



From
Ruin
to
Recovery

Gamblers share their stories

Edited by Arnold Zable
Foreword by Tim Costello

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Betting on a Better Life Story-telling/writing Workshops

This project was initiated in 2011 when Judy Avisar, a gambling project worker at MonashLink Community Health Service, invited Melbourne writer Arnold Zable to conduct a series of Story-telling/writing Workshops with problem gamblers and those at risk of problem gambling. Judy coordinates a program called 'Betting on a Better Life', aimed at encouraging social and recreational alternatives to gaming venues. The workshops were held at the Batesford Community Hub in the Melbourne suburb of Chadstone. As the flyer put it: 'Telling and writing our stories is a way to make sense of our lives and the challenges we all face. Come have a go – among friends.'

The first series of three-hour workshops far exceeded expectations. Participants produced poignant stories about their struggles with gambling of various kinds, and their personal journeys in dealing with their addiction. In 2012 two further series of workshops were held. The vision was to produce an anthology of stories and essays about problem gambling, aimed at reaching a wider audience through the publication of a book, written and produced by gamblers.

This collection was edited by Arnold Zable; two of the participants were also on the editorial team, volunteering their publishing skills and experience – Madeleine J on the editorial side and Anna Bardsley in the design and layout of the book and the cover.

The Storytelling workshops were funded by the Victorian Department of Justice and the Sidney Myer Fund.

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The participants were mainly referred by Gamblers Help Eastern.

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Contributors' names

Of the eleven contributors to this collection only two, Anna Bardsley and Peter Bridges, have chosen for their real or full names to appear under their stories.

The decision has been a very personal one.

During the preparation of the material for publication, there was much discussion about 'going public' and whether this was a good idea. Everybody wanted to be open, but hardly anyone felt they could. Given the community's highly negative view of gamblers, condemnation was feared if it was known that authors have or had a gambling problem.

Foreword

TIM COSTELLO

I once heard a spokesperson for one of Australia's major gambling lobbies say that in years in the industry he had only ever met one problem gambler. An extreme case, perhaps, but reflective of the state of denial that clouds our public conversation about gambling addiction.

As Arnold Zable observes in his Introduction, this book contains collective wisdom – wisdom that can only be gained by tough experience and deep reflection. As these resoundingly authentic stories reveal, the people who fall victim to gambling addiction are not simply defined by exceptional psychological profiles or by personal weakness. All kinds of people, all kinds of personalities, from many backgrounds and walks of life, suffer the impact of problem gambling. Multiple factors contribute to addiction, but at the core is a hazardous product that is packaged and marketed in unsafe ways.

I have nothing but admiration for the courage and resolve with which the story-tellers in this collection have used the creative experience to help themselves along the path to recovery and rebuilding. Beyond suffering and anguish people find the strength to rebuild and renew their joy in life, their hope and optimism.

Most Australians recognise that our national gambling problem needs to be addressed. But too often our conversation is confined to an abstract political debate. I would like to thank Arnold and all the contributors to this book for bringing the human dimension to the fore through these compelling stories. I am sure many will be touched by the power of these words, and many will be encouraged to travel the road to recovery.

Introduction

ARNOLD ZABLE

We all possess personal stories inspired by hard-earned experience. The writers in this anthology know what it is to be addicted to gambling. They know gambling from the inside. They have had the courage to enter into the world of their addiction and to recreate it in writing. They have dared bear witness to their painful descents into obsession. All but two of the writers have been addicted to poker machines. One has been addicted to gambling on horses, the other to the stock market. All have embarked on the arduous journey from ruin to recovery, and the process of writing has been an integral part of that journey.

As the facilitator of the writing workshops I have learnt much from the participants. They led me to the stories, rather than the other way round. Each piece emerged out of intense discussion. The room in which we met for three hours on Wednesday afternoons became a space of trust and integrity. The writing was fostered in an atmosphere of mutual support and camaraderie, releasing the participants to speak freely. The discussions and stories inspired mutual recognition – a realisation that while each story was unique, the writers were all in the same boat. In this, there was comfort.

As one participant reflects, in the group she felt a degree of empathy from fellow gamblers she had not received even from loved ones. She was able to express her sense of inner torment without being judged. In hearing the stories of others, she realised she was not alone.

In writing about their experiences, the participants became adept at bearing witness to their own actions. Creativity requires a degree of detachment and peripheral vision, an eye for the wide-angle shot. Encouraged to adopt a bird's-eye view of the gaming venue, the writers came to see themselves

in action, through their observations of fellow gamblers in the throes of their obsession – eyes fastened upon the machine, fingers tight with anxiety, muscles tensed, minds enclosed in a cocoon of oblivion.

The stories in this anthology have been written with a sense of urgency and immediacy. They take the reader into the experience and expose the roller-coaster ride of addiction. We feel the adrenalin rush fed by occasional winnings, invariably followed by loss, and a deep sense of despair and shame. We hear the anguished cry: What have I done? How can I get out of this nightmare? Why am I back at the machines despite my resolutions, my efforts to kick the habit? Why have I been way-laid again? I was on my way somewhere else, why did I walk in?

The writing takes us deep into the gamblers' minds and their titanic battles with their consciences. The emotions are raw and uncompromising. 'You stupid bitch,' one writer admonishes herself, 'you should have been home a long time ago'.

Despite being victims of the gaming industry, most participants display a high degree of political savvy. They have come to understand how the gaming industry creates and feeds the addiction. They are acutely aware that those who design and set the machines are coldly calculating. They entice through the use of bright colours, beckoning lights, symbolic graphics and the hypnotic sounds of illusory cheerfulness and success. As one writer puts it, players are subjected to a deluge of 'bells, whistles, beeps, bleeps and fanfares'. The layout of the venues and the placement of the machines are intended to make one lose all sense of time and space. The warmth and hospitality of staff are an integral part of the illusion. The gambling is encouraged by special events – pay nights, pension day, members' nights, played out in an ambience of incessant action.

The industry's success is also fuelled by intense lobbying, political connections, aided and abetted by the addiction of governments to the easy revenue. The odds are impossible to beat. As one writer observes, the addict is under the illusion that they are playing the machine, but actually it is the machine that is playing them.

The power of story lies in its attention to detail. The participants explored the skills of observation, of being fully alert. The specific details that emerge from this attention reflect life's complexity. When it comes to human

behaviour, there are no simple black and white explanations. No two stories are exactly alike. There are many scenarios.

For one participant, the addiction is triggered by an attempt to shut out the layers of noise at home, and the tragedies of her personal life. As she drives aimlessly from her house, the lights of the gaming venue beckon. It is open late at night. It exudes warmth, and encourages the passerby to come in from the metaphorical cold. Inside, the troubled stranger is treated in a friendly manner. She is made welcome. Offered a cup of tea. The venue represents a home away from home, a seeming haven from the stress and pressures of life. Sometimes the gambler becomes known by name, 'giving one a sense of importance that might be lacking at home'.

For another participant, the gaming venue was, at first, a fun place for an eighteen-year-old to hang out in, a place to kill time. She is of a generation that has grown up with electronic games of one sort or another. The machine is just another variant of what she has always known. By her mid-twenties, with the stresses of life mounting, the pokies assumed a different guise. The venue became a place of escape. The addiction had taken hold. Another writer contrasts her sense of low self-esteem and rejection with the short-term successes of gambling. She experiences 'a few glorious moments of winning a couple of dollars'. But inevitably, she is hooked, and comes to see that in reality the pokies offered 'empty promises leading nowhere'.

Other participants describe being drawn into the gambling web as escapes from boredom, personal trauma, severe illness, marriage break-ups or loss of employment. In contrast the machine becomes a dependable friend, a reliable presence. Gamblers begin with the conviction that they will not get hooked. It's all under control. It's just a means of having fun. 'I will start off with merely \$20 and see what happens. Three more wins. I'm in front, and before one knows it, life is spinning out of control.' The addiction takes hold and, with it, a life of deception and secrets. The machine becomes a living entity. It is seen as a monster, a sleeping dragon awoken to ferocious life.

Writing is primarily a form of expression, a means of getting it out, a mode of release. In time it becomes a way of working it out. Just the effort of putting pen to paper and embarking on the writing leads to unexpected insights. Enslavement is replaced by empowerment, ignorance by understanding. Over time, stories of gambling give way to tales of alternative passions and

interests. ‘I am more much more than a gambler,’ these writers tell us. ‘I have lived an interesting life. I have raised children. I have travelled. This is the person I want to be. This is who I really am.’ They reveal, in their diverse passions, their interests, and in their professions, that we are all susceptible to addiction. They take us beyond the stereotypes. The participants include a nurse, an academic, a former public servant, a businesswoman, a book editor, retirees and students.

The experiences recorded in this anthology provide maps, pathways from ruin to recovery. By reading them we are all enriched, both the gambler and those who live with them, both those who have overcome the habit and those who remain addicted. Taken in total, the writings in this collection add up to a collective wisdom. This is the gift they have given themselves, and to all who read them.

From the front line

ANNA K

The first big win

It's winter, around 2am, and the night air is bitterly cold. She keeps her head down to shield herself against the icy wind and quickly makes her way through the back streets of Caulfield to Armadale, to wake up a friend.

You see, she has spent all of her parenting pension again, and is in desperate need of some immediate financial help – a ticket to get her home on the first train, food to put in her son's lunchbox that day. She hasn't as yet given any thought as to how she will survive the fortnight. Panic grips her and she quickens her step. See the terror upon her face. Have you ever felt this way?

She knows her friend will help her; he is someone who has suffered from low self-esteem for as long as she has known him, who gets his self-worth from rescuing others, and she has watched him being taken advantage on more than one occasion. It doesn't help how she feels about herself to be involving him in this, but there is no other choice. Gaming venues do not supply emergency relief funds, no free phone calls to get in touch with loved ones and let them know you are OK, no Met tickets to avoid getting fined for fare evasion, no \$10 food vouchers to cover the most basic needs for survival.

It ends up costing him \$30, because she has asked whether she can have an extra \$10 to 'give it one last try' to see whether she can win back her losses. He agrees, but insists on coming with her – to keep her safe. Once in the venue, he who has never gambled puts a coin into the machine next to hers. He wins \$250! In a state of shocked surprise, he hands her half of his winnings. Outside he waits with her until her taxi arrives, and stands waving her goodbye. He is

the hero; he has saved the day. See the happiness, the pride written all over his face. Does it bring back memories of your first win?

In the back of the taxi, she feels a huge sense of relief; she'll be able to survive for now. There's also a sense of dread surrounding his win.

A week later, her fears are realised: he's been back to play again. He didn't get a win this time, but only spent a small amount of money, so he wasn't too concerned.

He sits back, remembering the nice tune his machine played when he won. She points out to him that Keno machines don't actually play music when they're paying out, she'd thought the same thing when she first won. It's all part of the subliminal programming, she tells him, to get people addicted.

But she doesn't reach him, not then or any time in the future. Just like nobody could make her understand the risk of addiction to poker machines when she first began playing them.

Her words are an intrusion, he becomes agitated: don't worry, he tells her some time later, he's got the machines all figured out, he's got a system and he can beat them. See his manic expression. Is it at all familiar to you?

From that day onwards and for the next ten years, her friend gambled at the pokies on a regular basis.

You can probably find him there now.

Friendship is free

I have \$30 put aside to take my best friend out for a drink tonight. During the day I phone her several times, and by mid-afternoon I hear the excitement mounting in her voice. She desperately wants to get out of her house – even if only for an hour or two – to escape the miserable conditions of her life. I make my last phone call to her from Dandenong Road, to let her know that I'm less than half an hour away; I tell her that I've brought some clothes that might fit her. She whoops with delight. She is just washing her hair and asks whether I would give it a light trim for her before we head out.

A tram to Elwood, a short walk to her front door. Then it happens: I don't walk past the venue on the way, I walk in. I feel confident that I will leave at once if I have a win, no matter how little, as I only have ten minutes to spare. That's if I'm not spotted immediately on entering and asked to leave – this place is on my self-exclusion list. I pick a machine where I'm not directly visible to staff and put \$10 in it; within seconds, the silence of the near-empty venue is broken by the shrill sound of the bells announcing my 'dubious' good luck as my machine sings its way loudly to \$300, then all falls silent once more.

I am now faced with cashing in my winnings and being recognised by staff as self-excluded; even though I know that my winnings cannot be kept from me, I still feel a surge of shame, and think I hear a staff member say, 'Maybe I should just walk up and ask her to leave'. I decide that since it could come to a showdown, I may as well keep playing and aim for a much bigger win. Imagine Marietta's face when I turn up loaded with cash and tell her we're going out on the town, and we're doing it in style! So I up the bets to maximum credits and bet hard and fast.

Nobody approaches me, and in less than ten minutes my \$300 is gone. I put in my last twenty, and a moment later that is lost as well. It has never mattered to Marietta if all we could afford is one drink each – just to get out of the house and enjoy each other's company would be enough to make her happy.

My friend doesn't get to see me that night. Or for the next three months. Her phone calls aren't picked up, her letters aren't answered. In my own

mind, the amount of money I would have to win to make up for this last disappointment has grown to obscene proportions.

A world of disappointment

You may understand what I mean if, like myself, you are a problem gambler and you've had to listen to the many lectures from non-gamblers. A gambling addiction by its nature is a very public addiction: whether through friends and family, welfare agencies or problem gambling counsellors, the addict's life is laid open to the opinions of others. Ironically, I've personally found criticisms and judgements to be the easiest to overlook: we give ourselves a much harder time than the onlooker could imagine. Who of us hasn't lined up in the toilet queue at a venue to face the mirror and give ourselves the 'bloody idiot speech' – reserved for when we've lost the lot. Long queue!

Yet to receive advice from a non-gambler just doesn't cut it. You may have been in this position – no matter how well meaning, the connection gets lost. How could a non-gambler possibly understand our addiction and give advice when we don't even understand it ourselves? Whether it's gambling, or alcohol and drugs, it's all the same disease. There's a certain phrase, coined within the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous over half a century ago, that best describes the nature of addiction for me: 'that it is cunning, baffling and powerful'.

So it is for problem gamblers who, despite of their best efforts, and at times even without making a conscious decision to do so, find themselves walking into the same trap over and over again. Afterwards they try to work out how they ended up in a venue when they weren't even thinking about gambling. If you are a recovering addict you may remember yourself how frightening it can feel to relapse after doing so well. And having venues on almost every street corner doesn't help when one is trying to keep away from them.

I've battled with an addiction to stimulant drugs on and off for the past thirty years. I never thought that I would go through it all again, but here I am! My gambling addiction is more powerful and more difficult to beat than anything. Nothing could have prepared me for this. Not that I ever understood what people meant ten years ago when they warned me of becoming addicted to the machines. With help from my counsellor I'm a little bit more able to see

it as a journey and not be quite as harsh on myself when I don't get it perfect. I'm able to look at it from the viewpoint that every day I haven't gambled is a day won.

In my past, I was close to a girl with an opiate addiction who secretly criticised me for taking drugs as a mother; she felt I should have known better. I wasn't aware of this until I ran into her years later, by which stage she had a five-year-old daughter. She confessed she used to judge me quite harshly until, after becoming a mother herself, she just had to have some opiates. 'You know what?' she said to me, 'I've had to rethink all of that. Addiction can't just be put on hold, it doesn't stop just because you love someone, does it?' As a gambling addict I believe that every mother thinks of her children – in fact, every addict knows that they are gambling with their lives.

In the same past, I was close to a guy whose gambling addiction took him down a road of more crime to be able to afford it. He still owned his own house when I met him; I remember one of the first times I phoned him before I started gambling myself and he told me that he was 'sneaking into the kitchen getting dressed to go to the pokies' so that his partner didn't wake up. I recall thinking it all very strange – why not just tell her that you are going? But if you are a gambling addict who has had to keep it a secret from your loved ones when you've needed to go and play, you've probably had to learn some tricks of your own along the way. Myself, I did whatever it took to help me to sneak away unnoticed, like oiling squeaky door-hinges during the day, and emptying the bins at night in my pyjamas, only to grab the bag of clothes hidden in the front yard before bolting down the road and getting changed behind a bush and going on my way.

One of the first few times I gambled, this particular friend happened to walk into the venue at the Elsternwick Hotel and find me there. When he saw me, he loudly shouted: 'Oy! What are you doing in here? Come on! We're leaving!' He pushed away at the buttons of my machine, shouting: 'Come on – push any button – it doesn't matter, we're going!' Not only was I very embarrassed, I was confused by his 'over the top' behaviour and annoyed because he'd wasted the few credits left in my machine.

Once outside he told it to me like this, and his words explained a lot more than the slogan 'you can't win': 'Don't go getting yourself addicted to gambling. I really mean this! It's not just you, it's everybody who plays them.'

It doesn't matter how much you pull out of those machines, you'll end up putting it all back in – and more. You've still got a bit of a chance left at a having good life, and you'll wreck it by playing those things.'

It took a long time before I reached an understanding of what he said to me that day, and by that time a lot of damage had already been done. Over the coming years he maintained this stance and continued to pull me off the machines – loudly! – if he happened to come across me at a venue. As for him, his addiction has cost him his home, his family and friends, and on many occasions his freedom. His advice came from personal experience and what he said turned out to be the truth. There's only one way I can put this: gambling really is a world of disappointment.



Lady Luck

The lights begin flashing – music starts playing.
Queen of hearts dazzles with smiles,
The lonely man begins to feel better.
Ladies and gentlemen, step right up!
The wheel has been spun,
There's no way to stop it – the night has begun.
The priest looks for sinners to save from hell.
A new hand of cards is being dealt.
The loser clutches his lucky charm,
The cheat starts winning.
Behind the shadows the clown is grinning,
Bright lights flashing – loud music playing.
The thief starts moving through the crowd,
The madman sighs and mutters.
Place your bets, come try your luck!
Again the dice are cast.
In a corner the old man dreams of his past.
Time stands still – it's the night's darkest hour.
The lonely man can't find his queen,
The thief gets busy working the floor,
Charming the rich and mocking the poor.
The lights stop flashing – music stops playing.
Daylight is breaking, the show is over.
The cheat repents, the clown is crying,
The lonely man heads for the door.
The priest turns sinner,
The loser imagines himself a winner.
The thief steals away without a sound,
And Lady Luck is nowhere to be found.

Shame

ANNA BARDSLEY

Hiding

The buzzing against her hip was unmistakable, though she tried to ignore it. She'd turned off the ringer before she came in, not that anyone would hear it above the jangling sounds of the machines.

When the phone stopped buzzing, she took it out of her pocket and checked the missed calls list. She knew who it was; that was the fifth time he'd rung in the last half-hour.

You should be at home, it's dinner time, you should be at home.

She shoved the phone back down deep and turned again to the machine with a handful of coins.

Soon. I'll go home soon. I deserve a break. Just finish this drink.

When I win...I'll go home then.



The buzzing reaches into her sleep and drags her into unwilling wakefulness.

Oh shit.

Slivers of memory slide between the hammering in her head. Carefully, she rolls over, her body aching for more sleep. She doesn't need to look at the clock; the alarm goes off every morning at seven.

Stupid. Going out late. Staying out later. Stupid.

She can smell that place on her, in her hair.

Get up, stupid. No sympathy for you. You did it – wear it.

Under the shower the hot sharp spray stings her skin, awakening more moments she wishes she could forget.

Face it. Face the music. Be responsible. That's what you believe.

The face staring back at her in the mirror looks strange and unfamiliar.

Shit, what have you done?

She remembers falling into bed somewhere around 4am. Can't recall how much she drank. How much she lost. But even after the shower, the smell of the coins lingers on her hands.



There were winnings last night: flashing lights, neighbours who stopped momentarily to check out how much, the smiling attendant writing out the slip, the chit-chat about how lucky she was.

The only thing left where the wad of notes had been for a while is a card she found in the Ladies. She reads the words again, 'Gambling – Do you need help?' before she tucks it out of sight. The familiar heaviness settles inside her, sucking the life and goodness from every corner.

Shit. I wasn't going to do that again.

She lifts her head and stares herself down in the mirror. Not liking what she sees, what she knows this person has done to her.

Who are you? How did you get inside me? How did I become you?

Shame wells up and threatens to suffocate her.

As if your life doesn't have enough crap in it.

Shame is her constant companion; she carries it wherever she goes. Cannot put it aside: there is, after all, so much proof, so many broken promises.

She feels him watching her, wondering why she was late home, why she didn't take his calls.

He doesn't say much, he doesn't have to, the words are in her head, running on a loop.

Stupid, that's what you are. A stupid loser, who can't be trusted, can't be loved.



She switches off the headlights before she turns into the driveway, parks the car and hopes the dog won't bark.

Just get inside, quietly. Sssh, stupid bitch, you should have been home hours ago.

Sitting in the car, the familiar Shame prickles her skin under the layers of clothes.

How many times are you going to do this? When are you going to stop this shit?

She checks her bag, looking for a tissue, and finds in a corner the card asking 'Gambling – Do you need help?'

Yes, I do. Yes, I will.



I went to escape
And I did
For a while
Until I could not escape

Falling in

In the beginning it was fun, just a night out with the girls, a cheap and cheerful dinner then a flutter. Just a few dollars didn't hurt and they all knew how to walk away. She enjoyed the break from her real life, enjoyed the light-hearted fun, family time with her mum, sisters, sisters-in-law. They celebrated each other's wins, commiserated the losses.

The slide down from that seemingly innocent fun to a shameful problem hard to face was gradual. The point at which it changed hard to identify.

But somehow she had gone from fluttering happily with the girls to hiding by herself.

The gaming rooms looked like caves, she thought. Dark, shadowy corners, hiding all sorts of secrets, no outside light, the rows of blinking, singing machines promising riches.

These caves had become a haven from outside stresses, things difficult to deal with, impossible to face. In the caves she was safe from reality; the repetitious rolling of the symbols hypnotised her into a false sense of quiet.

Then one day it was serious, something to do with an argument, things in her life too hard to handle. The layers of hard-to-handle were piling up, one on top of the other until she couldn't breathe, had to get away. She ran from the house, from the voices shouting, her needs unheard, unheeded.

Go for a drive, get in the car, get away. But I don't want to just drive, to be driven away. I want to be somewhere, belong somewhere.



Out of the dark and cold, flashing lights beckon from the side of the road, reminding her of fluttering fun. Walking in by herself seems strange at first, but not for long. Soon she realises that this is a place where it's OK to be alone, preferred in fact; the machines don't want to share your attention.

'What can I get for you, love?' the woman behind the bar asks. 'The usual?'

The kind words from this stranger make her feel cared for in a way that seems pathetic and sad, the wine in her hand another comfort.

Buckets of coins fill the machines. Wandering through, she's looking for the lucky one: the sounds of winning beckon. She slides in the first note, presses the buttons, watches the roll, waits for the win, wills the win. Up and down go the credits, free spins, that's what she likes, free money from free spins. Sitting on the edge of the stool, leaning into the machine, her hands flutter across the rows of rolling images, willing them to give her something, five across is best.

Come on you...give it to me. I deserve it.

Words roll around in her head.

I'll go soon, I will, when this lot is done, just a few more coins, can't play just one line, what if it's a winner?

She can't leave anything in the machine, so in goes more money, and then scabbling in the bottom of her bag for loose coins.

You did that half an hour ago, there's nothing left.

But wait, one more dollar...in it goes.

Please God, let me win...

But God doesn't come here, doesn't care if you win or lose.



What's the time?

Should be home.

Shouldn't be here...

Don't know how to leave,

Don't want to leave...

This cocoon of sound and lights and wins...

I want to win

Something

Be lucky

Somewhere, some way.

Shame is now added to the pile of hard-to-handle

Pull my patchwork coat of hard-to-handle closer

Try to hide the ragged edges of my humiliation.

Don't tell

Can't tell

How long I stayed

How much I fed

Into the hungry machines.

Can't admit

How much I lost

Even to myself.

Breaking out

It's almost two years since I took the card out of my wallet, laid it on the table and picked up the phone. Almost two years of counselling has changed so much for me. I am learning to embrace all of me, befriend the imperfect, broken, sad parts from which I desperately tried to hide for so many years. And to do that honestly and compassionately.

For the first time in my life I am able to begin to look directly at who I am and why I am broken. There has been much tragedy in my life, multiple deaths, including two of my five children, and I have come to realise that I used the pokies as a way to soothe the raging pain inside me. And they did it very well; in fact, I now know they are designed to do that, to take the users, the players, the gamers, the gamblers, to another place, a zone. Which is fine if you can leave when you want to. It didn't work that way for me and doesn't for many others. I remember the people I shared that dark cave with; I never made friends with any of them but we shared the zone. The companion we gamblers all share is Shame and it keeps us there, keeps us quiet, we cannot speak out because Shame keeps us dumb. Keeps us in the zone, brings us back again and again, it is a crucial part of the cycle.

As I step away from Shame, I realise that of those addicted to poker machines – and here I include the owners of the machines and the venues and the Victorian government, all collecting an enormous amount of guaranteed revenue – the only ones visited by Shame are those who feed in the money.

I haven't been inside a poker machine venue in over two years, but I know I am still a poker machine addict. When things get tough, they still call, I still have to fight the urge to run from the house and hide there. Sometimes I drive past and feel the pull of ... I don't know how to name it – habit, addiction? I am a recovering poker machine addict.

As part of my recovery I have been a member of several groups which have each been helpful to me. In one, I made a beautiful, uniquely mine, mandala depicting my journey through the time of my daughter's death. I did some community singing in another. I am now in a therapeutic group where I am learning to trust people and myself. Attending the Story-writing Workshops was enlightening on another level again. Here I found a way to express the deep shame I feel about being a gambler.

To the people I have met, the professional counsellors, the group leaders, the participants, I want to say thank you for helping me to understand that I am more than the gambling. For being the proof that while speaking my Shame out loud is very hard in the moment, bringing it into the light makes it shrivel and die and release its hold.

The long road back

PETER BRIDGES

Why did I walk inside the doors?
What was the reason, what was the cause?
Was it to gain, was it to lose?
Do I have the right to choose?
Or is that decision taken from me
By the attraction of what lies before me?
Bright lights, pictures of buckets of gold,
Do I desire what my eyes behold?
Can I just turn and walk away,
Or is there something that makes me stay?
Am I now in a hypnotic state,
Can I close my eyes or is it too late?
Have I succumbed to that cruel desire
To gamble – have I stoked that fire?
My hand is drawn towards my pocket,
Do I have the strength to stop it?
My pocket's empty – joy of joys!
I run out those doors to get away from the noise!
For now I have escaped Temptation,
Is it wrong to feel Elation?
The problem is that once you begin,
There really is no way to win.
Unless you really want to...
Do you?



Same room, same faces, same night, same time each week, a never-changing scenario: same feeling of hope, anticipation, of the inevitable disappointment or overwhelming rapture of attaining the unattainable. Pay night, pension day, members' night, night out, never-changing; bells, whistles, beeps, bleeps and fanfares, forever the pounding and bashing of buttons and panels. Your expectations of power over the machines, not understanding that they have the power over you, power to control your mood, your greed, your sense of hope and loss, your despair and agony. Your desperation to regain your losses (never happens!); torment you'll inevitably feel when you leave, if you can break the hold and retreat.

For the next few hours you avoid the mirrors because you'll look at the person looking back and abuse the image. Ask it the questions eating you up inside – why couldn't I, why didn't I, how could I, how have I been so weak, why didn't I walk away, why did I go in, where is my mind when I'm there? Why can't I stop?

Sitting, looking at the four walls, the blank staring at the TV in the corner; the picture is moving, just nothing's making sense. The clock shows 5am; still stuck in the chair, just don't want to go to bed, feeling like I'd rather be dead than leave the room and walk into the impending doom, scared to dream of the night before – the machine.



The constant barrage of sounds, the persistent tapping, the growls, the abuse, the cheers, the laughter, the clinking of glass...The voices from other parts of the venue interwoven with the previously mentioned noises and distractions, assailing your senses. Where can you escape? No! The TAB is in there.

The dining room? But you've just eaten a meal, can't fit any more in. You'll just play for a little while – minimum (oh, yeah!) bet. Bells and whistles silent for hours suddenly spring into life, joyous laughter as 'Jackpot!' rings out across a crowded room. Sad faces on those who just moved away, who have sat in the same place on the same machine for hours – hope springs eternal! – only to move and see somebody else collect.

The noise, nagging, nausea! Why do we put ourselves through all this? To win? To really win? To lose? To punish ourselves for being desperate enough to try to win the elusive 'pot of gold at the end of the rainbow'? To fund the profits of 'our club'? To provide funds for 'our club' to survive or exist? To put money back into the community (!)? For the pain we think we deserve to endure? Or are we just too weak to fight the need? Or resist? Or hypnotised by the illusion placed before us in these hallowed halls of temptation, constructed by governments for our own enjoyment? Entertainment? Enhancement? And profit?

The constant 'quotes' and 'returns' for your dollar, the repetitive assault of advertising, the never-ending reminders of the jackpot that's happening this week (or the grand prize)? Is it any wonder we are tempted to try at least once? Offers that seem 'too good' are thrust at us from all sides day and night. We find ourselves constantly reminded of what gambling can provide, but seldom does. Then there's that ad that tells us what great things 'clubs and pubs' can do for our 'community', and subtly slips in the fact 'they do' provide help and assistance to 'problem gamblers'! And puts up the Gambler's Help phone number, followed by the logo for their organisation. Hypocrites!



Today – the first day of the rest of your life.
Tomorrow – the hill to climb.
Yesterday – the past we choose to escape from.
The past – memories of days gone by.
The present – a gift we are given.
The future – fields of dreams.
Your heart – where love dwells and hides from fear.
Your mind – the tug-of-war with your emotions.
Conscience – where confusion reigns and the tug-of-war begins.
Temptation – will I, won't I? Maybe just one more dollar?
Fear – the unknown.
Confidence – oh yes, I can.
Hope – illusion created as we leave the womb.
Happiness – a feeling of warmth (so easily shattered by others).
Jackpot – the greatest illusion of all.
Winning – do you ever really ever win?
Losses – the debris scattered at your feet.
Losers – the shattered lives you see, some desperately seeking help, hopefully being able to find some.
Sunshine – the awfully bright light that blinds you as you leave the venue you've been lost in overnight.
Sunlight – a light at the end of the tunnel you've found yourself trapped within, unable to escape.
Tragedy – the unseen senseless pain and the destruction of lives touched by a loved one's addiction and an inability to combat its grip.
Aftermath – just that.
Saviour – the patient soul who helps you get to that place and stands beside you to catch you if you fall, who dusts you off, helps you back to your feet and acts as your guide until you once again regain your balance.
Salvation – the day you break free.



We are all on this planet for a reason – to live! This involves pitfalls and mountains to climb; we try to cope with it. Sometimes we can't cope and depression and a thing called heartache find us.

A lack of love in your life can sometimes make you feel worthless and unwanted, and you want to end that feeling. So you look for escape in drugs, alcohol, gambling. In most cases your self-esteem is broken down and you become dependent on those escapes that become addictions. If you somehow find a way to beat them you need support from family, loved ones (hard if you have neither) and inner strength. That comes from a belief that you can win.

If you do succeed, the 'demons' of addiction will try to draw you back to their grasp. It's up to you to resist, fight it off. It's never easy, which is why so many succumb. If the power of addiction can be beaten with strength and belief in oneself then there's hope. For it never to return to your life you must be so strong. That's a battle in itself. But it's now possible for you to win!

Do not give up on me

JOYCE LAM

In the pit

The warmth of the venue felt welcoming, and the soothing yet vibrant lighting tantalising, evoking excitement. The sound of free games and jackpots and the coins dispensing into the trough of machines sent a shot of adrenalin through her. She quickened her steps towards her favourite machine with anticipation that today was going to be a good one.

Perhaps this time I'll have 'better luck', she thought, as she slipped her \$50 note into the slot which, like a monster, sucked it in before she had time to ponder what she was doing. 'Oh, well, maybe God will be kind and let me win back my losses.'

Eagerly she pressed on the keys. Thud! Thud! Thud! She watched anxiously as the lines flashed again and again across her vision and nothing happened. With exasperation she saw her credits slowly dwindle and heard the warning sounds of a reminder that she needed to feed the machine again. She visualised it as an alien creature calling out, 'More! More!' and, as if under a spell, she pulled out another \$50 which was again hungrily devoured.

'I really should get a grip on myself and leave before I lose it all,' she said under her breath. Thud! Thud! This time she hit the keys a little bit more vehemently. Then suddenly the sound of free games rang out and she shouted with jubilation. But they paid nothing. 'What rotten luck,' she cursed audibly, oblivious of the glances coming her way. 'It should pay by now.'

Hastily she slipped in another fifty, her eyes fixed expectantly as the game lines scrolled musically before her. 'Stop! Stop!' she cried, hitting the

machine as if it would respond to her orders. ‘Stupid thing!’ she hissed with venom as she jabbed viciously at the keys again and again.

She was jolted back to reality only when she had lost her lot. Furiously, she went through her bag to see if there was perhaps one coin left. Just one more try and you never know, that may be the lucky last. But she was flat broke, not a dime to her name. She hunched forward despondently, exhausted of all her emotions, then walked out of the venue. Somehow it did not seem to be so inviting after all.

In the car, head cupped in her hands, she was disbelieving about what she had just done. ‘What’s wrong with me?’ she asked herself. ‘I promised not to come but I came anyway, and I lost control – and see what happened.’ Feelings of despair, utter failure, disappointment at her lack of self-control and anger at her loss overwhelmed her.

‘How on earth did I get sucked into such a dark pit? It was just for a bit of fun and a place to escape from the pain and disappointment of life...and now I’m spiralling down and down, unable to break free. I need to find help.’

She read the Gambler’s Help brochure she had picked up on her way out and drove off with a sense of hope and determination.

Break free?

Spiralling down into the pit is so easy. We land with a thud and then realise that the hole we are in is bottomless. Climbing out seems virtually impossible to the many of us who are in there through ensnarement by gambling. Can we break free from these chains that have ruined our lives or almost incapacitated us? I believe that we can, although falling in is easy and getting out is not.

First of all, we need to go back to the reasons why we gamble. The initial reason would have to be innocent fun. Beginner’s luck strikes and greed sets in and we are soon on the trail of self-destruction. It is subtle. Earning big bucks without hard work seems too good an opportunity to pass by, so some of us think. It is not until we are deeply entrenched and we have trouble finding funds to pay our bills that reality sets in. Some even succumb to the clutches of loan sharks and slide further into debt. Thinking that this time is

going to be different and that luck is going to change is foolishness in itself. It's like striking Lotto. One in a million, or perhaps a billion, chance while heading closer to self-destruction.

At the start, having lunch at the bistros of the clubs and hotels seems so alluring. Meals are cheap with a two-dollar voucher for some free games thrown in. A pleasant ambience with free drinks and encouragement to join the members' club with its promises of special privileges and prizes is enticing. The staff are friendly. Occasional free food and vouchers and prizes to be won, especially at festival times such as Christmas and Easter, add to the hype.

Soon the venue becomes a haven for escape. We are treated with respect. Often we become known by name, giving one a sense of importance that might be lacking at home. The reluctance to return to the havoc and misery of the home base turns into an excuse for tarrying, resulting in many visits to the ATM machine until the limits are reached. The initial escape leads to the problem of diminished funds or, much worse, no funds left, causing more havoc at home.

One could wonder: 'Why then do they sink deeper into debt and bondage?' Knowing when to quit would be a sensible solution but human nature is such that we have to win back our losses. We have to win and win. We must do so to even the score, such is the psychology of the game. A little winning to tempt our ego and then we are dragged deeper into the snare. Jubilation at winning can soon turn into remorse and we kick ourselves for our folly and wish with all our heart that we had called it quits instead of riding on our momentary good luck. Remorse can well be too late – nothing is going to change, no matter how many 'if only's are said. We are headed straight into our own entrapment.

Playing the pokies is like dope – it ensnares us and then enslaves us and sends us to utter destruction unless we know what's going on and have the courage to count our losses and start afresh. Can we do it? Are we able? I believe we can. We must take back our dignity and we will succeed if we set our hearts on it. It is not easy and it takes all we have and commitment and time. Words without action are dead words. No matter how hard it is we must push on. Whatever happens is better than not trying.

First off, we have to accept the reality of our weaknesses. Then we have to accept help. There are counselling sessions and financial advice services.

They help us develop strategies to deal with our weaknesses as well as to how to deal with our debts. Support groups are not judgemental and people in the same boat can share their experiences and their successes in overcoming their addiction. Success stories are an encouragement and to see and hear those who are making progress often urges the rest on.

We can start afresh. Yesterday will never come again but we have today. God says every day is a new day and a new beginning with new hope. If we keep trying we will succeed, but if we give up we will surely fail. Each small step we take is a step nearer to success. Are you willing? Do you have the courage to claim back your life for yourself and your loved ones? Start today and call Gambler's Help and do not give up. Never give up giving up. If we fail today we will try again and again until we get there.



Do not give up on me
Hopeless I may seem to be.
Spiralling down the darkest pit,
Slowly becoming a misfit.
Ensnared by its subtle spell
My shame I am unable to tell.
I struggle to free from its bondage,
But often it is sabotage.
The urge in me I cannot dispel
My sorrow I am unable to quell.
Soon I go again and again,
Although I did try to refrain.
You said I am weak that I succumbed
A slave to its spell I had become.
'Hope is out of your reach,' you screeched,
'Your promises you have breached.'
If only you know how I did try to refrain
I struggled but my urges I cannot contain.
Who can understand my despair,
The trail of ruin I'm unable to repair?
You said if conscience dies there will be no hope
You are not far from being on dope.
'Wake up!' you urged, 'before it is too late,
Right now you are standing at hell's gate.'
Conscience's flame still flickers in my heart
I guess I'd better well be smart.
Seek help to quit I must, I must,
Or conscience's flame dies and I go bust.

Reflection

Sue sank into one of the comfortable couches in the Riverside Privilege Room with her free latte, taking a break from playing. She scanned her surroundings, noticing every aspect of the decor, the people and the various machines.

She sipped her coffee with a kind of contentment, feeling quite special at being given such privileges. She was surrounded by a group of seniors happily socialising, enjoying their free drinks; some women had even brought their knitting. It felt like she was relaxing in someone's lounge room. This welcoming environment must have cost these older people a fortune as they had to accrue a lot of points to be able to access such perks. Or perhaps they had sneaked in as friends of unknown patrons. She smiled as she recollected how she was surprised when a little old lady had held her hand as she entered the lounge, possibly doing just that. Well, it was a warm and fun place, provided they didn't lose it all. She thought of how lonely some might be, perhaps neglected by their loved ones and seeking company and excitement.

Her eyes swept the room until they rested on a middle-aged woman like herself, sitting in front of Sue's favourite machine. She sat slumped into the seat looking at the screen as if in a stupor, not pressing any buttons as she had put on automatic spin. Sue observed her with interest and wondered what was on her mind. The player remained oblivious of all activity around her, showing no reaction to her wins or her losses, slipping in note after note without batting an eyelid. She seemed far away and her responses automated.

Suddenly the machine gave a free spin which triggered a big win. As the woman had bet high the total was huge. Other patrons gathered around cheering her on, but the player just sat there expressionless. She had put in so much money and yet was not mentally present to enjoy her winnings.

Sue was mesmerised and a strange feeling came over her. She remembered when she had started gambling that she was going through great emotional trauma in her life. The familiarity of the scene before her triggered memories of the times when she too had sat in front of the machines in a stupor, cutting out the outside world to escape her pain. Did she too present such a sorrowful picture?

Sue felt compassion, not judgement, for the woman. She knew that to change one has to initiate help oneself.

An inner ache told her that her own life was reflected in that player and that this was a wake-up call.

It is hard to see ourselves when we are part of the picture. It is only when we step back that reality hits us and we gain a new perspective.

Suddenly the ambience was not so attractive. The cup of free coffee seemed costly and the lounge felt cold. Sue got up from the comfortable seat and walked out.

Encounters with addiction

BENJAMIN W

Chasing their losses

In anticipation of great excitement, he walked into the smoky, dimly lit barn. It felt like a barn because the carpet was stained and swarms of humans, acting like animals, congregated near a watering hole. Alone and disoriented, he headed straight to the bar and ordered an ice water.

Sheepishly he skulked off to the nearest electronic betting terminal and inserted a \$50 note into the slot. That's why he was there, not to socialise, not to drink, only to gamble. He'd been carrying out this ritual for years and nothing was going to change. He sought refuge in his addiction, a kind of warmth and belonging, a perverted pleasure. In this activity, the excitement of the bet overtook all other emotions. Rational thoughts, formulated on the drive to the venue, had now disappeared. Limits to cash expanded, and any attempts at frugality collapsed. Dapto greyhounds were a starting point. 'Let's see if I can double my money': this was always the thought pattern. Sometimes it worked out, mostly not.

He noticed many other gamblers around him. As far as he was concerned, they were a nuisance. Some were drunk, others dishevelled and this offended him. 'Is that me?' he wondered to himself. What struck him was the apparent futility of it all, depressing sights of desperate men chasing their losses.

'Emus' at the races

I went to the Caulfield racetrack that autumn day. I was a young man and interested in the event. Great throngs of men rushed through the front gates with a look of desperation. They charged towards the betting options. Bookmakers and tote windows soon had long queues. Feeling a little lost, I asked a startled punter, 'When's the next race?' He replied, 'No idea, mate'. He was obviously oblivious to the outside world and not wanting to be distracted.

I was surprised by how small the horses appeared as they left the starting gates at the start of each race. Binoculars were a necessity but television monitors inside the stands made it easier. Back in those days, there was a rather odd but familiar sight near the end of the day – men picking up old betting slips from the ground. These men were called 'Emus'. In their penniless plight, they were hoping to find an old discarded winning ticket. 'Emus' were banned from all racetracks back in the early 1980s, and I guess you could now call them an extinct species.

Hooked into the game

I didn't even like her. She refused to acknowledge my existence. I was tired of encountering silence at my feeble attempts at pleasantness. All she wanted was my money. Her surliness only added to my feelings of isolation. I think her name was Charlene, TAB operator, protector of the safe.

In a cold, narrow, corridor-shaped room, blinking monitors, mounted on the walls, stared from above. Playing on the monitors were live race meetings, greyhound, harness, thoroughbred races, even a football game. A visual smorgasbord designed to tempt the weak-willed.

On an emotional roller coaster that day, I was hooked into a game of win, loss and the thrill of the chase. I'd forgotten what the time was and when my next meal was coming. All that was keeping me going was an intense desire for a bigger win. I needed that rush more than a feed. Nothing else was important to me.

Any rational control had disappeared hours ago. The little voice inside me kept saying: 'Go home' but the thrill of the chase was overwhelming. I'd given up on Charlene. She was not needed in the scheme of things. I'd switched to an electronic betting terminal. Distancing myself from human contact contributed to my feelings of loneliness. Eventually the desire for food drove me home. I felt disgusted that once again I'd lost.

How it began

It was a typical public servant environment – quiet, spacious and with lines of desks. As smoking was allowed in those days a constant cloud hovered over the scene. Beige carpet, fluorescent lighting and cream walls added to the banality. An overall sense of ordinariness pervaded the atmosphere. As in a factory, serious-looking people hunched over their desks. Their existence was based around mundane tasks, bone-numbing boredom and a sense of security. You were in for life.

At 10am on the dot the tea-lady would arrive. This event seemed to wake up those clerks nodding off, and cause a ripple of excitement. Like an oasis in the desert of a working day was the arrival of the tea-lady, her trolley laden with a variety of unhealthy food – buns, biscuits, rolls and sandwiches. A small queue would form, with sometimes eight to ten clerks lined up. The tea-break was a privilege of the public servant – a fifteen-minute interval which always stretched into twenty-five. A time for light-hearted banter about matters related to sport, usually football or racing.

Once the break was over it was back to work. Nathaniel Fink, a mild-mannered clerk, had the task of counting vouchers all day long. The vouchers were then bound into bundles. He also had an In and Out tray. This was the sum of his tasks for the whole day.

Fink had been working in the accounts section for nine years now. Tired of the repetitiveness and pointlessness of his job, he had dreams of being a filmmaker. He often went alone to the cinema and marvelled at the classic movies. He had purchased a Super 8 camera a year earlier, and making short films had become a passion for him.

He heard that a prominent film school was advertising its course in Sydney. Maybe this was his ticket out of the public service. Beneath its prudish veneer, the public service was a hotbed of gamblers, alcoholics and womanisers and Fink had been corrupted by this environment.

He failed to get into the film school course as he so desperately wanted. Devastated on hearing this news, he gambled even more heavily than he had before.

A way out?

In desperation Nathaniel Fink had self-excluded himself from all TABs. He had not always been a loser, but an intelligent man whose life had gone off the rails. Unshaven and dishevelled, he stumbled down a wet lane searching for his spectacles. As he crawled in the mud, the gloomy light made the task of finding them near impossible. They had fallen from his face after a collision with a light pole. He had been worried about money and lost his sense of direction. Eventually he managed to find his specs and secure them to his head.

Exhausted by this calamitous situation, Nathaniel rapidly ran his grubby fingers through his pockets. Desperate for any spare dollars that lay within his clothing, his spirits rose when he discovered a \$50 note in his trousers. Thoughts of gambling immediately rushed through his mind.

He had been a hopeless gambler all his life, but this time he was putting up the barriers. Self-exclusion was working for him, though partially. His cold and lonely existence sleeping on park benches would soon be over. Gambling much less had allowed him to accumulate a small savings account and he hoped to move into a rooming-house in the following week. Knowing his luck had changed, Nathaniel straightened up his spectacles and peered at the streetlights ahead. A kind of optimistic warmth overcame him and, with a spring in his step, he quickly walked towards the high street and at a secluded spot waited for the last tram.

The climbing wave

MADELEINE J

Up and down

Trying to give up gambling has been like the games of snakes and ladders we used to play as kids. I still have our family's old board, rescued from the back of a cupboard.

Long, sinuous snakes curve swiftly south past ladders that painfully progress upwards towards the pole position at the top. As a young player I hadn't noticed how generally short (and straight) the ladders were, and how lengthy and sneaky the snakes, with their tapering tails that spread out over as many squares as possible.

The landscape of my renouncement of poker machine gambling is strewn with snake-like obstacles that send me pitching ever downwards. I manage to stay away from venues for many weeks – climbing up a couple of ladders – only to descend on the snake's back when I call in for a 'brief' session, believing I am under control and can afford to take some recreation in this way. Several hundreds of dollars later I've once again proved that this is only a re-creation of past miseries and I am back to square one.

Up and down, down and up. I won't give up because I have to beat the game at its own game. A stray line of verse (is it Tennyson?) provides an apt image, if a mix of metaphors. I am, like the poet, 'Forever climbing up the climbing wave'. It feels a hopeless task.

The snakes look colourful and interesting on the board, the ladders solid and boring – an analogy for a pokie venue versus real life? My life is not boring but once I've passed through that door what can compete with

spinning screens and enticing symbols and the possibility of coming out ahead? Better not to enter in the first place. No snake-avoiding strategies have ever been effective once I'm inside.

Not playing is the only way to win. Tomorrow I'll snap the board shut, let it gather dust in the back of a cupboard. Game over – it has to be.

Fitting in

Soong

She was trying hard to fit in. A year or so ago Soong and her family had lived in a crowded refugee camp, having fled a brutal military regime. Now, thanks – she was sure – to her prayers as well as to the Australian government, she and her husband were beginning a new existence in Melbourne's inner west. Their rented unit was small and bare but to the couple and their two young children, it was a haven...so much room, so many unaccustomed household amenities, and above all, safe and secure.

There were many other things to get used to as well – a different language, the education system, the banking system, the role of Centrelink, how to find a job, negotiating public transport, new foods, the weather. The couple frequently felt lost and overwhelmed, as well as fortunate and grateful.

Soong was determined not to look backwards, to embrace what she could of this new culture while maintaining to a large degree her old one. Through a multicultural education organisation, she was assigned a home tutor, Marion, who visited for a couple of hours on Monday afternoons, to befriend her and teach her some basic English. Soong felt comfortable with this friendly woman who patiently helped her to learn a difficult and unfamiliar tongue and explained aspects of Australian life. Marion also encouraged her to try things she hadn't had the confidence to do before, like talking to her children's teachers or venturing into a big shopping complex. She lived nearby and sometimes accompanied Soong on these excursions.

Marion

Monday morning, and Marion had had a rough weekend. The prospect of giving a lesson to Soong in the afternoon did not appeal.

Wife and mother, part-time admin worker, good friend and neighbour, and now home tutor...all these aspects of her life were healthy and open, useful to herself and the community.

Marion was also a problem gambler, useful to the poker machine industry and the Victorian government. This aspect was a secret. Gambling was one sector of Australian life that she did not want Soong to know about...and certainly not of her involvement in it.

The rough weekend had been spent on a bender while pretending to the family on Saturday that she was lunching with a group of friends and then going with them to the footy. Sunday she had allegedly visited the local cinema. In reality, all these hours had been spent dashing herself at a nearby venue, losing too much money – as usual – and too much of her self-respect. She who had plenty of self-control and discipline in the rest of her life couldn't seem to stop.

Worst of all, who should on Sunday appear beside Marion at the next machine but Soong! Her student was pleased and excited to see her.

'Teacher, you said we should go to more places that Aussies do. So my family came here for a meal on my husband's birthday and then I came into this room and I just won \$500. For almost nothing! We'll come back next weekend too!'

My black sheep

What was my first step to becoming a gambler? Was it a harmless flutter on holiday in New South Wales in 1985? Did that turn me into a chronic case? Very possibly, because I know now that some people can be hooked from their initial exposure. I had the classic ‘early win’, which led me to think this seeming bit of fun could be a source of easy money. And so it seemed for the next few years, as I returned to NSW annually for a few days at a stretch and indulged in this enjoyable past-time.

By the time poker machines came to Victoria in late 1992 I was ready for them. Not only was I primed by my experiences up north but my life had become very difficult. Unpleasant people on both sides of the family to be dealt with, a lifetime of low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy coming to a head, and seemingly no hope of things getting better. Maybe the machines would like me...

But for the two decades since then it was downhill all the way, both financially and in how I felt about myself. It’s only in recent times that due to skilled counselling, joining of a support group, reading and researching, and recognising the good things and people I have in my life that I have tapered off my involvement with venues and am shunning gambling rather than seeking it out.

I’m the black sheep of the family, gambling-wise, and am keen that none of the relatives get to know of my shameful and guilty activities in that regard. One of the interests I’ve developed in my new life has been in the area of genealogy and through this I’m intrigued to find that there was another family member like me – paternal great-grandfather Leopold. I only ‘found’ Leopold a year ago, so to speak. Never mind that he died in 1899 and in the Far East. For me he lives...not exactly an inspiration but definitely a connection.

I’ve never seen a photo of Leopold nor anything he used to possess. For nearly all my life I only knew him as a name on the family tree. He was so un-illustrious that my father, who was born sixteen years after this grandfather of his died, never mentioned him, although it turns out he knew about Leopold’s activities.

After Dad died recently intriguing snippets came to light in the papers he left. (Previous to that I'd known very little about anybody on the European side.) Great-grandfather was, in Dad's words, a 'ne'er-do-well', the offspring of a well-off entrepreneurial family, highly regarded in Vienna and Budapest, who married the only child of a prominent Hungarian scientist and community leader of his day. This promising-sounding match turned out to be made in hell for great-grandma because within a short time Leopold had gambled away her considerable dowry and a large amount of other monies – as much as he could put his hands on.

I can only surmise that he off-loaded this booty in casinos, betting on card games for high stakes and losing. Perhaps other table games like roulette were involved too, I don't know. But I do know now that gambling on a range of sophisticated games was in the 17th and 18th centuries a popular past-time in England and on the Continent among the well-heeled, and that many people (both men and women) sustained huge losses and accrued large debts by this means. Whatever Leopold's particular game of chance was, he evidently became an addict and wrecked his life.

A few years after his marriage, broke and disgraced, he abandoned his wife and young son (my grandfather) and skipped the two cities with which he was closely associated, ending up in Shanghai, China's premier port. Goodness knows how he got there.

I'm pleased – and relieved – to have been able to establish, thanks to the internet, that despite this unimpressive background Leopold went on to become a reasonably successful import/export merchant in Shanghai. I've also tracked down that he wrote and published, in Vienna in his native German, substantial reports on trade between China and the rest of the world. His name pops up in other business contexts too, so it sounds like he put his head down and worked hard.

(A footnote to history: abandoned great-grandma remarried and had two more sons. Her second husband was, according to Dad's notes, a 'good man', a lawyer, but great-grandma lucked out there too. This husband shot himself because he felt he couldn't adequately support his family during an economic depression and the family was once again penniless.)

A death notice I have found records that Leopold died in Shanghai at the very end of the 19th century and was buried there. I don't think the extended

family back home could forgive him for what he had done, even though it seems that he rescued his life somewhat. I do wonder if he continued to gamble in the Eastern city that was notorious for it.

Who knows what to think about all this? My siblings sighed with disapproval on hearing of Leopold's newly uncovered life. However, in light of my own issues, I feel a link in a way with this black sheep and refuse to be judgemental...

A day in my life: by a poker machine

Well, when I say a day I don't mean a normal working day for humans; for poker machines a 'day's work' can be eighteen or twenty-four hours because we seldom or never take a break. We're too valuable for that, we need to be constantly winking a welcome, ready to rake it in for our owners and, of course, the state government. They're addicted to the huge profits, the billions a year that we deliver them.

Personally I like to be busy, and I am. I'm popular. The colours and graphics on my screen and the sounds I emit when there's a 'win' attract an endless stream of players, even in the early hours of the morning.

My mates and I see all sorts enter our bright and inviting environment – men and women, young, middle-aged, elderly...employed and unemployed...of various cultural and educational backgrounds...various states of health...the partnered, the single...those with money, those without...the busy, the ones with time to fill...the OK with life, those with some issues.

We machines do best when punters come on their own, and don't combine feeding us with eating and drinking, or with socialising, because then they can get distracted and we take a back seat. Least of all do we like those who play (we don't call it 'gambling' – 'gaming' at a pinch) in small groups. They view us purely as entertainment, tend to have a 'hit and giggle' approach – and generally take and share their winnings. They don't risk much so if they don't come out ahead it's no drama to them. Off they go quite happily and we may not see them again for months.

As I say, people who play us by themselves are the ones we really value, although we're not keen on those who bash our buttons hard or hit us on the

side, or the old biddies who wave their hands over the screen thinking that influences something. And there are the silly-billies who don't understand that when we last paid out, or where we stand in a room, means nothing. But we're not fussy what they believe or how they behave because solo players usually find that after a while they can't leave us alone – we seem like friends and they seek us out often.

I have to laugh to myself when they refer to their 'winnings'; rather a strange term considering they may have put in, say, \$500 in one session, and I may have offered, at some stage of the play, perhaps \$300 back. They usually get all excited but I'm not sure how that return makes a winner.

And you know the craziest thing? Even when I might finally pay out, punters frequently don't take the win, or they take it and immediately re-insert it, in me or another machine! Seems it's not the cash they're actually after, more the hypnotic trance we're specialists in inducing. It's referred to as 'the zone' and seems to be very seductive even though it brings the risk of loss of control. I've seen plenty of that. And witnessed the despair of players who've given me – in the hope of getting it back and more – money originally intended for rent or mortgage, food, bills and other things they need to pay. Instead of making money they end up making a donation to the venue.

Not only do we attract the already troubled – people seeking some time out from difficulties in their lives – we poker machines have the capacity to turn otherwise functional and sensible people into the troubled! Play us long and often enough and we'll alter the way the brain works so that they become obsessed with us and can't wait to come back and put more money down our throats, even after a big loss.

They may call it playing us but actually it's us playing them. We've programmed them so that they stay on hour after hour, removing money from ATMs in desperate attempts to get something significant out of us.

Since many such players, I hear, don't bet in any other way or take any other financial risks, you'd have to agree that we machines are pretty powerful. Dangerous even. We're so technologically sophisticated and high speed these days that we possess the capacity to turn off inner censors, override consciences, make people ignore their usual boundaries – and then return again and again and do the same thing. Being human, they may think they seek out the pokies because of their mood...up or down, or whatever. But

in fact it's the other way round. They come because they are programmed to come despite their feelings and circumstances at the time.

We pop into the heads of these sad cases when they least expect it, or want anything to do with us, and they can't wait to see us again.

Although players tend to have their favourite machines, or choose us on the basis of what's on our screens, my mates and I – there are more of us in Australia per capita than anywhere else in the world – are all basically the same. We're set up to return 87 per cent of what we take in, and we're hooked up to central computers which continually and randomly select numbers. When money is inserted into a machine and buttons pushed, the letters, numbers and graphics on its screen appear to spin and then fall into place to reflect a win or no win. But actually that's just an illusion. By the time that happens the 'game' is over and more numbers are being generated.

To obscure that we pay out a lot less than is put in overall, we sweeten the pill with what seems like some unpredictable fun – the possibility of free spins, substitutes, jackpots, interaction, links etc. We make players think they can win when in fact statistically over time they will lose if they keep playing, in that session or another. In different circumstances this would be called a scam.

Of course our owners and the venues like to hold problem gamblers – whose numbers, I believe, are greatly underestimated – personally responsible for their plight. The message they promote is that if their playing has gone beyond 'entertainment' – and that doesn't take long – such individuals need to set up strategies, observe limits, not chase losses and so on. Those who become addicted tend to blame themselves but the reality is that we machines are the real culprits.

Chronic gamblers carry a great and secret weight, as they usually keep their behaviour and feelings of guilt, shame, fear and despair to themselves. To add to their woes we can turn them into liars and deceivers too, as they try to cover their tracks. A lot of them end up real messes, financially and psychologically. I've heard that hospital emergency departments see their fair share. And divorce courts.

Although some politicians misguidedly talk about restricting the amount of money gamblers can spend at a venue in a session – pre-commitment, they

call it – frankly, that isn't going to make much difference even if it happens. We're here to stay, and we're everywhere, especially in poorer areas and in country towns. Lots of sporting and social clubs think they depend on us for their survival. You have to go to Western Australia to escape us: it's the only state where pokies are found solely in the casino.

There's further cheering news for us: getting off the addiction train is very difficult. Can be done but it's as hard as giving up hard drugs, they say. Yes, there are gambling counsellors and support groups, there is printed information in venues, there is the self-exclusion program, telephone and online assistance and so on. But what those who want to give it up are really required to do is to overcome their own brains. Good luck with that.

It's not luck, of course. It's a huge amount of sustained commitment and determination – and skilled help – that puts us right out of their lives on a permanent basis. I can afford to wish these hopefuls well because I know what a struggle it is. And unless things change, there are plenty more people, particularly young ones, becoming addicts due to the explosion in sports gambling and innocuous-seeming gambling apps, downloadable to mobile phones and tablets.

Beyond the craving

KATE HARRISON

Craving

I have had the craving all day. It is a constant feeling of anticipation, anxiety and a need to gamble. To gamble takes four things – an urge, which I have; time, which I have an abundance of; money, there's the problem; and an accessible venue. I want to go but without all four aspects jelling nicely, I can't. I am bored at home. I am walking, and cleaning, but I need more. I'm not getting enough satisfaction out of my daily life and I crave to be in a venue, winning money. Other than that I need some outlet that doesn't cost \$5 a minute.

The craving is winding itself around me like a cloud of desire. I am trapped and I need to focus on something else to escape the feeling. There is an urge to go. I'm not there. Why? Lack of money, transport and a nearby venue. It's a good thing I'm not there, but I'd like to be. Physically and mentally I want to go. I want to feel the rush of the free spins. I want to win so bad. But I can't make this happen right now. I am excluded from the venue within walking distance, and I have no money. But today, if the four aspects had combined, I would have been there, doing damage to my overwhelming desire to stop once and for all.

I am sick of the pokies! I play them for the following reasons: to get rich quick, to ease some sort of emotional trauma and for some excitement in a boring existence. My life doesn't have to be boring, though it is a tedious and lonely road when there is no money.

The person I want to be

I am not the person I want to be. I would like to be a calm, happy non-smoker whose only vice is a cup of coffee. Instead I love a fag, and a poker machine thrills me to bits. My parents would hate to know the truth. They know I had a problem with the pokies but they think I am over it. I don't smoke in front of them, so they probably see a person who resembles what I want to be but am not. I have lost a lot of precious time, money, self-respect and dignity by being a gambler. Fourteen years of constantly needing to play, and frustration when lack of money or time prevents this. Devastation when I lose. Desperation to win. There is no worse a feeling than putting through heaps of money, losing it all quickly and then having to leave the comfort of the venue and face the world, penniless. No power bills paid, no food bought and payday far away. The pokies have left me a victim of society, a mum with no car to ferry around her child.

I need to feel inner peace. Pokies don't bring instant wealth. They bring despair and guilt. I am naive and stupid if I think I can go to the shops after a session. Gambling addiction is a disease. Self-exclusion, if you can get into a frame of mind to actually do it, is great. As long as you don't go to a venue you haven't been excluded from.

I am a good person, but I feel I have wasted the gift of life by spending it in windowless, soul-less venues. It pains me to think of all the sunny days I could have enjoyed instead of being holed up for hours in some pub. I have lost more than money. Through gambling I have lost any dignity and pride my parents instilled in me. I am truly sickened by the extent these machines have ruled my life. I want to be free to enjoy that cup of coffee in the sunshine in peace.

A good day

Today I cleaned the house thoroughly, went for a walk and met up with a friend. It was a good, productive day and I feel good at the end of it. Last Thursday I played the pokies with money I shouldn't have, and had a crap feeling about the day that left a bad taste for a long time.

I can think of other things to do – exercise classes on a Tuesday or Friday or both, walking, knitting, reading, seeing friends and relatives. I feel better when I don't gamble and I feel revolting when I've lost a large sum of money, especially by myself. Now I just have to focus on better things to do with my time, things that are much more rewarding than pressing a button. If I can have more days like today I will not feel like gambling my life away.

Ancient history?

I turned forty yesterday. I am going to muster up all the courage and strength I need to make my life better. Fags gone. Weight off. Pokies – ancient history! I'm sick of being a poor smoker who dwells on winning money from machines that are designed to take it. I will never win on these machines, and I will never get anything but rotten lungs from smoking, and I will be happier trimmer.

My goals are simple: give up smoking, lose weight and stop blowing money. I will be richer, look better and my skin will glow. When Mum gets back from overseas I will be 75 kilos, prettier and a lot of the guilt will dissipate if I avoid the pokies. I will walk 30 minutes twice a day, watch what I eat and try to be happy at home rather than go out. I mean all this; it's not just pie in the sky. I'm sick of trudging through life unhappy because of my own choices. It's time to take action or it will all be over in a sea of smoky, debt-ridden, size 16 decades.

If I succeed in this mission it should have a domino effect. I will look better therefore I will be happier and less likely to plunge money into the pokies. If I don't play these machines from hell, my partner will be happier and less stressed and our whole lives could open up with new possibilities and

experiences. We could go on holidays, fix the backyard, buy new furniture, and a new car will become a reality instead of a distant dream.

If this plan of mine fails then it's back to sitting on the front step, fag in my mouth, lamenting my pathetic existence, and I won't even have the thought of my family coming home as they would have grown tired of living with a big, selfish slob. I can't let that happen, I love them too much. I have to do this for my sanity, my happiness, my beautiful boy and his dad.

Risk/reward

BLOSSOM

Trading the stock market

Roysen Sept 19 2008 email to me:

Blue chips near new highs and tech/ndx/Russell diverging so order is restoring to the mkt as we speak. Looks lower to me. Probably last real selling opportunity overall.

Roysen Sept 22 2008 email to me:

Sentiment Trader: The volatility we saw over the past week has been rarely matched in modern history. If we extrapolate the daily moves from last week, it would suggest the S&P 500 would move nearly 80% one way or the other over the course of the next year. In the past 70 years, that has been exceeded only once, in the aftermath of the '87 crash (when it reached an astounding 240%).



Roysen had been waiting for twenty-five years for this. He had graduated cum laude and started trading portfolios in front of his computer screen five days a week in Memphis. Saturday, he drew charts. Sunday, he attended to church and family. He dreamed of time for golf. Overweight, knee replaced, heart operation, and years later he is still fixated on the screens, waiting for the fall to start again.

I had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from domestic violence and had lost assets, my perfect spine, a second child. I was desperate, a single mum now, and it made no difference if I took a part of what I had left and

gambled it. I knew zero about the market, just saw the hypnotic moving charts and the flicking addictive lights on my trading platform with two clicks to put on a bet. Bet market up – a long – or down – a short. Four years later I am still fixated on the computer, managing my addiction.

Riding the wave: Roysen said it was going. He was in and loaded up – lots of Russell, Naz and the S&P, gold and silver, indices. He was doing a double inverse on the drop. The market was turning but we couldn't be sure, can never be sure; it had been erratic and high since last year with big clients distributing their gains out of the market. Watching every day, every night. Last October Macquarie Bank had dropped from \$95 in the wave four pullback, and maybe now was really it.

I had a *For Your Eyes Only* chart from Roysen, done with his intuitive fusion into the body of the market, hands touching the charts and patterns and feeling the market energy, stroking it like a wild thing. Informed by the market astrologer Arch Crawford, sensitive to full moon turns and lunar eclipses enough to nudge the collective hopes and fears and greed in the market mind-space, he felt its readiness.

His chart showed the Dow down to 600 – a very scary, sick-making place. Waterfalling and crashing down to massive losses for all the gamblers and into economic Armageddon for the rest.

I got in, 1547, my platform flicking, jumping red numbers, the bars were moving down fast. S&P and Naz and R2K, packing in the max amount of five contracts per position to \$1250. Each one-point drop gave me \$1250 per contract. It fell fast and I loaded up more as it passed 1525, 1517, 1511... Good long drops. S&P dropped below 1500 and was looking good. Incredible. Another short at 1492 and then momentum slowed at 1481 and reversed accelerating upwards, cleaning out shorts fast. I was worried. Sick. Panicking. Bought out my last shorts, four positions below 1500, losing money and it went on up to 1515.

Roysen said it was OK and he was loading up more.

Then it turned and fell off a cliff and we rode it down, adding more, piggybacking down the ride for days. Like the biggest jackpot ever and adding more bets as it fell, cascading money night and day.

Just ridin', said Roysen.

Risk, terror and an oyster

Risk

I gamble on CFDs. Contracts for a Difference. Win or Lose – the difference between your point of entry and your closing out, whether you bet on the market going up or going down.

I registered with the Market Maker, declaring my identity, credibility and assets and deposited money online. Easy-peasy. Then I downloaded the Award Winning Trading Platform and was away in minutes. Oh bliss, oh joy, names, numbers flicking red and green and two clicks to bet. Like a plane or spaceship, truly intuitive even for an old bag like me. Immersion. Escape. Total focus. Thrilling, intuitive, and infinitely hard and easy. Charts! Running live! Eventually found that I could go from one tick to one minute to one hour to one day charts. The patterns had been like this from time immemorial. I rode the ebb and flow between fear, greed and hope. Later, much later, I showed the platform and live charts to a young lawyer, a video gamer. His eyes bugged, after two minutes he whispered, 'I could watch this all night – so good and so terrible'.

Anyway, I was away in minutes. One click to buy or sell. Open in the red, already betting to make up my loss.

The ASX gave lunchtime talks in the city on this when they setup CFDs in competition with the Market Makers. I am still using the blue and white ASX mouse-pad I got in my show-bag. The audience were middle-aged to retirees and a scattering of women. I noticed well-groomed Melbourne women in tasteful black with smooth white hair parted on the side, all believing the skills they had used in their lives and careers would let them be winners – risk had always knelt before them.

The Market Makers make more and more each year. They get awards. They are on the other side of the bet and they always win overall. I paid all sorts of analysts and readers of entrails to give me sure thing betting tips. They couldn't do it. The chat rooms are full of people complaining and the trolls employed by the 'sure thing best tipsters' are extolling their virtues. I haven't a clue but I am betting. They are just names and numbers and charts running with the bets.

If I am right on my bet, the market will fall. Yes, indeed, four contracts \$1000 USD five points min. Stop Loss. So \$5000 to risk and start in the red as there is a spread between the Buy and Sell prices. I am lucky, the market falls three points, and I am break-even, two more and I am thankful. Then the market moves up fast and goes through my entry point and touches my Stop and all my money is gone. Next bar it moves down and drops like a stone for five minutes. It can bounce 20 points, 50 points or turn and bounce 1000 points...no horse ever leaves the box, turns back, takes your handbag and then goes back on the track and wins the race.

I wanted to win back CFD losses, the loss of my forced-by-evil-husband sub-primed home, forty years of saving, going without, serial house renovation, carrying and nailing, repairing of wedding-cake ceilings and showering under hose in the backyard for seven years. I was deep into PTSD from domestic violence and the deep focus of the enthralling computer screen was a reprieve and safety.



Terror

I watch the market for twelve hours at a time, then I sit there from morning to the next morning when it closes in the US. Make breakfast, take kids to the train, then back to the computer. I chat online. Twenty-eight hours and still going...I find people as troppo as me. I win lots but the ATO will take half so I keep trying. I lose and lose and lose. I am deeply afraid. I have deep terror in me. I had lost my home in my marriage. I lost all I had worked for all my adult life. I shake if I move away from my charts. I cannot do anything else. Sometimes my legs swell. I am isolated, no social contact, moved every few years by the husband and now in a truly alien suburb in a strange city. There are no skills to let me win. I am obsessed. If I look at the charts I am distracted. They move hypnotically, the bars dancing on the screen making patterns almost predictable, and all this in the centre of the house and four metres from my bed, running round the clock, coloured and beautiful. The charts are still going as I write. Daily bars showing the price movement for each day within patterns of colours and curving lines dancing across the screen.

Goldman Sachs the Vampire Squid has a computer program that can take down any market anywhere in the world if in the wrong hands, they say in court. They never lose. Leo Blankfein says he is doing God's Work. Algos run by the machines, the computers running twenty-four hours a day in warehouses owned by Big Commercials and Big Banks too big to fail – and who may also be running Dark Pools of money trading off market. New York Stock Exchange takes money to let them in faster than their clients and I, so they know what's happening before we do. They get their warehouses ever closer to the exchanges to save a microsecond of the milliseconds they use in betting. But Goldman never loses. The retail bettors have left, taking billions out. The algos talk to each other, stuffing bets, buying and selling many times each second. The market moves in patterns never seen before in history. Machines talk. And the owners never lose.



I know there are no brakes in the financial system to stop what comes after the collapse of just one major bank. They are all intertwined and cross-linked. One goes, they all do. The gamble has been too big. There is 70 trillion in G10 debt as collateral for \$700 trillion in derivatives. This is twelve times the Global GDP including the money made on financial transactions, i.e. not real stuff. All countries will fail and it will be an end to the abomination of the fractional reserve system of banking.

I fear social upheaval and the US had now got 30,000 armed drones domestically, I read, and Australia is buying them too. Our soils are old and worn out and we are the driest continent on a drying world. Our sustainable population is 22 million as determined by the CSIRO sixteen years ago and in twenty years we run out of loggable trees. We cannot even do subsistence well in this country. My ancient father may leave me a house in a dried-out paddock, maybe a dam, as he subdivides off the rest to follow the fortunes already given to the Golden Child, the narcissist progeny of the family tree.



The pokie addict's oyster

However, for those who gamble on the pokies, there is hope if the addiction is just to the machine. Go West. The West is a wonderful place, Perth the most isolated city in the world. The wind blows in the summer after 11am from the Indian Ocean and the Antarctic, clean and cool. There is joy in the West. There is a casual pickup for crews for yachts at the jetty down the street in Claremont in summer, on Wednesday arvo at 5pm; dinner after work at 5.30 on the beach at Cottesloe. The best ice rink in the Southern Hemisphere with Russian world champs and US Open winners teaching, and the best comic shop in the world.

Go West, pokie addicts, it's your oyster. Western Australia only permits the use of particular forms of gaming machine in Burswood Casino, and no gaming machines may be installed elsewhere. This policy (the most restrictive in Australia) had a long historical basis, and was reaffirmed by the 1974 Royal Commission into Gambling:

...poker machine playing is a mindless, repetitive and insidious form of gambling which has many undesirable features. It requires no thought, no skill or social contact. The odds are never about winning. Watching people playing the machines over long periods of time, the impressionistic evidence at least is that they are addictive to many people. Historically poker machines have been banned from Western Australia and we consider that, in the public interest, they should stay banned.

In the bush

On the way to the car, Dad got a big round glowing spoonful of honey from the bowl below where it was draining from the muslin knotted and held by the wooden spoon across the countertop corner and pushed it into my mother's mouth. She didn't want it.

The honey came from beehives scattered round the farm. They had bought the land in their sixties, very hot in summer, bitter with sharp frosts up trees in winter and eaten-out sheep paddocks. Dry winds over the paddocks and seared thin dry grass in summer and winter frost rose up the trunks, thirty inches some nights. Then some parts of the year they brought lambs and

lush spring grass and a wonderful rampant acre of garden and raspberries and boysenberries, strawberries and apples with nets and corn and potatoes and beans and tomatoes deep red and intense, eggs and happiness.

They built a home on the farm with hand tools and their own hands, a passive solar stone house. They found stone, collected stone from ripped-up paddocks and then dug stone. The stones, loaded onto the trailer, were irregular, yellowish to orangish and darker still – most two foot or so across. Mum, a little round thing by now, with radiant hazel eyes and remarkable white teeth, loved this. She built beautiful walls, stone face out, smooth, back filled in the middle to give two-foot deep walls. At last in Dad's retirement she got to do what she wanted. Open spaces away from the narrowness of town life, constant interests, independence, healthy tank water, their own septic system and rubbish went to the tip or the compost heap with shot foxes and all sorts of things loved by worms and micro-organisms.

Just married, she'd cooked a meal. 'Where are the potatoes?' asked Dad. After that, bread and potatoes every meal, two sweet bickies and a cup of tea each morning in bed. No good for a small, finely boned woman and no good for her. She conformed to an extent to being a wife, managing risk/reward through the wins and the disappointments.

They drove up through the paddocks to the road. She opened the gate, lifting it slightly and avoiding mud, and then took off to town. On the way she watched trees become strange and disturbed shapes, her vision like a computer screen crashing. Her eyes crashed.

The risk/reward and gamble of life came back and took her eyes.

The neighbours did not know how little her eyes saw. Macular degeneration took most of her sight yet she smiled with perfect teeth and big soft loving hazel eyes in a darkly tanned face and gave no indication. The sheep didn't know and she watered the garden and cooked boysenberry pies and froze fruit and lamb and managed to do most things.

The next risk she took was while enjoying life, up a ladder, painting the bedroom wall of her brother's farmhouse. Using peripheral vision she was off and away with the paintbrush. Risk won, the ladder slipped and she fell, broke her leg and took a piece out of it. Six weeks later on Sunday morning, in the hospital in the small country town I grew up in, the doctor drove in from the doctors' enclave out of town. The enclave was above a creek, where they cleared down the slope to waterline so the creek flooded the farms below it all the way to town.

The doctor chatted to Mum lying in bed, and she minded his two-year-old kid. Then he picked up her leg; the gash had healed. Her leg had never been X-rayed and he held it up and set it freehand, crooked. Her ankle was in the wrong position. She said it was obvious. She could not speak. She was in a trauma freeze. She had been in it since arrival in the hospital and the doctors shouted at her when she said she took no medication. The leg healed and her ankle stayed swollen. She could not bend it properly. She could no longer run after sheep or walk a steep hill. Again risk had won.

Fifteen years later she took the next game of risk/reward. She had had enough. Neighbours did not know how blind she was and it got worse. At a function she could not recognise someone who spoke to her and shock spread through the neighbouring farms. She put on weight. They never used the disabled parking in town; they just managed. I had rung the Royal Blind Society to help her, but she waited six months and they did not come.

After her eighty-sixth birthday, on a Monday morning in September, highly intelligent and aware, three months to the day after her last medical checkup, they had breakfast, beds made, mopped and Dad went out the front to work on the tulips. Tulips a metre and half high. She sat down and died. This time she was certain.

Dragons & dilemmas

NATTY G

Trapped!

One afternoon I was walking in the wood. It was cold and dark and I jumped at every noise.

I came across an old cave. Alone and scared as I was, I decided to investigate. Creeping slowly through the dim, narrow hallway-like passage, I was drawn towards beautiful, bright colours flashing at the other end, and the faint rhythm coming from there. I kept walking carefully, wondering what type of creature was making that sound, living in this cave.

The passage was very long and I thought I'd never come to the end. Suddenly I was there. Slowly I peered around the corner and saw a big but beautiful creature lying over by the back wall, fast asleep. Curiosity got the better of me and I wanted to see more. Slowly I tiptoed forward, getting nearer and nearer, hoping I wouldn't wake it up. The flickering of the lights startled me, and even though they drew me in, I scurried back slightly just to be safe. Then I continued forward again, still being careful and as quiet as a mouse.

Close up, I could see it was a dragon, a female dragon. Her scales were the colours of a rainbow, and her wings were of golden lace. Sharp spikes ran all the way down her extremely long tail. She was amazing.

I was nearly there. Even when the colours flickered again I didn't stop. I kept creeping towards her, in a trance until I reached the beautiful dragon. Unaware, I stepped on some pretty jewels lying on the ground of the cave, waking her in the process.

I WAS TRAPPED!

How it all began...

I am a single mum with a daughter who is now six years old, and we live with my parents in a cramped three-bedroom house.

Within months of my daughter's birth, I was being verbally abused by my ex-partner. He would not always show up for our access meetings, and when he did, he was hardly ever sober. It got worse and I became more frustrated and I had to escape. That's when I turned to the pokies.

When my daughter was a three year old in preschool, I was lost. I had a bit of time on my hands that I didn't know what to do with, and again I ended up at the pokies. Gradually it turned into a problem. I was making all kinds of excuses to go out just to gamble. I was coming home late after my night course because I was gambling. I was pawning my stuff just to get a quick buck for the pokies. For about two or three years I was in a bad place. I lied about where I was going. I spent every dollar I had. And people I loved stopped believing in me. I felt lousy.

Over the last couple of years I've been on the wagon, though not completely. Now if I do go out to the pokies, I either pay my bills off first and play with what I have left over or I budget myself and only take a small amount with me.

I realised my daughter was getting older and I had to make my life about her and not about myself and my selfish ways. With the help of my family and true friends I have decreased my gambling and started getting myself out of debt.



Slowly moving in the wind

The sun is out but the clouds are closing in,
The ground is wet and mucky, the wind like ice on my arms.
I stand here, slowly moving in the wind.

Beyond the oval and over the road,
A line of shops one after another are deserted.
Still I stand here, slowly moving in the wind.

Cars driving past me, left and right,
Trains a kilometre away speeding over the rickety track.
I still stand here, slowly moving in the wind.

Suddenly I see a dog walking my way,
Getting closer and closer, gaining on me.
But still I stand here, slowly moving in the wind.

The dog is still gaining, really close,
Nearly here, stopping right at my feet.
I am still standing here, slowly moving in the wind.

His leg starts to rise,
Getting higher and higher, then stops.
Unfortunately I still stand here, slowly moving in the wind.

'Come here, boy, come here,' says the owner,
'Quick, come here, Rover boy.' And like a flash the dog was
gone.
'Phew!'. I'm still standing here, slowly moving in the wind.

It's getting dark, not many lights,
It's still and cold with no one in sight.
Until next time
I will still be here; I will still be standing,
Slowly moving in the wind.

Changed priorities

LOIS ANN

Off and racing

It is Saturday and the alarm goes off at 8am. She arises and quickly turns on the radio to listen to the racing tipsters for their selections for that day.

Her excitement quickens with the thought that 'maybe I'll have a winning day'. She decides to cast aside all information she has gleaned and back her own judgement. She has been following a certain stable, with minimal luck, but she will keep with it. She also has a couple of favourite jockeys who have let her down in the past but she must stay with them too.

She decides to bet only in Sydney and Brisbane. They are both big meetings with large fields. The races begin. No luck in the first in either meeting. She recalls what an old friend (now deceased) used to say: 'It never pays to win on the first'.

Then the 2nd, 3rd and 4th races come and go with not even a place. Now she is starting to ask, 'Is it another one of those days?'

'Please God, let me have a winner today.' She knows she shouldn't ask God for anything to do with her addictions.

Races 5 and 6 come and go. She has a couple of small collects at both meetings but not enough to recoup her outgoings. She listens to Race 7 at both venues. Frustration and resignation set in.

Her horse runs 4th in the last race in Brisbane.

There's only Race 8 in Sydney left. Into her mind flashes one of her grandfather's sayings: 'Might as well be shot for a sheep as a lamb'. She doubles her outlay.

The race starts and the two horses she has backed are running mid-field. A hundred metres to go and, joy oh joy, both horses steam down the outside of the field. She has won – \$5 each way on both horses; also a dollar on the quinella and a percentage of the trifecta. She has dipped out on the first four but she isn't too disappointed.

She is happy. She has made a profit of over \$200.

'Thank God,' she whispers, although she knows that tomorrow is another day and that the outcome will probably be entirely different.

No longer a priority

My involvement with poker machines first began in late 1992. Prior to that I'd had a few trips over the border to New South Wales and a casual try on the 'one-armed bandits', as they were then called.

The temporary casino opened in Melbourne, and I made several visits, becoming quite interested, especially after I had a couple of wins. When a friend visited from Tasmania for a week I thought she might like to see what I had been talking about and so I took her in one night; we sat at machines side by side. Unfortunately, Ila didn't have much luck. I, however, could do no wrong. Each machine I played kept paying – in fact, at one stage I had people standing behind watching me fill my buckets. I gave my friend \$200 (a lot in those days) and still kept winning.

I was in, hook, line and sinker.

When the new casino was built, I visited often, with varying degrees of luck.

Then the machines emerged in clubs and pubs in the suburbs. By this time I was in, up to my neck. I would walk into one of my local venues several times a week. When automatic teller machines were installed it was easy to take just a few steps and withdraw money.

Eventually I came to the realisation that I had a very serious gambling problem. I decided to seek help from Gamblers Anonymous. The counsellor there tried telling me how the machines worked and how they were programmed to pay at random. She came up with some activities to take my mind off those monsters...such as taking a tram ride, going to the movies, lunching with friends. Nothing worked for me as I was bored by these ideas.

Eventually, she suggested that maybe I should try self-exclusion and, in desperation, I agreed to see someone and sign the appropriate documents. I nominated several venues around my area and this seemed to work for a couple of months. But I sneaked into one of the hotels, and although I was lucky not to get that 'tap on the shoulder', doing this just once brought on the urge. I didn't renew my self-exclusion agreement when it expired and would pop into any venue I was passing, to be mesmerised again by the machines.

My downfall is that when I am out somewhere and have had a couple of drinks, my weakness overcomes me. I think my counsellor has almost given up on me but I am trying to be more positive and apply willpower.

While I am not going to say I will never play the machines again, they are no longer a priority in my life.

The diagnosis

She works as an administrative assistant for the School of Innovation and Enterprise. The professor has invited a contingent of Asian students here on an exchange program for a week. Discussion is held on how to entertain the students and it is agreed that they be taken to Shepparton for a weekend to see a rural Victorian town and some of the countryside around the town. Arrangements are made with the mayor of Shepparton to hold a formal dinner and reception for the students at the town hall. A mini-bus is to transport them there while she will be the designated driver for the professor and his administrative officer.

She and the female administrative officer will share a motel room. During the Friday night, she wakes with agonising pains in her stomach. She takes some painkillers and eventually the pains recede.

The next day the students are taken around Shepparton to view the sights, including a zoo. They are very excited by the animals they've never seen before and become extremely animated, pointing and taking numerous photos.

That evening the reception at the town hall is a great success. She talks to the mayor's wife for a short time, mentioning what happened to her during the previous night. The mayoress advises her to see a doctor on her return to Melbourne.

She visits her GP the following day and he organises for her to have blood tests. He is to ring her on Saturday with the results. She is concerned, although she has not had any recurrence of the stomach pains. On the day in question, the receptionist contacts her and tells her to come into the surgery that morning as the doctor needs to speak with her.

Now she is anxious. She is in the waiting room and the doctor comes out to call another patient in. He normally looks over and waves to her but not this time. She becomes even more apprehensive. The doctor finally calls her in and tells her, gently, that she has bowel cancer. She just sits and looks at him, completely numb – she is in shock and can think of nothing to say. Her heart is beating wildly while he talks but she is not listening. Finally her brain takes in the fact that he intends making an appointment for her to see a top surgeon immediately. The doctor repeats how sorry he is to give her this mind-numbing information.

She walks out to her car, and sits in it for what seems an eternity but is only a few minutes. She must deal with the reality of what she's just been told. 'I have cancer. What is my future? Do I have a future?'

She starts the engine and slowly drives home.

Kicking the habit

She hadn't been to a poker machine venue for six weeks. She was feeling very proud of herself. 'Just another two weeks,' she thought, 'and I've kicked the habit'.

Do you think she lasted the distance? Once an addict, always an addict?

Then came her car accident which left her with a broken bone in her arm, no car and plenty of time on her hands. The inevitable happened. She knew she should walk right past the venue only a block away from her home, but she felt something or someone steering her through the door. Once inside came the familiar excitement at the prospect of winning.

She sat at her favourite 'panda' machine, adrenalin rushing. It was wonderful to be pushing those buttons again. But her hopes were dashed. Walking home in complete disappointment, she wondered what had caused her to succumb to temptation again. The following day, with the whole afternoon looming and little to do, her thoughts turned again to the venue and the idea of recouping her losses. She knew it was dangerous to follow that thought but she justified it by telling herself, 'It's only money and maybe luck will be with me today'.

Her favourite machine was in use so she sat at a '50 lions', which she had never tried before. It was only 25 cents to play all lines which meant she could play without losing all her money quickly. She increased her bet occasionally and the machine gave her small wins.

She couldn't believe her eyes when all the lions appeared – she had won \$500! She collected her money and quickly headed home with a spring in her step. 'God has looked after me kindly,' she thought as she thanked Him.

Several days later she started thinking about that wonderful '50 lions' machine. Once again, with nothing of importance to do, she headed for the venue and was thrilled to see the vacant chair in front of that game. Half an hour later she had won and collected \$100. She knew she should go home but, looking around, she saw that the 'panda' machine was available. Half an hour and she had won \$100. Not trusting her luck any further, she left with her winnings of \$200.

Now she really had the urge. Walking home from the railway station after attending a Story-writing Workshop one Wednesday afternoon she passed the venue. There was no way she could not go in, so back to the '50 lions' with expectations. This visit, however, turned out to be an entirely different story. She lost \$130 of her recent winnings.

She made a promise to herself that she would do her best not to give in to her addiction again. She would concentrate instead on her new and exciting and hopefully more rewarding venture – buying and selling on eBay.

Scenes from a life

SABINA WALKER

How I met your dad

Chaos is happening. My chenille bedspread is covered with clothes. My friend Judith and I cannot make up our minds what to wear. Shoes are spread like a minefield over the flowered carpet, my dressing table is a cosmetic extravaganza.

Saturday night, and we're going to Powerhouse. Finally we are ready. Judith wears a purple minidress with matching platform shoes. I have on my white dress trimmed in yellow with knee-high white plastic boots. Excitement is in the air.

Now to leave the house without my dad seeing us! I can smell Old Spice: Dad must be nearly finished in the bathroom. I yell out goodbye as the door slams shut. We run up our street, saying hello to neighbours, laughing as we go. 'Well, we missed out on the disapproval lecture,' I say. 'Yeah,' replies Judith, and we look smugly at each other.

Queuing up to get into the dance we can hear 'Hey, Bungalow Bill' being sung and my body automatically starts swaying. I see a boy who takes my fancy. He is very tall and lean with shiny long dark hair. He is wearing a blue satin shirt with black flares. He is my aim for the night.

Innocently, I stand where he can see me, acting as if I'm only interested in the band playing, while I discreetly look at him out of the corner of my eye. Finally, he asks me for a dance.

Between dances he complains of a sore side, saying he has a rumbling appendix. I think it a bit strange when he tells me that he'll see me again if he isn't in hospital.

Three days later his sister comes to my house to say he is in hospital. I finally decide to go and see him.

The rest is history. Marcus and I were married for forty years.

Mental anguish

The day started normally. The children went to school. Marcus and I went to work. Then the telephone call telling me Marcus was in hospital! There had been an accident at work and he had hurt his back. Our lives had changed. Anyone who has lived with someone suffering chronic pain, or who has suffered chronic pain, will know where I am coming from.

I was always making excuses for Marcus and trying to keep peace and harmony within the family.

Marcus tried his best but the pain would win. Depression, rapid mood swings, over-the-top highs due to medication: all took their toll. Occasionally he would flare into a rage over nothing. What happened one Christmas-time was an example.

'What's wrong, Sabina?' asks my friend Linda.

Silence!

I think, trying to get the words out. 'It's happened again. Marcus is not talking,' I say.

'What!' exclaims Linda. 'Not even on Christmas Day? What about Skye and Tony?'

I drink more coffee to swallow the tears while looking at the black and white tiles. I'm feeling I need to justify myself.

Then I blurt out: 'Well, Linda, you know it's not the incident that starts the sulking, it's an excuse to let out his anger and pent-up emotions. Then he doesn't talk, because that way he has control.'

‘Sabina! Sabina! Tell me what happened.’

‘We were at the Frankston shops on Friday night, people everywhere. Marcus took the kids. I thought we were to meet at the escalators near Myer. I waited for over half an hour. Then I heard his booming voice yelling: “What are you doing here? I told you to meet me at Target.”’

‘We went home in silence. I knew from past experience it was no use trying to talk to him.’

‘The next morning I said good morning and got no response. That evening I cooked dinner and kept talking as if everything was normal. No response, and he didn’t eat his dinner. That was two weeks before Christmas...and nothing changed.’

‘The kids wanted to know what they had done wrong and would Dad be talking on Christmas Day? I prayed that he would.’

‘Christmas came and I had to be excited for the children. Marcus stayed in bed. We all played charades of being happy. I was determined I wouldn’t cry. I cooked the lunch. The three of us sat down to a festive table with matching bon-bons, napkins and table-cloth and our best china.’

‘Marcus wouldn’t join us. As if on cue Skye and Tony laughed as hollowly and as high-pitched as I did as I read the corny jokes aloud. I made a joke of inviting Smokey, our dog, to the table to eat Marcus’ meal.’

‘I was at breaking point.’

‘I don’t know what to do, Linda.’

Escapism

I never thought I would be enticed by the pokies. Not in a million years! A friend is holidaying at our home. Her desire is to visit the pokies, so I accompany her. I quickly discover the escapism, the highs and lows, and the availability of gambling venues. To start with I have it in perspective. It is a place I can go so long as I have money in my pocket.

The room is cosily warm, with soft dark carpet and dimmed lighting. Everything is familiar and beckons me in. Machines are playing their different tunes, lighting up like jewels in an Aladdin's cave.

I randomly put one dollar into a 5-cent machine. Everything starts going crazy. Coins are moving across the screen. The winning amount is racing; music is getting louder and louder. People are milling around me. 'Major Jackpot \$8000' is displayed across the screen. I am stunned, elated, transported out of my depression.

While waiting for the paperwork to be done I ring Marcus to share the exciting news. 'You've been gone for over an hour. When will you be home?' is his retort.

Shortly after that event we are told that Marcus has cancer of the bladder. Months dissolve into a year. Marcus has his bladder and prostate removed. The cancer has escaped. His wound is infected, and his kidneys are closing down. The Alfred Hospital staff are doing all they can.

In between visits I go to the casino. I am overcome by the immense size of the complex: a smorgasbord that turns on me and eats me up, sucking my money into a vortex of illusion. The hypnotic tunes and themes weave their way into my brain. I have a big problem: one that I don't want to address. It is my secret, at least the severity of it is.

I hear the nurses talking and feel activity around me. Marcus is sleeping. My greatest hope is that I have taken him out of his depression; at least helped him and reassured him. I had prayed to take him away from the dark places that he went to in his sleep.

I am frightened of the unknown and life without Marcus. I should be able to put my faith in God and let life unfold. I am trying. The hurt is destroying

me and I have been too low to work at it. I need to forgive myself and look for warmth, love and calm in the right places.

A history of abuse and then needing to alleviate the hurt, not by love but by beating myself up and looking for a quick high to escape: that is what was ingrained in me in my growing-up years, which doesn't mean it has to stay that way. It is a constant struggle.

Currently, I pour out my love to Marcus and he turns his needs to me, feeds off me, tells me how much he loves and appreciates me. My hurt stays locked up: I start to cry, but the tears don't fall.

I should go to the beach, watch the tides ebb and flow continuing nature's rhythm, or visit the Dandenong Ranges and feel the deep rainforest surround me with growth in abundance. Only there is no time to do so.

Instead, I have been finding myself at the pokies, only for a while of course, and only to put through \$20. The escapism of the pictures rushing in front of my eyes; the game seems to bring order, and the chase is exciting. One, two icons fall down with a thump, but not the third. The person sitting next to me wins big, or maybe they lose and look depressed, angry or drugged: anything but happy.

I see myself, yet I slip in another \$20 note, hoping for a high. Occasionally I go home rich but mostly with an empty purse, only to feel more miserable and beat myself up. I tell myself I have a problem and should ring Gamblers Anonymous, but instead I kid myself and then once again find myself at the pokies.

My world

Who am I? You tell me. I have taken you into a crevice of my soul. I am now into the last chapter of my life and I intend to make it a good one.

Marcus has been calling me to visit his grave and I have been procrastinating. Today, after visiting my friend Bessie, I will go to the cemetery.

Bessie is a 4-foot 11-inches loveable lady in her seventies. Once I start talking to her I forget her age. The love of life bounces in her voice. Bessie

still lives in Fawkner, where I grew up. The rumbles of my past stay hidden whenever I go there.

The sun is shining but the day is cold. The area looks different. In place of the primary school I attended is a beautiful Buddhist monastery. Six nuns are out for a walk, their robes moving with the breeze. Mystique surrounds them, with only their eyes to be seen.

I have an enjoyable day with Bessie. She treats me to bingo and lunch. That bingo hall certainly wasn't there in my young days. Bessie says nothing to prepare me as she drives to an area that I had been familiar with. Now in the place of the concrete Ministry homes there are enormous new dwellings.

I no longer belong to this Fawkner that is fringed by Sydney Road. I remember the Merri Creek weaving its open way throughout the suburb. Now most of it is channelled underground.

After saying goodbye to Bessie, I go to see the home I grew up in. Two units are there now. With an urge greater than my manners I stand in the front yard. Feelings and memories are surging out of the ground into my feet, rushing like an avalanche throughout my body. Waking up on Sunday morning to the intoxicating smell of cakes and biscuits baking! I can taste the butternut snaps: they were my favourites.

Dad loved horse racing. I can hear the radio blaring on a Saturday afternoon. No one could talk while the excitement of the race was on. Dad was thumping the table, rotating his fist, while egging on his horse to win; commentators were discussing the track conditions, etc. I couldn't even breathe loudly!

Like many fathers of my generation, he was a returned soldier from the Second World War. He was too proud to seek counselling.

I separate my Dad's personality into compartments: an emotional man who would cry at a sad movie; memories of brushing his hair; a compassionate, caring, knowledgeable man. On the flip side, he was an alcoholic: he would either ramble on about the war or become violent. His father was a gambler and his mother an alcoholic. My mum coped as long as no-one knew what was happening. An era of secrets and pretence. Life met with a stiff upper lip. Emotions never displayed except for happy partying!

Despite the dysfunction of my family, I always felt loved. I remember these feelings in order to understand my behaviour.

I'm glad that the house which held these secrets has been obliterated. While I still have history, I am now a spectator to Fawkner.

Finally at the cemetery, I visit the grave and place my flowers. I feel nothing: Marcus' spirit is not reaching me. Then I realise that is what I need to feel. The following week is speckled with an image of Marcus standing away from me and happily serene. I am now comfortable with the space between life and death.

Help

After five months of palliative care Marcus has been released from pain and is now in God's care. I don't have to be strong any more, I can cry. Instead I nurture everyone else's emotions. My mind is shattered. It feels like the electrodes to my motherboard have been removed.

Continually returning to venues, staying there longer than I should...

In desperation I ring Gambler's Help Line. A gentleman by the name of Roman talks to me for several hours, tells me I am sitting on the edge of a well with my feet dangling in and that the way I choose to move is up to me. The key things he says to me are: 'Why not get a dog?'; 'What do you like?'; 'If you enjoy nature so much, visit it'; 'Stop lying to yourself'; 'Be honest'; 'Make an appointment with a counsellor.'

Thank you

Dear Sharon,
From the bottom of my heart I say thank you for the time and empowerment you have given me. I have the utmost respect for you as a counsellor. The tapestry of my life is enhanced by the rich gold threads of your guiding wisdom.

I have been visiting you for three years. I no longer use the word 'stupid' in relation to myself. Slowly realisation has seeped through my mind. I understand how post-traumatic experiences have been fracturing my limbic system.

When I hear derogatory, judgemental opinions directed at people with mental health issues, including addiction, I feel indignant. My response is to refer to my own experience with an analogy. I say: 'Imagine a young child having her hip and leg damaged severely. Incorrect or no help has been given. The child learns to walk the best way she can, suffers deep pain and accepts what is: being unable to play sport, feeling different from the other children. Then as an adult she is handed a prosthesis and told to get over it.'

You have given me tools which are changing the way I live. I have needed to revisit many aspects of my life. Mindful awareness has been a pivotal tool in moving forward. Your reassurance and guidance with my grief has had a profound effect. Encouragement to build my leisure activities has been essential.

I still feel the feather of temptation tickle me into submission from time to time, and I have taken appropriate steps to support my determination to deal with this. I have finally asked for help from friends who are temporarily looking after my money. I don't have an ATM card. I buy a Woolworths card once a fortnight which enables me to purchase food, petrol and other essentials from Big W. The tools of survival for a recovering gambler you have taught me have been deeply appreciated.

Sharon, I look forward to seeing you again.

Regards, Sabina

Contributors

Anna Bardsley

When my life hit the fan, I struggled to keep my head above water. The pokies provided a hiding place from the world I couldn't handle. I kidded myself that I had it under control, that I was winning more than I lost. When I finally had the courage to look myself in the eye and count the total cost of lost time, money and damaged relationships, I realised I couldn't do this on my own.

I have been fortunate to receive quality help by means of weekly counselling and participation in several groups, all of which helped me re-establish my social connections, have compassion for myself and find the path out of the dark place I had inhabited.

The Story-writing Workshops gave me a chance to explore and express my experience in a safe and caring environment. The closeness and mutual respect that grew between us during those weeks is something I will always value.

Now I am free to look for other, happier ways to fill the gaps in my life and able to revisit past skills and engage with new ones.

Anna K

I'm a single mother of a 21-year-old son. I first walked into an electronic gaming venue thirteen years ago. Without knowledge of the powerful programming of these machines I was defenceless, and soon became addicted. Over the next twelve years I did a lot of damage to my life, but it was my son who suffered most. Two years ago I hit rock bottom and made a more serious commitment to recovery, self-excluding for the maximum two-year period and attending regular counselling. Things are slowly getting better; I still react when difficult circumstances arise but don't always gamble in response, and when I do, I no longer chase my losses. I've even managed to start saving on a Centrelink income. But, best of all, my self-esteem is returning, and being part of the Story-writing Workshops was, for me, a celebration of that.

Benjamin W

I have had a long-standing gambling problem and have always found it difficult to address it. Gambling started for me in a small way over 30 years ago and grew quite rapidly into a problem; apart from occasional periods of total abstinence it has been chronic ever since. It was worthwhile attending the Story-writing Workshops because not only were they a terrific social outlet, they refined and improved my

writing abilities. They also gave me insights into other problem gamblers' struggles and stories. Hearing the stories provided a powerful experience of the desperation and self-sabotaging behaviour that gamblers impose on themselves.

The benefits of being involved in these workshops were wide-ranging. My preference was for horseracing, greyhounds and harness. To hear the stories of pokie gamblers has been very revealing for me. Their addictions and thought processes are very similar to mine. The workshops combined a creative process with a therapeutic outlet for like-minded people grappling with their problems on a daily basis.

Blossom

Country childhood, academic and then took the gamble coolly and clearly as the last resort to win back what had been mine. I had been impervious to the pokies, comfortable with horses but CFDs (Contracts for a Difference) got me.

I am thankful for the care and help of my family violence counsellor and the loving acceptance and support of my gambling counsellor. It has been a pleasure to participate in the Story-writing Workshops, working with people telling their truths from lives lived intensely and experiencing how people can write and do it fast. I have written about the balance of risk against reward, basic to gambling and set against the shadow of powerlessness.

Joyce Lam

When I was diagnosed with a very serious illness I gave myself permission to have fun; playing the pokies also gave me a means of escape from my daily problems – if I was going to die I might as well die happy. Fun times soon became further and further apart and before I knew it I was hooked. Escape became bondage and added to the problems in my life.

It was difficult for my family to understand that I needed understanding and love and encouragement at the time of my treatment. I was misunderstood – things seemed fine but they were not. I was tormented by the constant war between my conscience and my morals and my need for a fix. I tried self-exclusion, counselling and self-help but to no avail. I was ensnared!

I joined the Story-writing Workshops and I was able to express my inner torment without judgement, something I did not receive from my spouse. The sharing of my plight with the group reveals that I am not alone and highlights how subtly one can be sucked into the web. The acceptance helped me to heal. Before, even a 'Pokies' sign would draw me like a magnet but now I can drive past without a flutter in my chest and I am able to take money from an ATM without wanting to use it to play. This is a great win.

Kate Harrison

I am a 40-year-old mother of one. I enjoyed the Story-writing Workshops; they gave me confidence in my writing ability. I have been involved in gambling for the last thirteen years and it has been a devastating journey. Counselling, self-exclusion and support have been factors in ceasing the habit. I have other interests and I find if I can focus on these, it lessens the desire to gamble. The Workshops inspired me to listen to others, and to delve deep into my own addiction and self-reflect. I am now in the early stages of realisation and I have hope that the next ten years will be full of exciting prospects that have eluded me while being a person addicted to gambling.

Lois Ann

When I was young I had several pen-friends with whom I kept in touch for many years. One of them was a New Zealander, the daughter of the owner/trainer of Rising Fast, and she mentioned that the racehorse was coming to Australia and that I should keep an eye on it. Of course I backed Rising Fast each time it ran and I made a minimal amount of money as I wasn't really into betting. I was so thrilled for the family when it won the treble in 1954 – the Melbourne Cup, the Caulfield Cup and the Cox Plate. No other horse has done that. I think that was when my gambling instincts came to life.

In May 2012 I was given the opportunity to join a six-week Story-writing Workshop. I knew from the very beginning that I was going to enjoy it and learn a lot about how to write and tell stories, always an interest of mine. The facilitator was a wonderful teacher and gave each and every one of us much encouragement.

It was wonderful how we bonded; one of the participants said he walked away feeling a glow inside after each session. We all agreed that we felt the same way. The pieces we wrote resulted in a variety of emotions when read to the rest of the group – sympathy, sorrow, pathos, and laughter. We followed up later in the year with four more sessions to prepare for this book to be published. I hope that as many people as possible will read its wonderful stories; hopefully they will learn that even though we all have weaknesses of some kind, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

Madeleine J

Seeking to join in the new entertainment that came to Victoria in 1992, I innocently started playing poker machines when they arrived here two decades ago. Not so slowly I slid into addiction, which I've spent many years trying to understand and overcome. The Story-telling Workshops that produced this publication were a godsend: they provided the opportunity to share the journey with fellow victims/survivors, explore experiences in a number of ways, and feel supported in an

empathetic and creative environment. At our gatherings we freely expressed our considerable angst at our situations, and also gained some relief through humour, often pretty black. Our encouraging, insightful and non-judgemental facilitator brought it all together.

The workshops increased the confidence and skills of individual participants, while hopefully our contributions will bring some light – and comfort – to readers similarly ‘caught’, and also raise public awareness.

I’m not just a recovering gambler but a partner and a parent, am employed part-time in an industry I love, and do some rewarding voluntary work. Problem gambling sends self-esteem into an abyss; these days I’m focussed on rescuing mine by recognising the successful and healthy areas of my life.

Natty G

When I was told about the Story-writing Workshops I was so excited that I went for it, signing myself up. I thought that these classes might help me with my first novel or children’s stories. I hoped the course would provide me with knowledge about creative writing; what I didn’t expect was it was about me telling a story about myself.

I found myself opening up to a group of strangers, who I believe are a really good bunch of new friends. I also had a great teacher who taught me that the key component in writing, perhaps the most important thing, is to write about what I know, and the pen will just flow. I had a terrific experience, meeting new people, writing lots of different pieces. I had a really awesome time.

Peter Bridges

After I was severely assaulted at work in the mid-1980s I started to develop health problems, and was eventually forced to leave and go on the invalid pension. Of more recent years further major health issues have been diagnosed and, as is common, gambling on the pokies followed, as an outlet for feelings of helplessness and as somewhere I could turn off for a while.

When I joined the first incarnation of the Story-writing Workshops my life was about to be turned upside down again. I was being forced to move into my first new home (in over 30 years)! So there were WORDS flying through my mind in ‘rapid-fire’ fashion. The facilitator was able to calm my anxiety and prompted me to write on the subjects placed before me.

Through the workshops I found an outlet for my creativity and also connected with kindred spirits in this amazing group of people. Their tales deserve and need to be told. They offer insight into a world of pain and heartache, but also a glimmer of

hope for a new beginning, and support for those whose lives are back on track. This book could provide a hand to those who need the help or are trying to provide that help to others. I hope it does.

Sabina Walker

The Story-writing Workshops were a positive experience for me. Our facilitator listened, inspired and empowered us to new heights of creative writing, giving everyone time to be heard.

We were a lively bunch of people. I always went away from class happily looking forward to our next gathering. One participant told a terrific yarn. Another poetically described the dilemma of gambling. Everyone contributed in their own unique way. My plight was to step away from gambling whilst reaching out to others. The unfolding of my writings released emotions, enabling me to see my life as a whole.

I am now retired. A lot of my time is spent looking after my young grandchildren. They are a constant source of love and youth. Community work, family, friendships and church also help to fill in my days. I pray that I am gifted with time and health to conquer my computer illiteracy, improve my writing skills, explore fine arts, play ten-pin bowls, attend dance lessons and no doubt lots of other things.

Where to get help

A range of free and confidential support, counselling and information services for people concerned about their gambling (and their families) can be accessed by contacting the following:

Gambler's Help

24hr telephone support

Phone: 1800 858 858

www.problemgambling.vic.gov.au

Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation

www.responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au

Gambling Help Online

www.gamblinghelponline.org.au

Self-exclusion

The term 'self-exclusion' is mentioned by a number of contributors to this book. In relation to Victoria, this is a voluntary agreement designed to help people limit their gambling in hotels and clubs and at TABs throughout the state.

The person nominates the gaming venues and TABs from which they wish to be excluded. Via the voluntary agreement that they have signed (which has a photo attached), they authorise staff at these venues to require them to leave the premises upon identification.

www.gamblinghelponline.org.au/accessing-support/self-exclusion/

Disclaimer: the above information was correct at time of publishing.