


Rituals

The money pit



They might be waiting to renew their driver's licences, so patiently do they shuffle toward the five computer kiosks on the ground floor of 33 Bloor Street East, just across from the Bay. Every Monday morning, the same polite queue forms at the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation. Everybody's clutching a piece of paper. Some people gaze at an unfixated point on the wall; others prefer the comforting sight of their own Tivas. Cecil Greenidge, in his aubergine TTC uniform, awaits his turn, while Gaetan Desaultels, a shambling, middle-aged fellow, is quietly led away from the counter to a back room. For a collection of lottery winners, this is a curiously unexcited lot.

"Are you employed by the Ontario Lottery Corporation, or do you sell lottery tickets?" the agent asks. Cecil Greenidge looks down at his TTC uniform, raising an eyebrow. "Do I look like I sell lottery tickets?" The humourless woman repeats the question in the weary voice of someone who processes some 400 winners every week.

The 59-year-old Greenidge is here because, after playing for 13 years, he's finally hit five numbers on Lotto 6/49. His incredible luck (the odds of getting five numbers are 55,500 to one) doesn't pay off as handsomely as you might expect. He's bagged a paltry \$1,355. The elusive sixth number would have given him a \$2-million payoff, but now we're talking seriously long odds: his chances of nailing all six were one in 14 million. In terms of statistical probability, you're more likely to be struck by lightning twice in the same month.

Still, he remains quietly confident. "I'm going to get it one day," he says with calm assurance, the sort of voice he might use to tell people that the Number 11 will be on time. Of course, false hope is the stuff that dreams are made of—false hope manufactured by marketing campaigns that, given their source (the government), verge on immoral.

The recently merged Ontario Lottery and Ontario Casino corporations have a shiny new acronym and a \$34-million marketing budget to attract players to their 11,000 lottery retailers, 13 lotteries, countless scratch-and-win tickets, eight casinos and nine racetrack slot facilities. In 2000, the OLG grossed a cool \$2.6 billion. Ontario has come a long way since my father almost lost his postal privileges for playing the Littlewoods football pools by mail in 1953. Back then, the government was arresting bookies, not mimicking them, condemning the Irish Sweepstakes, not hiring advertising agencies to persuade people to buy tickets. Of course, back then the government wasn't getting its palm greased either. Easy money changes everything.

The sanctioned version of the lotto began in 1975 with the now defunct Wintario. Today, every dollar spent on lottery tickets in Ontario gets halved before being recycled: 33 cents goes to the province, 10 cents to operating costs and seven cents to retailers. The other 50 cents gets paid out in prizes. Play roulette in a casino, and 97 cents gets paid out. Even armed bandits cough up about 80 cents of every dollar people feed them. Small wonder that governments everywhere are jumping on the lottery bandwagon.

Legalized gambling is a growth industry in Canada, and the OLG plans to keep it that way. "Hey, you never know." "You'll get used to being a millionaire." "Imagine the freedom." Right. The reason for the fantasy-driven advertising, of course, is that it works, and not just on desperate people. The OLG boasts that more than half the province's adult population indulges in lottery tickets regularly, and 88 per cent have played at one time or another.

Take Gaetan Desaultels, the 53-year-old Vineland resident who's earned a trip to the "winners' lounge," away from the hoi polloi, by virtue of the size of his jackpot. Here's a guy who spends considerably more than the \$4.60 a week the OLG says is the provincial average. Desaultels proudly tells me that he blows \$100 on lottery tickets every week. Has he ever won before? Once—\$1,100 a few years back. Today, he's taken time off from his job at a fruit company in Niagara to catch the bus to Toronto and cash his scratch-and-win. All those zeros confused him at first. He thought his Crossword ticket was worth \$5,000, roughly what he spends on the lottery each year. In fact, it's worth \$50,000.

His plans for the money are typical: he intends to pay off some credit cards and bank the rest. Canadians generally don't go for the yacht, the Ferrari or other conspicuous toys. Eighty-eight per cent of major winners simply deposit their proceeds. Of course, he's also atypical in that most 6/49 players will never visit 33 Bloor, let alone sit in the purple splendour of the winners' lounge, where he waits alone for his cheque.

Meanwhile, out at the kiosk, Cecil Greenidge has presented his winning ticket to an agent. Ten minutes later, when his name is called, he steps forward and accepts his \$1,355 prize, along with a perfunctory handshake and standard-issue "Congratulations, sir." He folds the cheque into his wallet, puts his wallet in his aubergine pants and heads back to work, past the line of shuffling winners.

The agent doesn't even look up as the next shadow crosses her desk. "Are you employed by the Ontario Lottery Corporation, or do you sell lottery tickets?"

—Kate Barker