



SYLVIA DE SWAAN

## Readers Write

### GAMBLING

IT WAS TEN O'CLOCK ON A FRIDAY night in San Diego when my boyfriend said, "Let's go to Vegas."

We were unemployed students, broke except for his financial-aid money, but he assured me our winnings would more than cover the cost of the trip.

I had never gambled before, having been raised in a family that considered gambling a lower-class behavior (along with divorce and drinking). But I was taking charge of my own life now, and I decided there was such a thing as "responsible" gambling.

When we arrived at the casino, buzzers and bells and lights saturated my senses. We headed for the blackjack table. I was stunned by the minimum bet: twenty-five dollars. "Trust me," my boyfriend said. I watched as he won twenty-five *hundred* dollars in fifteen minutes. It was that easy. Why hadn't I tried this before?

I was ready to leave, but instead we

went to the next table (where he lost) and the next (where he won a little) and the next (where he lost again). Our pile of cash was shrinking.

We hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours, so we got a hotel room. I collapsed into bed, but my boyfriend whispered that he was going to play a few more tables. I awoke each time he came back to the room for more money.

By morning our winnings were gone, but he wasn't done. Shaken but still a believer, I ran to the ATM to withdraw a hundred dollars. Each time I returned to the ATM, I thought of how easily he'd won in the beginning.

Eventually there was nothing left. We had just enough money to buy gas for the long drive home. According to my boyfriend, it was all my fault: I had jinxed him. He'd never lost before.

*Anna Marie Van Bonn  
Flossmoor, Illinois*

I HAD MY FIRST LESBIAN AFFAIR IN my junior year of college. No one from my hometown knew about it. During spring break, I decided to tell Wendy, my best friend since seventh grade. If anyone could accept me, it was she. Still, I was nervous. There was always a chance I'd lose her friendship.

Wendy and I were riding on the train downtown when I proceeded to tell her about the affair, omitting names and pronouns. Eventually Wendy asked a question using the word *he*. "Well," I replied cautiously, "the 'he' in this case happens to be a 'she.'" Wendy stared hard at me for a minute, then turned and looked out the window. I was shocked and hurt but said nothing more.

Over the next fifteen years I tried unsuccessfully to gain Wendy's acceptance. Though she expected me to support her through a string of boyfriends and eventually a marriage, she kept her distance

from anything related to my love life. When I invited Wendy to meet my partner, who had moved across the country to live with me, Wendy replied, "Can I pretend the two of you are just friends?" I laughed, thinking she was joking. Then I realized she wasn't.

I later wrote to Wendy and explained that I was still the same person I'd always been and expressed disappointment that an intelligent woman like her would choose to nurture her prejudices rather than examine them. I told her that I needed her to respect me, or the friendship would be over. In her reply Wendy was furious that I would threaten to end our friendship because of this and bitterly assured me that I would never find another friend like her.

*Amy L.  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

**MY FATHER WAS A FUN-LOVING, HARD-working guy.** He drove a semi and lived for Friday-night "club meetings," when my parents and their friends would get together for card games. The women would play Tripoley and watch television. The men would gather around the kitchen table with their cocktails and play pinochle, joking and laughing long into the night. The money didn't matter as much as the thrill. They were healthy and strong, at the peak of their game.

One by one the members of the Friday-night club died, until my dad was the lone survivor. He started going to the casino. Even after his health declined and he began to use a wheelchair, he could still play cards. His gambling debts mounted, but he continued until shortly before his death. Those card games were his connection to the life he had lived, those Friday nights in a house full of friends.

*Cynthia Durante  
Okanogan, Washington*

**MY UNCLE ALWAYS GAVE THE BEST presents,** like a wind-up toy motorcycle and a handmade silk box kite. In 1949, when I was ten, he gave me a present I didn't recognize at first, but I could tell from my mother's gasp it was something I wasn't supposed to have — and therefore a really good present. It turned out to be a miniature roulette wheel with a green

felt betting cloth and a pamphlet on rules and odds. I quickly tested the wheel to see if the odds given were accurate. Several hours later they were confirmed, and I put the wheel in the closet.

One summer day, looking for something other than the usual board games to play with my friends, I pulled the roulette wheel out of the closet and showed them how to bet, using beans and matches. It sparked everyone's interest, and we soon switched to pennies. A few weeks later I had several coffee cans full of coins.

When the kids started grumbling about not winning, I switched to blackjack. The coffee cans continued to fill up. Soon most of the kids within a three-mile radius were scrounging around for Coke bottles to turn in or lawns to mow so they could get back in the game. We played on a table in the garage with a light hanging over it. I wore a yellow vinyl eyeshade and kept semiregular hours.

I was in the middle of a deal one Saturday morning — the ten-to-twelve shift

— when the garage door opened, and there stood a dozen adults with wide eyes and slack jaws.

I was forced to close my casino, but since the parents couldn't figure out who had lost what, I got to keep the money.

To this day I don't go to Vegas. I don't like to be on the other side of the table.

*Doug Colville  
Cotati, California*

**UNLIKE MY MOTHER, I'VE ALWAYS** played it safe. When she took me clothes-shopping, she liked hot pink. I chose brown. At five I knew I wanted to be a nurse. She was still not sure what she wanted to be. At twenty I met the man I would marry. At twenty she had joined the navy.

Before my wedding I thought it would be good to travel with my mother. I wanted to see Paris. She booked us on a cruise to Bermuda. On our last night I agreed to go to the casino with her. We put one quarter in the slot, and fifty-some quarters came

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
The Bedroom	January 1	June 2007
Guns	February 1	July 2007
Change Of Heart	March 1	August 2007
Rivals	April 1	September 2007
Telling The Truth	May 1	October 2007
Airports	June 1	November 2007

shooting out! Overwhelmed with our good fortune, we called it a night.

I enjoyed telling friends the story of our good luck, until the first time my mother heard me tell it, when she quickly corrected me. "Oh, no," she said. "After you went to sleep, I went back and lost it all."

*Lucy G.  
Florence, Massachusetts*

**I GREW UP IN LAS VEGAS AND WORKED** in twenty different casinos on breaks from college. I'd walk the floor or sit in a booth, making change for people playing slots.

One place I worked was the then-snazzy Riviera Hotel, the first casino to have its own wedding chapel. One night I saw a groom sitting at a nickel video-poker machine with his bride on his lap, both of them still in their wedding outfits. She happily supplied him with nickels from a plastic cup while she ate a hamburger with ketchup.

I also worked at the Aladdin, which had gone bankrupt and was always on the verge of closing. I had the graveyard shift and wandered the floor of the once-beautiful casino, a change belt at my waist. Sometimes a Marilyn Monroe impersonator would float in, so beautiful and blond and elegant in her white dress. She'd quietly order drinks and play the slots, going through racks of silver tokens, unwinding after a long night.

*S. Solomon  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

**OUR WEDDING WAS SET FOR FEBRUARY 1.** We'd already booked the church, bought the rings, and sent out the invitations. Then, two weeks before Christmas, my fiancé, Alvin, disappeared for a day. I knew right away he'd gone to Las Vegas for one last gambling fix. I was angry, and my stomach churned with anxiety. How much would he lose this time? Could you stop a wedding once it had been planned?

Late that night, Alvin returned home with a sparkle in his eyes. "Before you say anything, take a look at this." He handed me a check for thirty-four thousand dollars from Harrah's casino. "I won it," he said, elated. "This will be a fresh start for us. We can pay off all our debts. It's

the best wedding present anyone could have given us." But I knew he was deceiving himself.

Ten days later Alvin went back to Vegas and gambled away every last penny. When he returned, he didn't need to tell me the news. I could tell from his hunched shoulders and dejected expression. A small part of me felt relieved, because I knew if Alvin didn't have to pay off his debts the hard way, he'd never learn. He kept apologizing and saying he never wanted to hurt me. "This was the last time," he promised.

On our wedding day, after I'd put on my beautiful dress and checked my makeup, I peeked into the sanctuary and noticed another door at the back of the building. I had a mad desire to run out that door as fast as I could. But then I thought of Alvin waiting for the ceremony to start, of my parents and sisters who'd come so far, and I knew I couldn't do it. Instead I trusted someone I knew could not be trusted. I walked down the aisle like the good girl I'd been brought up to be. I took a chance.

*Louise E.  
Venice, California*

**MY DEVOUT CATHOLIC MOTHER-IN-LAW** believed in miracles. She knew that God could touch you with his grace when you least expected it, and she was going to give God every opportunity. She played her lottery numbers — birthdays and anniversaries — each week. Neither repeated failure nor talk about the odds deterred her. She was sure that riches waited just around the corner. Besides, she had heard stories of other winners: friends of friends, the daughter of her hairdresser's cousin. Her own sister had won five thousand dollars on *The Big Spin*.

My mother-in-law died never having hit the jackpot. Driving to her wake, my wife and I passed a drugstore with a glowing neon Lotto sign. In honor of the deceased, we pulled in and bought fifty scratch-offs, then distributed them at lunch to all her relatives and friends. Their faces glowed in anticipation as they scraped the tickets. Most were losers; a couple had minor wins. Oh, well. There was always next week.

*John Unger Zussman  
Portola Valley, California*

**BEFORE I WAS BORN, MY MOM WORKED** in California as a dental assistant. On New Year's Eve 1968, the dentist she worked for took the whole office to Las Vegas for a party. The staff piled into a rented limo and drank martinis as they headed for the Dunes Hotel. My mom went along, though she didn't drink or gamble. She had other plans.

That night in Vegas, when the dentist was tipsy, my mom flirted with him and went back to his room. They had sex only once. She says she kept her eyes closed the whole time and prayed she would get pregnant. It worked.

Nobody knew that my mom's best friend, Dee, was actually her lover. They wanted a child and had chosen the dentist — a smart, handsome, and (most important) married man — to be the unwitting sperm donor. As soon as my mom started to show, the dentist asked if he was the father. She swore he wasn't and quit her job.

Eighteen years later, after I'd insisted on meeting the man from whom I'd inherited my passion for numbers and horse racing, the dentist finally found out the truth. I met him at a card house in Los Angeles, and we got to know each other as we played blackjack side by side.

*Gina G.  
Eugene, Oregon*

**MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE BEEN MARRIED** for twelve years. He is seventy-five; I am fifty. When I met him, I'd been through decades of abuse at the hands of a volatile mother, an absent father, and the inevitable controlling men who'd followed. He gave me peace and the strength to get the counseling and medication I needed. We had a happy marriage.

When he entered his seventies, though, the passion went away. We tried Viagra and porn. We even briefly considered bringing a third person into the bedroom, but we didn't know how to go about it. In the meantime I preoccupied myself with work and family.

The day I met Charles was like any other. He came to my place of business to give me a quote for a job. (His wife, of all people, had referred him to me.) His tall frame, gray hair, and blue eyes sent my imagination into overdrive. After that first

meeting, I was torn between my sense of loyalty to my husband and a yearning to feel a younger, stronger, fully functioning body close to mine.

One day Charles called, and I confessed everything: how much I wanted him, how I'd agonized over betraying my husband. I had no idea what his response would be. I did not know his marriage was ending.

Being touched at fifty is different from being touched at twenty, or thirty, or forty. At fifty you know your life is passing, your body is changing, and this could be your last chance.

Every time I meet my lover, I take a risk. I am amazed I can lie to my husband so easily about where I'm going or where I've been. I tell myself I'm protecting him, and that my betrayal enables me to stay in the marriage. And I will stay. I will not desert him. He will be secure in the knowledge that he is loved and respected.

Every night I say a prayer of thanks that I've made it through another day and nobody got hurt.

*Name Withheld*

**MY DAD'S MONTHLY POKER GAME** rotated locations, so that he and Mom hosted it at our house every nine months. It was always a big production, with platters of cold cuts and my mom's homemade apple pies to eat. We'd insert the leaf in the dining table and tuck extra folding chairs around it. Dad would shuffle a brand-new deck of cards, the plastic just removed. Sometimes my brother, my sister, and I would give Dad the money we'd earned helping him split wood or shovel snow, hoping to get a cut of his winnings.

As the guests arrived — all men Dad worked with at the police station — the house filled with noise and smoke and laughter and playful ribbing. Poker chips clacked on the table. One of the players would rub my head for luck; another would ask me to cut the deck. We kids would watch until Mom hollered for us to come to bed. Dad would give us each a playful swat on the butt as we left. The next morning we'd ask him how much he had won or lost. He'd groan in frustration when it'd been a tough night and lift us

up, laughing, when he had won.

Once, as my father left for poker night at another player's house, my brother, who was eight, pulled some money from his pocket and gave it to my father to bet in that evening's game. The following day Dad was particularly miserable from the pain of his loss.

A month later, when the game landed back at our home, the guys asked how we'd enjoyed our dad's winnings from the previous game. My brother looked at my father, and Dad turned away in embarrassment and shame. We never gave our money to him again.

*L.N.*

*Chicago, Illinois*

**AKIKO'S PARENTS HAD STRUGGLED** for thirty-five years to hold on to their Japanese identity while finding success in America. When she and I announced our engagement, they weren't impressed with her choice. I was neither financially successful nor Japanese.

We made the announcement on Labor Day, when her family hosted an annual dinner for friends. The festivities included poker. Being pretty good at cards, I said that I wanted to play. Akiko's father, Ben, took me under his somewhat drunken wing and explained the rules in broken English.

Most of the players were drunk to the point of being easy marks. Stone-cold sober, nervous, and calculating, I started to win. My victories were met with polite smiles and proclamations of "beginner's luck." Ben, however, was delighted and took credit for my skill, having taught me the rules.

Toward the end of the night things grew quiet, and everyone watched Ben and me — the last two players. We were playing high or low to win, and I had one of the lowest hands in the game. When it came time for us each to pick high or low, he generously said, "Micah-san, you go high, I go low, and we split the chips."

"No, Ben-san," I replied, "I'm going to beat you."

We both went low. Ben shook his head. "Sorry, Micah-san. You played good." He dramatically showed his cards one at a time: ace, two, three, five, and six. I showed my cards all at once: ace, two, three,

five, and six. It was a tie. Ben pounded me on the back, and the older folks burst out laughing.

Ben and I get along pretty well these days, but I don't play cards with him anymore. I've already won.

*Micah Posner*

*Santa Cruz, California*

**I WORK AT A RACETRACK, TAKING** bets. Three types of bettors come to my window: There are the professionals, who always do their research, plan their bets, and know when to call it a day. They sometimes smile, rarely talk, and mostly just go about their business.

There are the recreational bettors, who start the day with a set amount of cash they plan to gamble and generally stay within that limit. They smile, drink, and have fun. Some are older couples who still dress up to go to the track. The women even wear hats and gloves, just as they did in the forties.

Then there are the desperate gamblers, who are alternately entertaining and pathetic. Each has a tale of woe. "Yesterday I picked the 4-6 at Philly, even though the 4 was 50 to 1. But the friggin' teller couldn't get the bet in on time, and I was shut out of a \$15,000 payday!" It's always the teller's fault. The desperate gamblers also have stories of grand victories. "I had the pick-6 at Belmont last month. Made \$106,000. But, hell, it's only money."

The "it's only money" line is delivered cockily whenever they win. When they don't win, they have no lines. They want to be cool and smart, like the professional gambler, or relaxed and fun-loving, like the recreational gambler, but they can only look like what they are: desperate. They start the day peeling bills off a bankroll and most times end it making two-dollar bets with coins, stinking of booze.

After placing their bets, they stand with their fellow desperate gamblers and yell at the TV screen: "Come on, Five. Come on, Five. What the fuck are you doing? Come on, go, go, go! . . . Shit! What are you doing to me?"

The horses can't hear them. I wish I couldn't.

*Kevin Kane*

*Madison, Connecticut*  
*(end of excerpt)*