

Words **Tania Connolly** Portrait **Frances Andrijich**

# A bad bet

Most people bet a few dollars at the races, but on Perth Cup Day, 1989, I upped the ante and gambled with my life. Did I win? I'm still here, but the odds were stacked against me.

A perfect summer day turned ugly when alcohol-fuelled violence erupted in the car park of Ascot Racecourse. Approaching sirens spooked the crowd and bodies melted away, leaving a trail of debris in their wake.

My friends were involved in the mêlée and staggered towards me with ripped shirts and bruised egos. Aggression still oozed from their pores as they all piled into the car, Joel in the driver's seat. After much swerving and swearing he pulled over, declaring himself too drunk to drive, and several friends hopped out, deciding it was safer to call a taxi. I wasn't one of them.

Ignoring their pleas, I remained ensconced behind the driver's seat, the lure of food at Fast Eddy's too strong to resist. Joel jumped in beside me leaving Sam to drive, with Murray in the passenger seat up front.

We were winding our way through the quiet back streets of Joondanna when Sam dramatically increased speed. I asked him to slow down but he just laughed and accelerated harder.

The car surged to 100km/h

and I gripped the door handle as butterflies dive-bombed my gut. Sam wrenched the steering wheel to turn a corner and I slammed hard against the door. The back tyres screeched in protest, lost traction, and the car began drifting right. Sam oversteered, but instead of stabilising, the car began fishtailing wildly down the street. I could see the fear in Joel's eyes and my stomach clenched. I felt sick, realising with growing horror that the car was speeding dangerously out of control with no way of stopping. I prayed we wouldn't strike another vehicle as I was certain we wouldn't survive a head-on collision at our current speed. I now deeply regretted agreeing to the lift home.

## Life forever changed

Sam's attempts to wrest back control proved futile. Without slowing, the car left the road, mounted a kerb, and headed in the direction of a light pole on the verge. I screamed as Sam tugged the wheel sharply left again. The pole loomed and I braced for impact. The rear of the vehicle whipped around in a cloud of

sand and grass and smashed into the pole.

I blinked in shock, dazed from hitting my head on the post. The entire rear-passenger seat had been crushed like a softdrink can and I was perched at an awkward angle in the middle of the car, sandwiched between Joel's six-foot frame and seven metres of solid timber.

From the time Sam pressed his foot on the accelerator to hitting the lamp post was probably less than a minute.

My dress and bare legs were covered in glass from the smashed window. Larger shards had embedded themselves in my right arm, causing it to bleed, but I left them in, too scared to dislodge them. Sam and Murray appeared unhurt and jumped out of the vehicle to assess the damage. Joel moaned about his sore back and stumbled out.

Impossible to open what was left of my door, especially with a light pole wedged against it, I tried to slide over to the other door, but when I attempted to swing my legs, they wouldn't budge.

I placed my hands either side



RAC member Tania Connolly at the crash site.



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of my torso to help with leverage but my legs remained immobile. I focused all my attention on moving my lower limbs, but still nothing happened. My heart thundered in my chest and blood roared in my ears. I struggled to breathe and I felt as if I was suffocating. I cried out for someone to help me.

The boys returned to the car and Sam coaxed the engine into life and drove off. I pleaded

with them to call an ambulance because I suspected there was something seriously wrong with me. They decided instead to swap the wrecked car at Sam's house and drive to the hospital. Once we arrived at the house I refused to be driven anywhere else.

I pushed my bloodstained arms through the smashed window and sobbed. A pair of strong hands hoisted me up while my legs

dragged limply behind me. It never occurred to me to remain still in case of a spinal injury, I just wanted to escape the claustrophobic confines of the car. Murray laid me down gently on the front lawn on my back then went into the house to phone an ambulance.

It felt like I was lying on molten lava – white-hot pain erupted in my belly and agonising spasms ripped through my stomach.





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above: The car after the crash.  
right: Tania Connolly at her sister's wedding a few months after the accident.

Was I paralysed? Haemorrhaging internally? Was I already dying? I didn't want to die. There was so much I hadn't done. Then a door slammed and Murray ran out of the house, knelt beside me and squeezed my icy hand, offering comfort. I clasped it like it was a lifeboat.

A paramedic wrapped me in a silver blanket to combat my shivering, applied an oxygen mask and checked all my vital signs. I was scared. What would the doctor's diagnosis be? I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair, I didn't want them to open me up and shake their heads in despair at the mess. I closed my eyes tightly, trying to erase all the negative thoughts.

At the hospital a CT scan followed numerous X-rays and ultrasounds.

Orderlies wheeled me in and out of lifts, doctors poked and prodded me, removed the glass from my arm and stitched me up. Five hours later, I was delivered to the ward where I received both good and bad news. I wasn't paralysed, but I wasn't able to walk either. The crash had fractured my pelvis in six places and ruptured my bladder, resulting in a water bag being attached to my right leg. This provided traction to enable my bones to heal in alignment.

Pethidine was injected into my thighs every three hours to relieve the intense pain. I spent a total of seven weeks in hospital, dependent on the nurses to wash my hair, shower me and scratch the itches I couldn't reach. I didn't eat for 10 days. I cried a lot.

Eventually I began physiotherapy, then hydrotherapy, and when I was

sent home I relied on crutches for a month followed by a walking stick for a further four weeks. At 23, I was reluctant to use a walking aid that would make me look like a cripple.

Joel had chipped a bone in his spine that could have severed his spinal cord at any moment. He had to have an operation to have staples inserted into his spine.

It's been 25 years since my accident and while the physical scars have healed. The emotional scarring is harder to deal with. We were lucky to survive and walk away, and when things get me down that thought motivates me to be positive. Gambling with my life is not a risk I'd take again.

These memories were stirred while my 16-year-old son was studying for his learner's permit.

Soon he and his friends will have their licences and in 12 months' time, they'll be legally allowed to drink. The combination of alcohol and driving can be catastrophic and I stress to him that the consequences of one split-second decision or one foolish act could change his life forever.

My stomach knots when I hear brakes screeching and I hold my breath, waiting for the crash. I read one story very similar to mine – where a young girl died. That could easily have been me. Drivers need to be aware they hold their passengers' lives in their hands and there are consequences, sometimes tragic, to their actions. ●



### Young drivers and alcohol-related crashes

#### In 2007

- 13% of 17-24-year-olds involved as a driver/rider in a fatal or serious injury crash had a blood alcohol content (BAC) greater than 0.05
- The rate was higher for males (15%) than females (9%)
- Involved 17-24s were more likely to be over 0.05 BAC (13%) than the total population (9%).

#### In 2012

- 9% of 17-24-year-olds involved as a driver/rider in a fatal or serious injury crash had a BAC greater than 0.05
- The rate was higher for males (11%) than females (5%)
- Involved 17-24s were more likely to be over 0.05 BAC (9%) than the total population (7%).