

A vertical image featuring a tree whose roots are exposed and spread out across the bottom half, while the top half shows the tree's canopy against a sunset sky. The title 'DISMISSED' is centered over the tree's trunk.

DISMISSED

*how one woman's intuition ended her addiction
and exposed a government cover-up*

GISELE JUBINVILLE
WITH DANA DA PONTE

“*Dismissed* is an engagingly written examination of Gisele's monumental struggle with a VLT addiction and her determined efforts to garner the strength and knowledge to eventually break free. Her story highlights the massive harms associated with uncontrolled play such as family turmoil, financial disaster and loss of self-esteem and her frustration with government officials who were not forthcoming.”

Garry Smith (Alberta Gaming Research Institute)

“Gisele's memoir is an incredibly rewarding story about a couple's desire to save their marriage in spite of a long-term addiction to VLTs. Gisele's research on the VLTs is spot-on as it reveals how the VLTs are designed by the manufacturers to “maximize playing time” and the design works wonderfully in that many Albertans play VLTs for so many hours/days/weeks/months/years that they lose everything in the process.”

Kevin Harrigan, PhD

Research Associate Professor

Head: Gambling Research Lab, University of Waterloo

“Your story echoed what our daughter went through—the similarities were scary. The narrative of the all-important meeting was gripping, to say the least. You were in a situation fraught with obstacles... alone with many against you. How proud I felt when at last you confronted them head on and didn't back down!”

Keith Piercey (father of VLT suicide victim)

“It has been 16 years since my son’s suicide. ‘What’s normal, Ma?’ The simple question he asked me shortly before his death still haunts me. Gisele’s personal story of her struggles, the same struggles as my son’s and thousands the world over, provides the answers.”

Phyllis Vineberg (mother of VLT suicide victim)

“Gisele was caught and infected by a machine that was designed and manufactured with the intention of conditioning the human brain to act like an addict. I commend her for being able to decipher some of the reasons why good people become victims which many of us advocates already knew and most of my colleagues regrettably don’t want the public to know. Those facts and her belief in God saved her life.”

Sol Boxenbaum (Addictions Counsellor, Consumer Advocate, Viva Consulting)

“The advent of EGMs and their addictive qualities have reached new destructive heights. Newspapers report that in Canada, FIVE million dollars a day is spent to promote gambling. What chance does any truth have against this barrage? As a pharmacist, I have always had a different view of addiction, and felt there was no worse hell than to be addicted. The fact that our governments benefit from player addiction obscures social costs. I would be proud to buy your book and put it in our church library.”

Bill Clark (www.gamblingwatchglobal.com)



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ADIGI BOOKS
25128 Coal Mine Road
Sturgeon County, Alberta
Canada T8T 0J2

www.adigibooks.com

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To invite Gisele Jubinville to speak at your event, contact her at
www.giselejubinville.com

Cover design and layout by Dean Pickup
Dpict Design and Photography www.dpict.ca

Editing by Faith Farthing
FinalEyes Communications Inc. www.final-eyes.com

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Claudine Lavoie Photography www.claudinelavoie.ca

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I dedicate my book to all victims of VLTs and slot machines,
to the players of these machines who did not survive
their addiction, and to their loved ones for
having to deal with such a tragic loss.

Gisele

“If you follow your heart, if you listen to your gut,
and if you extend your hand to help another, not
for any reason, but for the sake of humanity,
you are going to find the truth.”

Erin Brockovich

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PROLOGUE

I became a millionaire in 1993. By 2009, I had lost over \$400,000 of that same money in video-lottery terminals (VLTs) and slot machines. While becoming a millionaire was like a dream come true, losing that \$400,000 was a nightmare from which I couldn't wake up. Eventually though, I had to wake up. If I wanted to save my marriage, what was left of my bank account, and ultimately my life, I knew I had to figure out what had happened. Four hundred thousand dollars has a way of making you sit up and take notice. You don't lose that kind of money without getting at least a little curious.

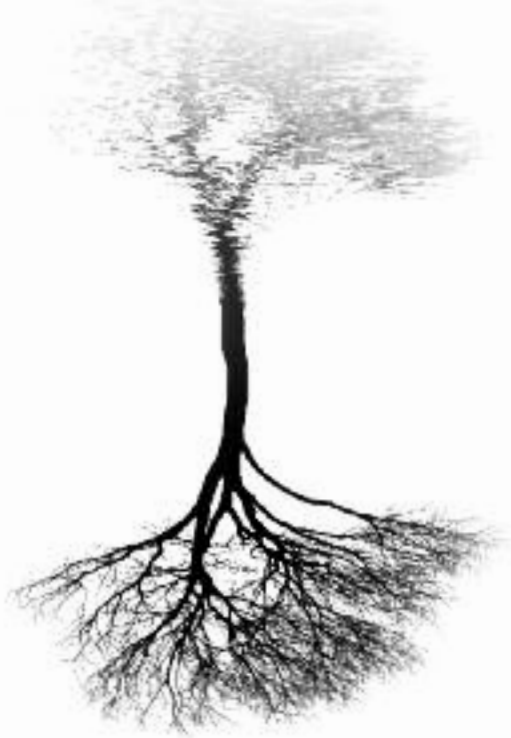
That curiosity led me down a path I never saw coming. I knew I had a tendency to ask a lot of questions and yes, my relentless need to understand everything landed me in trouble every now and then, but I never expected it would lead me to discover such shocking information about myself, my marriage, and my government. I never planned to come across the evidence that I

did. I never set out to uncover what other people were trying to hide. This was never my intention. I was simply trying to understand who I had become and why I couldn't stop playing gaming machines. Destiny stepped in with a plan of its own though. Along the way, some folks told me things they weren't supposed to and I came across other information in the most unusual of ways. Even when I didn't understand what I was doing, my intuition pushed me to do the strangest things. Looking back, it all seems like a giant puzzle that Serendipity was putting together with the pieces of my life.

In the end, my curious nature paid off. Don't get me wrong, I never recovered the money I lost. Nonetheless, the information I discovered saved my life and ended my addiction. If it helped me, then maybe it could help other addicts as well. Whether or not they suffer from an addiction, maybe it will inspire others to get just a little more curious. No matter what life throws at you, it's nothing a little curiosity can't handle. If you take the time to question what is going on and why it's happening, the answers will lead you out of any trap. And luckily, just like hope, truth floats. After all is said and done and everything is settled, truth has a way of rising to the top, whether you want it to or not.

— PART ONE —

HEAD OVER HEELS



RICHES AND RAGS

In the bottom of an old box, tucked in the back of my closet with my family photos, newspaper clippings, and a lifetime of memories, is a small, blue bankbook. If you found this little blue bankbook and flipped through its pages of printed transactions, you would see a story of numbers that reflected an ordinary middle-class family struggling to make ends meet while raising three teenagers and operating a small business. As you scanned the withdrawals, you would never see money escaping to Vacations Plus or Independent Jewellers. Nor would it be spent enjoying a fancy night out, retreating to day spas, or shopping for nice, new entertainment systems. Instead, you would see a predictable monthly pattern of one barely sufficient deposit followed by a series of practical withdrawals to grocery stores, gas companies, and credit cards. However, if you kept reading—on the very last page, just below the last ordinary transaction—you would see the beginning of a completely new story. Slightly to

the right and below the last withdrawal, in the column reserved strictly for deposits, you would see, printed in unassuming black bank-font, six handsome numbers preceded by a very proud and ridiculously happy number one.

Depositing a cheque for over a million dollars made out in my name from a major bedsheet manufacturer in New York was the happy ending to a long story of struggle, persistence, and faith. In four years, I had invented, patented, and sold my idea for better-holding fitted-bedsheet corners. The years leading up to this accomplishment were chaotic, stressful, and wrought with financial uncertainty. So one of the first things I did after I deposited the money was buy myself a gift. I'll admit it was a somewhat extravagant gift; but there was a reason I wanted it.

A few years earlier, my husband, Len, and I had purchased a piece of farmland close to town, and since we weren't interested in living with a high mortgage, we decided to build a garage that we could temporarily transform into a home. Our hope was to one day build our dream house, attach it to the garage, and remove the temporary inside walls. The farm we purchased was located near an affluent city. When I drove into the city, I would often see beautiful expensive cars drive past me on the street or park beside my avocado green station wagon at the mall. The stark contrast between their expensive vehicles and my second-hand-kid-stained-hint-of-po'-white-trash family wagon was a motivator for me. Whenever I saw a Mercedes, I thought to myself, *There goes my house*. My husband had worked in construction for many years, so I knew that with his hard work and expertise we could build a house for the same amount of money that other people spent on gold hubcaps, leather car seats, and California sunroofs. Many nights, when I was on my hands and knees on our factory-quality kitchen carpet, crawling across the bed sheet I had laid out on the floor because I didn't have a big

enough table to work on, I promised myself that if my idea worked and made us money, I would be just like the people that I believed had made it. I would not only build myself a house but I'd also buy myself a Mercedes. Not necessarily a new one; my poverty-conscious childhood prevented me from even dreaming about spending that kind of money on a car. Nonetheless, the day I sold my avocado green station wagon and sat behind the wheel of a classy white Mercedes trimmed in gold, I savoured the best celebration gift I had ever given myself.

It wasn't the first time I celebrated a financial milestone with the purchase of a gift. When I was seventeen, I left my French Catholic prairie roots and moved to the big city. I had studied hard to finish high school a semester early. My dream was to find work and save enough money by the following September to enrol in cosmetology school in Toronto. It took me a while to find a job; but when I did, I was so excited about cashing my first paycheque that I wanted to celebrate. I was taking the Greyhound bus home for the weekend to see my family, and I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate my accomplishment than to buy my mom something pretty. My parents never had a lot of money when I was young. I grew up in an old log house built by my grandfather on a farm passed down to my father, who then became a struggling farmer with 14 kids, thankless rock-infested fields, and an empty wallet. My mother is a proud woman who learned early how to stretch a penny across a needy line of growing kids. We rarely could afford new clothes, so she designed her own patterns and sewed most of our clothes herself. She was always mindful to follow the latest trends so we would blend in with our friends at school. She sold cream in town every week to pay for groceries and she raised a field of corn every summer. As she bent to work with her hands in the soil and plant seeds, we could hear her asking God to watch over her garden

and ensure it would produce enough corn to feed her family and pay for school supplies. My parents sacrificed to guarantee we wouldn't suffer needlessly. I may have had to share a bed with two sisters. Our house may have been so old and poorly insulated that if you left a glass of water in your room overnight the top layer would be frozen the next morning. But we never went hungry. We always looked good and my parents worked hard from sunrise to sunset to give us what they could.

As proud as my mom was, while her relatives and neighbours paraded in new jackets every season, she wore the same one for years just so we would have what we needed to stay warm. Her house was like her jacket, spotless and proud but worn and patched. Spending a portion of my first paycheque on a gorgeous new bedspread for my parent's bed was my way of giving mom some of what I always thought she deserved. When I placed the gift in her hands, she opened it slowly and took in all the pretty details. She ran her hands across the soft edging and smiled. We walked to her room and her face lit up as her new bedcover billowed like a cloud before it fell over her tattered wool blankets. As I watched the transformation both in her face and in her bedroom, I realized there were some things only money could buy.

I was twenty-five years old when it was time to celebrate another financial milestone. When my husband was young, he swore he would be a self-made millionaire before he turned thirty. On his thirtieth birthday, he had accomplished what he set out to do and we celebrated our financial freedom by buying my parents an elegant grandfather clock. As we accumulated wealth, Len and I had also purchased five land titles, designed and built our first dream home, and by that time lived a bigger life than either of us had ever experienced. He also came from a large French Catholic farming family that worked hard for the little money

they had. Living large was new for us both, but after living on both sides of the metaphorical tracks, I vowed never to go back.

If only the transactions in my little blue bankbook could have stopped there. Unfortunately, my vow was only as strong as the economy and that turned out to be as reliable as a drunken Vegas groom. It was the 1980s and a recession had left its ugly footprint on our community. Soon my husband and I were mortgaging our land titles to keep our business afloat. One clear title after another was sacrificed, but still we couldn't stop our ship from sinking. Like any honourable captain, my husband would go down with his ship. He wouldn't throw his crew overboard just to save his own lifestyle. For all those who relied on his business, he tried everything he could to ride out the economy until things turned around. But they never did. Overnight, our interest rate climbed from 8% to 21%. We could no longer make our payments. Like so many people experienced during the recession, the banks came and took everything; we lost our business, our vehicles, and our house. My husband had no choice but to declare bankruptcy, and we were forced to look for a new place to live.

As we struggled to find footing in an unpredictable world, my in-laws agreed to purchase a piece of land with a small house near our hometown. They would keep the house in their name until we could afford to put it in our own name. I wasn't excited about moving back to our hometown. Honestly, I hated the idea. I was devastated. But Len and I leaned on each other and together we encouraged ourselves to start over. When it came time to pack what was left of our million-dollar lifestyle, we couldn't even afford a moving van. Like a scene out of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Len, our three kids, and I all piled into a rusty old grain truck and drove straight into my first nightmare.

It was on the night of our eleventh anniversary that I received

a gift that marked our financial setback with a big red flag and let me know exactly how far we'd fallen. A few months had passed since our move, and I was the only one earning an income at the time. My husband was taking care of the kids and remodelling a camp trailer he purchased to use as the offices for his new lumberyard business. We were married in November and traditionally that meant our anniversary was in the midst of a typical northern winter. Our eleventh anniversary was no exception. A cold blizzard had settled in for the night, and there was no way my husband and I would be driving to town to celebrate—not that we had anything spectacular in mind. We didn't have the cash to splurge on anything more than fast food, and the day unfolded with the taste of bitter nostalgia. Feeling a little sorry for myself, I was thinking about earlier anniversaries where I had to remind Len that it was that time of year again and hint for something special. But before, we always had the money to celebrate with an expensive piece of jewellery or something equally extravagant. And that made this year seem sour and disappointing.

While renovating the home my in-laws purchased under their name for us, we lived at my parent's house. That afternoon, after spending the morning in my new home cleaning, painting, patching, and trying to scrub the poor out of my life, I came through the door of my parent's place and the scent of a chef's feast greeted me. I walked to the kitchen to see my brother and sister working hard to cook the most sophisticated meal I had ever seen prepared in my mom's kitchen. They were busy arranging a five-course meal complete with Cornish hen, white wine, appetizers, and an extravagant dessert. When I walked in, they explained the meal was for Len and me and for my parents who were also celebrating an anniversary that month. They asked me to call to ensure Len drove over in time to enjoy the surprise.

The disappointment I felt all day started to melt as I marvelled at all the work my brother and sister had devoted to help Len and I celebrate our special day.

When Len walked in the door to join us, he was carrying a crumpled brown paper bag. He apologized for arriving late but explained he had to buy me an anniversary present. We all looked puzzled wondering what he could have possibly purchased on his way home. The only store for miles was an old country store. After opening the bag, I held up a box of peanut brittle. It must have been on the store shelf for some time because it was coated with a layer of dust. As I wiped the dust off, everyone else laughed but I started to cry. My family mistook my tears for sadness over the loss of my old life, but I wasn't crying about a loss. For the first time ever, I was crying over something that Len and I had gained. In the past, Len had rarely remembered our anniversary without my hints, and this year I didn't expect a thing. The fact that he went out of his way to try to make me happy meant more to me than the fancy dinner ring he had bought a few years earlier. As he held me in his arms and I rested my head on his chest, I could hear the sound of his heart beating; I thought, *Here is something I can count on*. His gesture showed me he loved me more than ever, and if I could take how I felt to the bank that night, I would have been able to buy back our millionaire life in a heartbeat.

Unfortunately, banks don't deal in fairy tales and happy endings, so once more we were left struggling to make ends meet. In nine years, I had gone from rags to riches, and in another nine years, I travelled backwards and fell from riches to rags again. Soon, my unhappiness with moving back to our hometown caught up with me and I became depressed. I knew I would choke to death if we stayed in that small prairie town any longer, so we packed up and moved to the big city once again. We bought

some farmland on the outskirts of town and built the garage I mentioned earlier. Len and I started a new lumberyard business and lived on a tight budget and an empty savings account.

It wasn't until I deposited my million-dollar cheque and stared at the balance in my little blue bankbook years later that I craved celebrating a new milestone again. It had been a long hard road, but here I was staring at a bank account that I had yet to wrap my brain around. It all seemed like a dream. We had struggled for so many years that I couldn't believe we could enjoy spending money again. I got my feet wet by purchasing my Mercedes and writing a cheque to my parents. I gave them specific instructions that this money was to be enjoyed with no strings attached and they were to buy something they had always wanted. When I called a few weeks later to see what they had purchased, I was flabbergasted by their choice. Of all the things I could have imagined that they wanted, I wasn't prepared for what they bought. In a matter of fact tone, Mom informed me that they had spent the money on their funeral expenses. Taken aback, I said, "Mom, surely you could have spent the money on something more enjoyable."

Without hesitation, she explained, "It's always been important to Dad and me that you kids aren't burdened with our funeral arrangements. We've always wanted this, and you said we could spend the money on something we've always wanted. We could never afford this in the past, so we knew right away what we would do with the money you gave us."

She sounded happy and as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, so I let it go. It was not my idea of splurging, but I knew they had done what made them feel good.

With the money from the sale of my patent, Len and I were financially secure at last. We had money to build our dream home, money to put away for an emergency, money to handle

all our bills, and money to take us wherever we wanted to go. It was an amazing feeling and one I had never experienced before, not even when we had money in the past. Earlier in our marriage, we were wealthy for a few years, but most of our money was wrapped up in land and the construction business. This time we had one large lump sum of money to deposit. Not only was I where I had always wanted to be financially, but I had accomplished something that I personally had set out to do. I was, in my own eyes, a success.



DRIFTING

After my success with the patent, I faced huge life changes that I wasn't equipped to handle. Not only had life become so very different from when we struggled, but my children were finishing school and moving away. And my husband and I were undergoing a huge transition in our marriage.

For 22 years, we had worked together. Now, suddenly, we each had the opportunity to choose what we wanted to do, and for the first time since we got married, I didn't want to do what he wanted to do. And, deep down, I wished he wouldn't choose to do it either. His dream was to start a family business with our children. This was both difficult for me to understand and to support because I had grown up believing that it is never a good idea to go into business with your children or relatives. These opposing goals caused a big gap in our individual perspectives. While I disliked his choice, deep down I felt like I had no right to tell him what to do, just like he had no right to tell me what to do. Despite trying as hard as I could to give him

the freedom he needed to do what he wanted to do, starting a family business was extremely difficult on me. I constantly worried that something awful would happen and our close-knit family would be torn apart. This deeply ingrained belief made the following years extremely stressful for me.

I was also extremely disappointed with my husband's desire to start a business from the ground up again. We had owned and operated many businesses in the past, so I was ready to slow things down. Our life had been so stressful and so hectic for so many years; now that we had money to do what we wanted to do, my desire was to enjoy ourselves and take things easy. In my eyes, we finally had the perfect, peaceful life and I felt absolutely no need to change it, but he wanted more. Over the years, the fact that we didn't see eye-to-eye made me angry; it was an anger that I bottled up and shelved far from view.

I also hid the guilt, fear, and anxiety I felt about having money. I secretly feared that because I was rich, something bad would happen to me or someone I loved. I constantly expected bad news to come knocking at my door; maybe my husband or one of my kids would die or be injured in a major accident or I would contract some horrible disease. At one point, my fears became so real that I actually experienced many of the physical symptoms of multiple sclerosis. After months of therapy, the cause of these fears was revealed. My belief that it is "harder for a rich man to get into heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle" was causing me to think I was no longer safe now that I had money. I had heard this saying so often at church, at school, and at home while growing up that it had become deeply ingrained in me.

Needless to say, things did not go as I had imagined they would. The perfect life I had envisioned was not to be found, and nothing was unfolding the way I wanted it to. But instead

of expressing this, I kept my disappointment to myself. I completely lacked confidence, assertiveness, and the ability to voice my own needs and wants. I had also not yet learned how to value my feelings or myself; so, most of the time I wasn't even aware of how deeply I was affected by the direction my life was going.

The family business moved along despite my apprehensions. In the beginning, Len set up the business office in the den of our new house. Having the source of my stress in my home—in the home I had so lovingly planned and dreamed of for years—caused me to want to escape. My sanctuary had lost its peace. My dream house had lost its perfection. At the same time, my husband was using more money than I had agreed with to keep the family business on its feet. Dipping into our personal accounts to help the family business began slowly; but over time, more and more money was required to keep it viable. The business was still in its infancy and required far more capital than it was bringing in. It was also heavy into research and development and hadn't yet generated the revenue that would be required to pay for all the operating expenses. I couldn't help but feel that my million-dollar fairy tale would come to an abrupt end.

While decisions were being made that I wasn't happy with, I kept quiet. And although I now see that everything happens the way it does for a reason, I wish I could have said what I needed to say back then. Voicing my concerns might have saved me hundreds of thousands of dollars and years of stress and worry. The facts that I didn't want to be involved in a family business and that my husband couldn't give up on his dream together set into motion a drifting apart within our relationship that, in hindsight, created many issues that I was not fully aware of, nor did I know how to resolve. In the past, our relationship had been built upon collaboration and in spending many hours working side by side. Through the wisdom we gain by looking back, I now see that we

were oblivious to the upheaval that no longer working together would cause in our lives. That, in addition to the many other changes taking place in my life, made me not know where I belonged. I was adrift without a place to anchor my sense of self.

Soon the discussions and arguments about where the money was going became more frequent and more intense. I would continuously say to my husband, “But you said you wouldn’t touch any of our money. You promised not to use it for the family business.”

He’d rebut my concern persistently until I was convinced. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to him, I was usually not as convinced as I was simply worn down. I would always cave under the pressure. I didn’t feel confident enough to oppose him, and I never felt strong enough to say no. He thought I was finally agreeing with him, while I felt like he was going back on his word. I felt hurt, tired, unhappy, pressured, betrayed, and lied to. And I didn’t have a clue how to acknowledge, much less cope with, all of these feelings.

These continuous withdrawals built up to a heartbreaking crescendo. One ominous day, he came to discuss money with me one more time, but this time he came to discuss mortgaging one of our clear titles. After living through one land title after another being taken away from us, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. At first, I was in shock. The idea that he would approach me and ask this of me was unfathomable. It would put us in such a precarious financial situation, which I thought I would never have to experience again. I screamed and cried that there was no chance in hell I would agree to what he was asking of me.

“You’ve already put way too much of our money in the company. That was money you said you would never touch.”

Extremely upset, he got up to leave and said, “That’s what I can’t stand.”

He felt like he was being controlled. He felt like I was standing

in the way and telling him what to do. He needed my signature to do what he wanted to do, and I didn't want to give it. He hated being in that position. Finally, he replied, "I have no choice. I have to do what I have to do."

"You can't do this without my signature, and I'm saying it's not going to happen," I fought back. "Not in a million years."

He repeated himself again: "I have to do what I have to do."

We left it there. But every second day he brought it up again. He said that if we didn't do this, the business was going down. "Although things are difficult," he said, "they will turn around."

He insisted that this was only a temporary setback and soon the company would be in a position to repay us. He argued that with this decision his success and our family's well-being were all on my shoulders.

I felt like it had all been turned around on me and that, if I didn't do this, I was selfish and unwilling to take care of our kids. My inability to stand strong and validate my own point of view only made things worse. Like a canyon carved in the landscape by years of erosion, our collective resentments ate away at our relationship. Where we once found compassion, support, and kindness, we now found jagged edges of anger and regret.

He continued to push, and true to our destructive pattern of communication we had already firmly established, he eventually wore me down. The lowest point in our relationship followed soon afterward, when driving into the city to sign the papers to mortgage our land title for the business.

I pleaded with him: "Don't you see the repetition in our life? Don't you see how we've been here so many times before? Your decision to sign over our titles has happened in the past and it's happening again. I don't want to do this," I said. "I don't want to do this."

My stomach churned to the point of nausea. Feeling forced to do something that I swore I would never do again made me

physically sick. When we got to the vestibule in the lawyer's office, I turned to Len and said, "I don't feel good. I have to go throw up. I can't do this." I went to the washroom and gagged, but I never actually threw up. I came back hoping that seeing what it was doing to me would make him change his mind. But he didn't. Even in my state, he let me sign those papers.

The hurt I experienced in the past felt like tiny waves of pain compared to the tsunami of betrayal that washed over me as I signed those papers. On that day, a new thought was born. It was not a conscious epiphany. In fact, it never really surfaced into my consciousness. Instead, this thought lurked quietly in the background, slowly causing damage over time. Unspoken, it remained for a very long time hidden in the secret corners of my heart. Because it was never given the opportunity to be proven wrong, it was free to cause all sorts of unpleasant effects in my marriage. For years, the question played over in my mind, as if I was waiting for someone to answer it. *He can't love me, can he? If he can do this, he must not love me.*

Years later, I confronted him, "You say you love me, but you can't. You knew that what you were asking me to do was destroying me, but you made me do it anyway."

With regret and sadness, he replied that he honestly felt like he had no choice at the time. But the damage was done. The choice had been made, and in the meantime, the crack in our marriage became a chasm. Emotionally, we were drifting further and further apart. It seemed only fitting that eventually we spent most of our time in separate countries. Although still married, Len's work conveniently required him to establish a manufacturing shop in the United States. When he first mentioned it, he asked me to go with him, but I couldn't decide what to do. One morning I woke up at four, and I had finally made up my mind. I woke him up to let him know, "Yes, I will go with you."

I am willing to do whatever I have to do to keep us together.”

“What do you mean?” he asked sleepily, “I thought you had decided to stay here?”

Feeling crushed and confused I replied, “I thought you wanted me to go.”

I realized then that deep down he didn't want me to go. Today, I believe a great part of this was due to the state of our marriage; but it was also because he didn't want to lose his home in Alberta. He wanted me to keep our home anchored while he went off and did what he felt he needed to do to save the family business. Nevertheless, my secret thought gained more traction. *How can he love me? He can't love me if he wants to leave me here all alone.*

Instead of dealing with my rejection, I kept my feelings to myself. By this time, I was getting really good at burying everything deep down inside. As the anger, hurt, and fears built, my need to escape increased. I wasn't ready to face the issues at hand, and I especially didn't want to deal with the problems in my marriage. They seemed so overwhelming and caused such tremendous friction that I just wanted to avoid them. I wasn't ready to look at how I really felt because I was worried about what it would mean. *Would our marriage be over? Would I be forced to live alone? Was the life I knew already dead and gone?* I had never imagined my life without Len, and after 25 years together, I didn't want to.





FATAL ATTRACTION

There were so many other ways of handling the conflicts in my life and I truly chose one of the most difficult. Had I felt strong enough to say no and mean it, had I felt confident enough to not be persuaded into doing things that didn't feel right for me, or had I been courageous enough to value my thoughts and feelings, I may have saved myself years of insurmountable guilt and anxiety and hundreds of thousands of dollars. But I was trying to avoid a confrontation. I was trying to avoid the uncomfortable and unfamiliar experience of opposing someone I loved because I was afraid of what would happen if I did. Sadly, these fears led me straight into the cold arms of my local casino.

My first visit to the casino was not unfamiliar to me. I had been a poker player for many years. My husband and I had played poker with friends for over 20 years, and those late nights huddled around a table, laughing and laying down hands until the wee hours in the morning are among my favourite memories.

Our poker games were filled with fun and laughter, and no one in our group ever experienced a gambling problem. My husband and I also visited Las Vegas once a year, and whenever we were there, I was the one who ensured we adhered to a strict budget. I never felt pulled to spend more than our daily limit, and losing control had never been an issue. Playing poker carried only happy memories for me. I suppose this explains why, when I first stepped into a casino in Alberta, I found myself drawn to the poker tables as I tried to find something to fill my time. I rationalized that I would play poker every so often until I figured out what to do next with my life.

In the beginning, I stayed true to my rationalization and played only poker. I wasn't yet interested in video lottery terminals (VLTs) or the slot machines. Unfortunately, in order to play poker at most casinos in Alberta, players are often required to put their names on a waiting list until a seat becomes available. As they wait, players grab some coffee or read a newspaper, but since I was never good at sitting still during these waiting periods, I gravitated toward the VLTs. I would casually insert a \$1, \$5, or \$10, and leisurely play one 25-cent credit at a time until my name was called, at which time I would immediately stop playing and take my turn at the poker tables.

My first visits to the casino were casual and innocent, but their frequency slowly increased over time. More visits to the casino meant more times waiting for my turn at the poker table, which meant more time at the VLTs. And, I found that the more I played them, the more preoccupied I became about playing them again. I returned to play more often and for longer periods at a time. Then, instead of going to the poker tables when my name was called, I asked that my name be rotated to the bottom of the list. I wanted more time on the machines because I was convinced the "big jackpot" was just a few spins away-or would

come after just one more \$20.00 bill or maybe two more...

This behaviour would continue until I had no choice but to leave the casino without playing poker because I had lost too much money. Many years later, I learned that VLTs and slot machines are strategically and intentionally programmed to create the impression that the big payout is just around the corner, to bait players into playing longer. And those jackpots rarely come.

When I first started visiting the casinos, these features worked their magic on me since I was so naïve about what really went on. No hidden agendas of the VLTs or slot machines would have affected me so much had I known the truth about them. As it was, though, I fell for all the bells and whistles. Instead of stopping when I should have, I thought *I need to make back the money I just lost*, or *This machine is about to pay out big time because the player before me put in hundreds of dollars already*, and *That will be the day I let my machine go just to watch the next player win the jackpot after only one spin!*

Most regular players relate to this line of thinking and articulate the same experience of being part of some mind trap that prevents them from using reasonable judgment. The machines always skilfully convinced me that the jackpot was just one or two spins away.

Therefore, against all logic and reason, completely convinced I would win back what I had lost, plus much more, of course, I continued to insert more money. Like a hamster on a wheel, I repeated the same action over and over again. I was convinced I was actually getting somewhere, but in reality I was only becoming more addicted and losing more money. My insane reasoning never worked! Every day I believed it would, and every day I was proven wrong. Since the moment the VLT-induced insanity first gripped me in its cold, calloused fingers, the vicious cycle repeated itself day after day.

Within six to eight months, my visits to the casino increased dramatically. Compared to playing poker, I found that the VLTs provided more action, thrills, and excitement. Not only were the VLTs faster than the much slower-paced Seven-Card Stud, they also offered more glitz than your everyday poker table. Spin after spin, I sat in anticipation, anxiously wondering when a winning combination would appear on the screen before me. The machines kept me on the edge of my seat, and I liked the high of winning a jackpot. Like a vampire seducing its prey, the VLTs were, at first blush, sexy and alluring. They were shiny, flashy, fast, and exhilarating, and unfortunately for me, it was love at first sight—not the romantic, beautiful, and healthy love you'd witness in *The Notebook*, but the obsessive, destructive kind that you'd see in *Fatal Attraction*.

For me, the VLTs also offered an escape from having to interact with anyone. While sitting in front of a gaming machine, I didn't have to deal with the other players or talk to anyone. Being left alone made it much easier to tune out the world and zone out. Without realizing it, that ability to shut out the world was one of my favourite attributes of gaming machines. I was at a point in my life when I didn't want to deal with anything, and the chance to escape boredom, my empty nest, loneliness, and lack of goals or direction held such great appeal that my attraction to the machines only grew deeper and deeper. I didn't have to think, plan, or worry. All I had to do was push the spin button on the machines until the big prizes came.

In the beginning, I stuck to a budget, just as I had for all the years I played poker. I could often enjoy a full afternoon of playing poker for \$60. But not with the VLTs. Slowly, I started withdrawing \$40 or \$60 dollars more when I needed it. Breaking the budget was the first sign I was moving towards addiction, but it took me far more than that to pay attention.

Now that I was visiting the casino regularly, I fell into a morbid routine of waking up, making sure my house was clean, tying up loose ends bright and early, and then driving to the casino by 10 a.m. At this point, I was still going only to casinos—I hadn't yet included bars or lounges on my circuit—so to hide my almost daily visits, I plotted which casino to visit on which day. I still didn't want to admit what I was doing, so I convinced myself I was going to play poker even though, inevitably, I spent most of my time at the VLTs.

Within a couple years, I found myself running errands at the local mall, and while I was there, I convinced myself it wouldn't hurt to visit the lounge and throw a few dollars into the VLTs. This particular lounge was attached to a restaurant my family used to visit after Sunday mass when my children were much younger. I had never paid attention to the lounge before and, in fact, I'm not even sure it was there back in the days of our Sunday ritual. Like many restaurants that transformed once VLTs were legalized in Alberta, I wouldn't be surprised if it was added for the sole purpose of housing these iniquitously lucrative machines.

The moment I entered the quiet lounge, I recognized the stark difference between the casinos I had been visiting and the lounge atmosphere. As soon as you walk in the doors of a casino, your senses are taken hostage. Colour, sound, light, and action come at you from every direction. From the showy lights and flashy colours to the endless ding, ding, ding of a hundred brazen gaming machines ringing simultaneously, there is nothing subtle about a casino. Everything is designed to make you take notice. Like a Texas beauty pageant swimming in a sea of big hair, tawdry eyes, loud glossy lips, and dazzling rhinestones, everything in a casino is bright, bold, and in your face. Look down and your eyes get lost in the hypnotic patterns woven across the

casino carpet. Look up and around and your senses struggle to take it all in; servers and casino attendants race from player to player to replace drinks, empty ashtrays, cash in tickets, and offer change. People line up at the ATMs waiting to withdraw more money. Winning machines boisterously ring, proudly announcing another jackpot. The other machines busily sing catchy tunes while seductively flashing their bright lights, tempting you to join the fun, and players at the tables place audacious bets in an attempt to beat the house. Bold patterns and colours flood continuously from every corner. Everything in a casino fights for the foreground, competing for attention. In this atmosphere, VLTs and slot machines fit right in.

The lounge in the mall displayed a completely different attitude. No big doors or bright signs announced its existence. In fact, the doors were understated, as if trying to hide from everyday eyes. They weren't attempting to pull you in or to even be noticed. Instead, they were almost saying, "Don't worry. Come on in. No one will notice if you sneak inside. We're so good at blending in that nobody will ever know you're here. Your secret is safe with us." When I opened the doors and walked inside, my senses were not instantly assailed as they were in a casino. Here everything was hushed. The lights were dim, the music remained in the background, and everyone kept quietly to himself or herself.

The atmosphere of a bar or lounge is, of course, much different during the day than at night. Whereas in the evening the music gets loud and the crowd lets loose, the daytime lounge is relaxed, subtle, and serious—as if those who gather there have a purpose. Quiet and understated, the lounge I walked into that day was very much like any other lounge during the day... except for the VLTs tucked in the corner.

Like a slice of Vegas cut out and deposited in the corner of

a sleepy ghost town, the VLTs seemed awkwardly out of place. They had the same bright lights, flashing colours, and juvenile jingles as the machines you'd find in a casino; but in this understated atmosphere, their motives seemed to speak more loudly. It was easier to fool myself when I visited a casino because I justified my visits as entertainment. But I couldn't as easily justify visiting a lounge in the middle of the day. Admittedly, it was definitely harder to convince myself I didn't have a problem but, unfortunately, the addicted mind is easy to fool. By this time, I had unknowingly allowed the addiction to sink its claws deep into my psyche. I easily and quickly deceived myself by promising I would only go in for a minute—just long enough to see if any of the machines were paying that day.

This dangerous decision soon spiralled into an ill-fated habit. No longer was I going to the casino to play poker; I was now going to the mall and other locations in my community that offered VLTs with the sole intention of playing the machines. Now my only goal as I ran errands in town was to get them done as quickly as possible so I would be free to make my way to the VLTs once again. Unfortunately, for me, many places within my community housed these machines, which I found incredibly convenient—the fact that VLTs were more accessible than poker rooms made it easier for me to play machines more often. Poker was only available later in the afternoon and usually only until midnight, but VLTs were available as early as ten in the morning and until as late as two in the morning.

Poker tables were only in casinos, whereas I could find VLTs tucked inconspicuously in many of the local bars and lounges. As I've heard countless addicts since attest, a veil of secrecy floats over the VLT addiction. Keeping your secret becomes intensely important. You don't really want to face what you are doing and you definitely don't want other people to

catch on to what's happening, so you scheme and plot to conceal your habit. The accessibility of VLTs and slot machines within my community made this need relatively effortless to take care of. Without having to travel long distances, I could play gaming machines regularly without anyone knowing what I was doing. I could easily and conveniently visit one location one day and another the next. I could even cover up how many hours I played in a day by visiting one location in the morning and a different one in the evening.

Yes, I had made another gloomy leap down the VLT rabbit hole. Instead of confining my gambling to daytime only, I now squeezed in nightly visits whenever I could. Not only had the frequency increased, so too had the intensity with which I played. Instead of taking out only \$60 in the morning, I withdrew \$100. Instead of taking out another \$40 to \$60 when my initial withdrawal ran out, I now took out \$100 to \$160 each time I made a trip to the ATM. I was regularly spending anywhere from \$200 to \$260 a day visiting lounges and bars. Sometimes, I would return to gamble twice a day and I still couldn't see that perhaps I had a problem. Of course, nagging thoughts were slowly creeping up, but I masterfully ignored them, pushing them back into the recesses of my mind where they couldn't threaten my obsessive desire to play. Like all truly dedicated addicts, I paid attention to thoughts that supported my addiction and quickly snubbed any that attempted to wake me up to what I was doing. No one, including my husband, my kids, or even myself had any idea how addicted I had become or how much money I had already lost.

I did everything in my power to cover up my tracks, which, from speaking to other gaming machine players, is common. I would purchase something small like a magazine at Wal-Mart or some bread and milk at the grocery store. When asked if I

wanted cash back, I would say “\$60.” The \$60 wouldn’t appear as a cash withdrawal on my bank statement—not that it mattered since my bank statements had long remained unopened. Guilt and fear forced me to keep up the charade to prevent anyone from discovering my shameful secret. The calculated charades didn’t stop there. I had two accounts, each at a separate bank. In my shame and humiliation, I withdrew a little from each one so the total amount withdrawn wouldn’t be so glaringly obvious to anyone, including the bank employees who I irrationally feared would catch on.

Because I was really good at hiding my habits and because everyone, including my husband, seemed so wrapped up in their own lives, nobody questioned what I was doing with my time or where I was going. I was so good at making excuses to go to town that for years no one grew suspicious. My husband had no reason to suspect I was being irresponsible with money. He had trusted me with all our personal and business finances for twenty-five years, so it never crossed his mind that I would behave so recklessly. He had no reason not to trust me. Because he had never needed to look at them before, catching a glimpse of my spending habits in our bank or VISA statements also was unlikely. Maintaining our household accounting had been my responsibility since we married and it allowed my secret to remain hidden far longer than it should have.

I was able to cover up my addiction for four years before anyone became suspicious. Even I was oblivious to how much money I had lost during that time. Part of pushing those nagging thoughts to the back of my mind included ignoring the amount of money I was losing in the VLTs daily. If I acknowledged the amount I was losing, I’d have to acknowledge I had a problem. However, I wanted to remain blind to it all. And somehow I was able to ignore the fact that hundreds of thousands of

dollars was slowly seeping out of our hard-earned savings.

The state of our marriage also helped to keep my addiction a secret. Whether or not either of us was aware of what was happening, it was easier to not discuss where I was or what I was doing. We both knew I didn't support my husband's decision to spend our money the way he was on the family business, so rather than question my whereabouts, he ignored it so that the other uncomfortable issues were not discussed. Our mutual desire to ignore the situation created a deafening silence between us that we both tried desperately to tune out.

Hiding the fact I was losing so much money is one thing. But as surprising to me was the fact that I could hide the hell I was living through internally. No one knew how much I hated myself or how every waking moment was filled with destructive thoughts. My mind was a battlefield, and every weapon on that field was incessantly firing away at me. I had not a moment's peace. My spiral of self-destruction supplied a never-ending stream of abusive and demeaning thoughts. I hid my internal battle so well that no one around knew what was going on inside me. I had heard stories of family members who had no idea their loved ones suffered from a VLT or slot machine addiction until it was explained in a suicide note. I wondered how it was possible to hide such a devastating addiction. But now living through it myself showed me how much can disappear so easily in the background of our everyday lives.

Despite the torture I endured, my addiction only grew in severity. My husband was travelling regularly to the United States and his absence left me with far more opportunities to frequent the casinos without any explanation at all. Like oil thrown recklessly on a grease fire, it fuelled my addiction. Feeling lonely and with no one to be accountable to seemed like a valid reason to spend more time in front of a VLT.

By this time in my addiction, I would leave home in the morning and play until late afternoon, mostly in a local bar. I would make an appearance at home and then return to a casino, where I would usually stay past midnight. Not only had my gambling frequency shifted again, so too had my reasons for playing the machines. I was no longer playing for entertainment. It was no longer a game. I now felt a frantic compulsion to make up all the money I lost. I was going back day in and day out to win my money back. Logically, this made no sense; but, like every good gaming-machine addict, I had convinced myself it was possible.

The amount of money I lost was shocking, but I was more shocked that I was spending most of my days in a bar. Never would I have predicted that I would be the kind of person who does that. I was also becoming increasingly obsessed. Displaying classic addictive behaviours, such as trying to hide my VLT playing, I obsessively thought about gambling, vowed I would never play VLTs again, and then woke up the very next morning with an uncontrollable urge to get back to them as soon as possible. Despite all that, I fooled myself into ignoring what was happening.

Because I was spending much more time at the casino, I required much more money than I ever did before. The \$260 I used to spend in a day had long been surpassed. In the thick of my addiction, I lost amounts of money that today make me nauseated to remember. So much of what I did then seems surreal to me now. Much to my horror, humiliation, and disappointment, I was now withdrawing \$250 to \$500 at a time. And then, if I fed the entire amount into the hungry machines and the day wasn't over yet, I dipped into my credit cards.

My behaviour was frantic and irrational, but so were my thoughts. My thinking became so warped when it came to

money that I no longer recognized myself. I would go shopping at the mall and see an item of clothing I wanted to buy; but instead of purchasing it, I would tell myself there was no way I could afford it. Considering I had spent \$500 on VLTs the night before and I was on my way to spend another \$500, this kind of logic was indeed coming from a sick mind that was caught up in what I now know to be a perfectly orchestrated trap.



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