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The Merry Pranked

COMING THIS FALL 2014

The Marquis' Mark



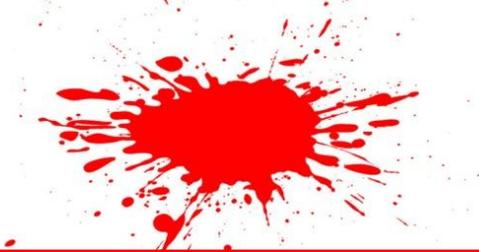
DAV D

Rush

TRIPPING

ON

Tears



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EPILOGUE

Excerpt from The Merry Pranked

About the Author

To Mom and Dad

CHAPTER *One*

BASED *On* another's perception of honor, for the first time in my life, I knew what it was to hate. And not just any hate, but the kind that resides deep down in your soul; a dormant beast that many will never awaken, while many others will have the misfortune of embracing.

The hate fueled me. Although I knew I should let it go, somehow, surprisingly, it gave me new purpose – defined the new me. That, however, was not really a good thing. I was pretty sure the hate I'd embraced, the darkness within my soul - was going to be the end of me.

And why not?

Wasn't that how it should be?

I really had nothing to live for anymore.

My life was going to end in darkness, my soul surrounded by hate. If there was any consolation, I guess, it was that before I knew hate, I'd known true love.

CHAPTER *Two*

I'D *Never* considered myself racist, but, I guess...I am.
I'm a racist, even though it goes against everything I grew up believing – everything I
am.

I'm a racist.

I cringe as I realize this truth, but nevertheless it's right, as now, deep in my heart, I know
it's true.

It wasn't always that way.

I grew up in a wonderful loving household. My parents, who I've only now come to truly appreciate, having shrugged off the blinders and conceit of my teen years, where I was sure I knew everything and they knew nothing, were somewhat progressive individuals for their day and age. They grew up in the Seventies and married in the early Eighties, a time of skinny leather ties, Flock of Seagull hairdos, and bands like Culture Club, Tears For Fears, and other assorted oddities. I believe at some point in both their lives they each owned pet rocks and, possibly, mood rings. In their day, their parents had already dealt with the issue of racism, in regards to Blacks—or should I say African-Americans to be more politically correct.

Can you call them Blacks today? Negroes? What is politically correct?

As a Caucasian male in today's day and age, it's difficult to know what you can and can't say. Sometimes it's just better to keep your damn mouth shut.

As I was saying, my parents didn't see people based on skin color and they taught me and my sister and younger brother to do the same. Everyone was welcomed into our home, so long as they were invited into it by a member of the family. My parents trusted our judgment and tried not to judge, although I'm sure we made that difficult, especially when we started dating. Both my brother and I brought home the occasionally questionable girl – you know the type that dresses in such a way and acts in such a way that you're not supposed to take her home to Mother - but it was easier for my Father to understand our intentions based on the...well, I hate to be rude, but rather slutty nature of the young ladies involved.

I said I was a racist, not a sexist. I'm sure once these young ladies navigated the turbulent waters that defined being a teenage girl and seeking acceptance and popularity they came out the other end intelligent and well adjusted young women. At least some of them; there were a couple that to tell you the truth I wouldn't be surprised ended up wrapped around a pole in their all-together in one of the city's many adult men's entertainment establishments. That's not to say there weren't a few wayward males, also doing a lot of stupid things while looking for acceptance and popularity; and while some of them have found their way in life, I'm sure others have a less than impressive resume, and may even be considered failures.

I guess the point of all this is that during those teenage years, where we all believe we know everything, and everyone older than us doesn't know shit, we experimented a little trying to find ourselves, which made it a hell of a lot harder when you consider biology had taken over and turned many of us stupid with desire and lust – awakening sexuality is not necessarily a friend to the average teenage boy. While puberty turned me and many of my friends into masturbating idiots, I would imagine it is during this time that teenage girls begin to discover the power they wield over us. They begin to understand the difference between the sexes and the fact that many of us – young male adolescents - are preoccupied with only one thing—SEX.

As I've alluded to earlier, my Father understood some of our dating choices, because he knew we were horny, and that in being horny, we were also temporarily insane. I can honestly say, that during my teenage years, I did care for and enjoy spending time with many of the young ladies I dated, but underneath it all, there was always that one unrelenting goal—trying awkwardly to get laid or at least cop a feel. No matter how much I enjoyed a girl's company, or thought she was cool, nine times out of ten, I still wanted to see her naked and I still wanted to be naked with her—in the biblical sense, you understand. That's why I say it was easier for my Father to understand my younger brother and my intentions when we brought a young lady home; despite the fact we didn't acknowledge it, or even believe it, he was once young himself and driven by the same primal carnal desires. What made it hard for my Father was when my sister started bringing boyfriends over during her teenage years. You see, he knew that no matter how much that young man was interested in my sister, that underlying all that, what he really wanted was to see her naked and be naked with her. He was always polite to them, but I think that was only because he knew that my friends and I weren't. We let anyone dating my sister know that if we heard of any attempts at hanky panky there'd be serious consequences—the word *castration* may have been worked into many of those threats. I don't know how effective we were, but my sister did get through her teenage years without getting pregnant; I should also point out that despite all my efforts during those high school years, I also got through my teenage years without getting someone pregnant; the truth of the matter was that despite having rounded

many of the proverbial *bases* on dates, I only hit one home run in high school, and that was a stupid move in itself – *but more on that later*. When it came to sexual intimacy, you could say I was a late bloomer, having not engaged in regular sexual intercourse until college, and even then, in my second year of college.

I know I seem to be fixating on sex—possibly elevating its importance to the young male mind too much, but as I think back to those formative years, it did seem to occupy quite a lot of our energy and thoughts; probably more so than it should have. I guess my point is that despite this preoccupation with sex, my Father had also instilled in me a respect for women. Other than fearing the intentions of my sister’s boyfriends—I know he’d have preferred she didn’t date until well into her forties—he never treated her differently than my brother and I. She was included in everything, including labor around the yard, until she discovered she could use her gender to get out of the work.

When it came to education and the potential of what we could become in life he never discriminated; actually, based on the fact my brother and I seemed to have lost our focus after discovering girls, I’m pretty sure he figured my sister was his and my Mother’s only hope to bring future glory to our family.

It was this lack of discrimination and sexism that I grew up with. I saw it every day in how my parents related to one another. I was lucky in that my Father had done well for himself, allowing my Mother to become a full-time, stay-at-home Mom. I’d never questioned this until my teenage years when I finally asked my Mom about it, sure that she’d been forced into a role she really didn’t want. To my surprise, staying at home to raise us had been her decision and one she never regretted. In life we tend to take a lot for granted, which I’m definitely guilty of doing. Now, unfortunately, that she’s gone, I can look back at all the little things she did for us simply because she was there and available—things that may have seemed trivial at the time, but were significant upon reflection.

Mom ran the household, but that didn’t mean Dad was a slouch in that area. Sure, he worked hard, but he also found time for us. It was obvious my parents started a family because they wanted a family and were prepared to put the time and effort into it as required.

As I observed my parents and their interactions with one another, I also saw that Dad relied heavily on Mom and her opinions; they often spoke about business deals he was involved in, and he valued her input. It wasn’t uncommon in my household, growing up, to find my parents huddled together in conference, discussing matters regarding the household or Dad’s business. I’m also sure there was a lot more they discussed; matters that were private to them and of no concern to us. It’s only when you get older that you realize your parents are more than just parents, but also human beings with their own thoughts, hopes and desires.

Now, I know I’m painting quite a rosy picture here; it’s something I can’t help. They’re both gone now, and all I remember, or choose to remember, is how lucky I was to have them in my life. As a boy growing up, I hit the jackpot; I had friends whose parents paled in comparison to mine. Nonetheless, even though they kept most of their disagreements between themselves, and I can’t remember us seeing them fighting or saying a cross word to one another, there were times when they got on each other’s nerves. Hell, that’s only normal when you’re trying to build a long life with one another.

I remember the time Mom and Dad were heading out for a night on the town, and while backing the car out of the garage, Dad accidentally ran over one of Mom’s feet. He didn’t do any serious damage or break anything, but he did scuff up one high heel and was never let to forget what a bonehead move that had been. Over time, however, in recalling the incident, it became

less to criticize Dad regarding it and more to tease him about it—a source of laughter for the entire family. As I always said to him, “If you didn’t want to go out dancing, but just wanted dinner and a movie, there are better ways to go about it.” His response was always something to do about my taking a long walk off a short pier. I told him I would as long as he was right there with me holding my hand. And so on and so on.

When I think of my parents I can’t help feeling nostalgic, but I’m telling you this with purpose, not simply to indulge myself. I grew up in a home with a family that wasn’t perfect by any means, but a family that somehow worked, and in that regard I believe it was as perfect as any family could be. My parents gave me the leeway to get myself into trouble and to make mistakes; at the same time they instilled in me values and a code of conduct that always kept me from taking things too far. They established boundaries that, in effect, kept me and my brother and sister from going off the rails and not becoming well adjusted adults. Together we laughed, cried and loved together, and it is because of that fact that my future hit me like a tonne of bricks. Maybe if you can understand where I’m coming from, my background, my concept of a loving family, it will make it easier to see why I finally did go off the rails when confronted with the absurdity of another’s concept of family, as well as their idea of right and wrong. And while I know I’m not supposed to judge, and that many will explain to me that I just don’t understand - it’s a cultural thing - I can’t help it, I’ve been judged and now I’m judging and have judged. We all do, yet only a few of us are willing to admit it. I’ve turned that corner and am ready to admit it.

But more on that later.

CHAPTER *Three*

IN *Life* we all want to think that in some way we are special; it is a healthy conceit, just as long as one doesn't get too carried away and enter the rarified world of the narcissist. My Father was outgoing; a brilliant salesman with a personality that made him larger than life. Dad was the type of guy who could enter a room and within a short period of time, know everyone in the room, and have them gravitating towards him - and not in a bad or obnoxious way. There was just this quality about him that was lovable, and probably stemmed from the fact he genuinely liked and loved people. He wasn't making an effort to be popular, it just came naturally to him, and I admired that.

Mom on the other hand had a quiet dignity about herself. She could be as fun loving as Dad, but wasn't quite as gregarious. Like Dad, she truly liked and loved people, and when you won her over and had her in your corner, you had yourself a personal champion - a person ready to fight to the death for you. Dad was also like that; if he was on your side, he was on your side, and my brother and sister and I knew we could count on him - count on them. I always said that if I went out and shot someone and the police showed up at our door, my Father would argue that I shouldn't be arrested for shooting that person, but that that individual should be arrested for stealing my bullet. I'd say about the only thing my Father couldn't abide, and wouldn't have backed either me or my brother on was if we were to in any way physically harm a woman. My parents didn't condone hitting, but put up with the fact that for a while my brother and I thought

we were each other's personal punching bags. This tolerance did not extend to my sister when we were growing up. She could whack the hell out of us, but if we were to even threaten to retaliate, the look in my Father's eyes said it all. Of course, when we got older and more mature, my brother and my fights also became a thing of the past; verbal jousting became the weapon of choice and much to our surprise and happiness, my sister wasn't excluded from this.

As I said earlier, Dad was a salesman, selling wholesale to large department store chains; he specialized in candy, which, of course, made us popular with the neighborhood kids growing up; we all learned very quickly that salesmen get samples, and a considerable amount of them. Dad was the Candy Man – sure Sammy Davis sang about it and took it to the top of the charts, but that was just singing, Dad actually had the goods to back up the title and wasn't shy about passing them out.

Despite his success in life, Dad had not been very good at school. I believe, and I can't be completely sure this is accurate, that he was thrown out of every high school in his neighborhood, and may only have gotten his diploma by the skin of his teeth – if in fact he ever got it (we never asked and he never said). He was a big guy, known as 'The Ox' by his classmates, and quite the athlete, although he did admit in later years that his role on the lacrosse team was as more of an enforcer than a finesse player. Our Mom encouraged us to read, but in all the time I had to spend with my Dad he never cracked a book. Sorry, he did try reading a baseball novel called *Ball Four*, but never got past page one hundred. That's not to say that Dad was simple or stupid; quite the opposite. Dad devoured newspapers and magazines like they were going out of style; anything from the current news of the day to history magazines. In his own way he was well read.

Mom was the reader in our family; a very intelligent woman who excelled in school. She devoured books and encouraged me and my siblings to do the same. Reading for us wasn't a chore, but enjoyment. Mom instilled a love of the written word in all of us and encouraged any signs of creativity we demonstrated. I'd seen friend's creativity cut down by their parents, especially during their later teen years when their parents were hoping their children would start focusing on a practical career choice after high school, rather than pursuing some crazy dream. We didn't have to deal with this. I can't say for sure, but something deep down tells me, my mother could have been a writer—a novelist. She had the knack, but never pursued it, as far as I know. After she passed I almost expected to go through her personal things and find a half-written manuscript amongst them, or even several completed manuscripts that she had finished and simply filed away. Like I said, I'm guessing here. At the same time, she never once expressed any regrets in her life and her decision to become a stay-at-home Mom, raising the three of us.

I bring all this up, as a way of pointing out that it was this encouragement that led me into the life of a writer. My younger brother went into banking and my sister into nursing, leaving me the only member of my family to pursue the arts or as my brother pointed out to me, the only member of my family who was willing to accept or pursue a life of poverty.

"Who the hell is going to read anything you write?" he once asked me. "Mom and Dad can only buy so many books and not enough to put you on the New York Times Bestseller List."

I believe, "Bite me," was my response.

Yes, I know what you're thinking, not all that creative a response for someone who fancies themselves a writer. At the same time, who wants to waste any of their good material on their little brother? Actually my sister came to my rescue pointing out to my little brother that as long as he was successful in the financial community I'd know where I could go for a loan

whenever I needed it. Strangely, this didn't seem to please him, although it did give me a solid game plan.

Up until the end of high school I had written a lot of short stories, none of which were published anywhere of any renown. I took a stab at a novel, but came up short; who knew it took that much effort to actually write professionally?

Like most aspiring writers, I decided to study journalism. What better way to become a writer than to be making a living writing while trying to achieve that dream. Journalism, of course, is supposed to be about the facts and getting them right. That kind of training is not conducive to the art of writing fiction, as I found out, and many of my college classmates, who had the same idea as me. At the same time I found an outlet that seemed to agree with me. I graduated and started working for a small regional newspaper, doing everything that was required of me; it wasn't glamorous, and the pay certainly confirmed my little brother's predictions about my seeking out poverty for a living, but I liked it. I didn't know how far I was going to take it, but I felt I'd found my niche in life. Maybe writing fiction wasn't for me; maybe my talents lay in non-fiction; exploring the world and relating it back to my readers.

And, yes, I can say readers because believe it or not I found them, or should I say they found me? Back to the concept of thinking we're special. Why me and not someone else in my journalism class? Or one of the many journalism graduates around the world? I sold a book and it became a substantial enough hit that I was able to pursue writing books full time. Was it because I was more special than everyone else, or just dumb luck? It was the latter, even though if Mom were still alive she'd say the former.

I had a good friend in college who had scored what every guy thinks is the jackpot in a girlfriend—a stripper. I've never been one for adult entertainment and the so-called 'Men's Clubs.' Yes I'm being diplomatic, but I've never liked the term 'Peelers' when talking about strippers.

I'd been in clubs before. All young men at some point or the other find themselves drawn to the establishments. I mean you can have a beer and watch women get naked on purpose. The draw is pretty simple to figure out. I went a few times with some buddies, only to discover that these places were quite boring. You drank overpriced alcohol, and watched the standard three-song rotation of dancers. The first song, she just dances in a sexy outfit; the second song, she might take off her top; the final song, she goes completely naked—over and over and over again. The funny part is that having been a film buff for quite some time, my impression of strippers was that they performed on stage. What I discovered was that half the time the girl on stage looked like she was going through the motions, absolutely bored with the whole routine herself. We referred to these girls as *walkers*, as that seemed to be the extent of their dancing—they were mailing it in, waiting to get off stage and try to make some money with the private dancing. The only individuals who seemed to be having a really good time were the guys who were drawn to *perverts row*, the seating around the edge of the stage on which the stripper danced. I never paid a visit to the row, preferring instead to keep my distance.

The strip club world is all fantasy. That is one of the reasons why I found it so boring. I didn't believe for one second that any of the dancers who sat down at our table and paid special attention to me were in fact really that interested in my life. This was usually proven true when they finally got around to asking me for a private dance; the second I turned them down, and they realized I wasn't willing to drop my hard-earned money on them, their interest in me didn't dwindle, but simply died. Guys don't realize that the minute you walk through those strip club doors you are entering a world of fantasy where nothing is real. To the dancers you are a giant

dollar sign—their means of making a living. And to me that is fair. That’s the unspoken contract that exists between men and dancers within that world. Unfortunately not all guys got it, and some of them fell in love with the dancers, spending a fortune on them. When some of the dancers realized this, those who had lost their humanity and only saw men as dollar bills, they were able to take the fantasy out of the club, stringing these guys along for vacations and other ill-gotten gains. I know one dancer who took a guy, an executive from a bank, for leather furniture, a big screen TV, and an allowance worth thousands of dollars for at least four months, before he realized she wasn’t going to sleep with him. She’d pulled the ultimate con, because she didn’t have to engage in sex to get these items. She also liked to test her admirers, who were hopeful of one day getting into bed with her, by calling them up in the middle of the night and saying she wanted a coffee. Surprisingly, many of them would get out of bed, go to a coffee shop, buy her a coffee and deliver it to her apartment, where she would promptly take the coffee and close the door on them. They were hoping for a late night booty call, based on their considerate actions, but were just played and used, this particular dancer defining her power and reveling in it. Nonetheless, they kept coming back for more abuse, at least for a while.

My friend wasn’t like these guys. He was actually dating Candice before she decided to become a dancer to help pay for her college courses. She was actually a nice girl who danced for a reason and kept it clean, which probably accounted for the fact that amongst the girls at the club she worked at, she was probably the worst earner. She did make enough to look after her needs, and that was all she cared about – that was adequate. It was when I got together with them that she would regale me with stories of what went on behind the scenes of the average strip club. The stories were fascinating; it was like Dorothy pulling back the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz* and realizing the Wizard was just a man. Her stories stripped the strip club of its illusion and presented it as a dreadful place where dreams went to die, and where many women/dancers lost their basic humanity after dealing day-to-day with men who had an unhealthy view of women and their place in our world. No matter how you stacked it up or tried to spin it, strip clubs and the relationships formed in them, are dysfunctional and serve no purpose in society at large. I found all of this fascinating.

Looking to pay off my student loans as well, and supplementing my meager journalist pay, Candice got me a job at the strip club, first as a doorman and then as a bartender. It was here that my first book was developed. I realized that no movie or TV show had ever accurately represented the environment of the strip club, so I set out to do exactly that, showing it in all its ugliness. An honest - and because it was honest - harrowing depiction of a world that served no purpose in society; a world that I witnessed really did destroy souls. And that’s what *The Sinful Delusion*, my first book, written in the style of the New Journalists like Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, was about.

I was as surprised as anyone when I found a publisher who was willing to publish the manuscript; I was equally surprised when the book performed really well; I was pleased when it performed well enough that I was able to call up my little brother and tell him he could take that life of poverty crack of his on a long walk off a short pier. I think his response to me was, “Bite me.” For someone as creative as him, that *was* his best.

The only problem with writing a book such as *The Sinful Delusion* was the fact that many readers automatically assumed I wrote about it because I was a strip club patron—a long-time fan of the art of exotic dancing, which, of course, I wasn’t. While I took pride in the book’s success, it did bother me that some would think that, so when my publisher asked me what I wanted to write next, I gave it some thought and figured I’d focus on a subject matter that was as

far from strip clubs and stripping as I could get; a subject matter that if I handled it right, would earn me some respect and demonstrate my scope as a non-fiction writer. What is that subject? Funny you should ask.

Growing up in my household, religion was not a big topic. When we were little, my Mother would dress my brother, sister and I up and take us to Church for Easter or Christmas Mass, or something like that. Dad never came, and none of us ever thought to ask him why. As we got older it seemed the only time we were in Church was when someone died or someone was getting married. That's not to say my family didn't believe in a higher power, a supreme being or anything like that, but that we didn't feel it was necessary to frame that belief in one particular religion or need a Church to cement it within our hearts.

Is there a God?

Good question. And, you know what; I can't say definitively one way or another. I believe there is, as I believe there is a grand design regarding life and someone or something must be behind that grand design. Let me use an example that isn't personal to me, but I believe illustrates my point.

Wilmer McLean.

You probably have never heard of him. In 1861, he and his family owned a farm near Manassas Junction along the banks of the Bull Run River. It was in his front yard that the first battle of the American Civil War was fought—a war that claimed the lives of 620,000 Americans. It was in 1865 in the remote hamlet of Appomattox, a town in which Wilmer had moved his family to escape the horrors of the war, having bought the Appomattox Court House, that Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Virginia to Union General Ulysses S. Grant, thus ending the conflict. You could say the war started in Wilmer McLean's front yard and ended in his front parlor. All of this could be coincidence, but throughout history there have been many such events that can't help but make you think that somebody is up there pulling the strings and having a little fun with us. The symmetry of it all is amazing.

No, I wasn't writing a book about the American Civil War, but bring this up, as the topic I did choose surprisingly reflected some of the issues that soon affected my life and turned me down the road to hatred. The book dealt with faith and beliefs and the arguments of both of those from opposing sides. It encompassed the relationship between two of the 19th and 20th Centuries most famous men, *but more on that later*. It's a subject I researched exhaustively and one I could go on and on and on about indefinitely, but it only plays a small part in the narrative of my downfall. Let's instead get to her and how she changed my life.

CHAPTER *Four*

WHOEVER *Placed* solitaire on laptops was a genius. I'd been showing up at the cafe Koffee Krisp every day for two weeks; not because I loved coffee that much, although I did, but because of her. I don't know what it was about her that captivated me; I didn't need to know. All I knew was that I wanted to meet her, talk to her; what I also knew was that I was also a social coward. I wasn't smooth; I wasn't even close to smooth. I knew guys who could just sidle up to her and start a conversation and all would go well for them. I hated those guys. I had, as they say, no game. All I had was time on my hands, a laptop and an ability to consume an inordinate amount of coffee.

So every day, instead of staying home, organizing my research, and properly starting my new book, I traveled to Koffee Krisp, ordered my brew, sat down, opened my laptop and looked like I was consumed by whatever was on the screen, while all the while, sneaking furtive glances in her direction, and taking in her essence. That, in itself was a chore, as once I had her in my sights, I desperately wanted to hold her in my gaze, drinking in her beauty, but if I looked too long, she might notice and be a little disturbed or creeped out. I had to take quick looks, which just weren't long enough to satisfy my desire to just watch her move around in our little caffeinated world.

Yes, while I tried to perfect being the best coffee shop Peeping Tom I could be—would Dad be proud?—I also had to look busy. There's no point in pulling out the laptop unless I was going to look busy and engrossed with it. I mean it was the ultimate cliché, pulling out a laptop

in a coffee shop and writing, but being a living cliché was what I was willing to become just to be near her. At least a cliché until I worked up the nerve to speak with her, if that ever happened. Despite the task ahead of me, and a deadline, I did very little writing. I used their Wi-Fi to check my email and surf the Internet; when I looked like I was typing or actually writing, I was generally composing my grocery list or a 'To Do' list, not actually writing anything of any substance. I'm sure from a distance, however, I looked good and thoughtful as I did so. I was pathetic, but that wasn't what I was going for, and so long as no one could see the computer screen, that was my little secret.

Despite my desire to observe her, from time to time I did get caught up with my laptop and forget everything else. So, I didn't see her approach the table beside me and start wiping it down, shortly after the young couple, who had been trying to have a quiet disagreement with one another, left. When I next looked up she was standing there, practically beside me, cleaning the table and looking in my direction, a big smile on her face. I was tongue-tied.

"You look deep in thought," she said, still smiling.

"Huh?"

Yes, that was the best I was able to come up with. What a Player, right?

"You were looking rather intently at your screen. Something interesting?"

I did my best to recover and channel my smooth. If there was a betting line in Vegas, it was safe money I was going down in flames.

"Just writing," I offered.

"Really? Book or screenplay?"

She knew the cliché. "Neither. Just my thoughts of the day. That sort of thing."

Did that sound cool? I don't know.

"Thoughts? You're a philosopher."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Well, what's your thought of the day?"

Talk about being put on the spot. I'd actually been playing solitaire and concentrating a little too intently on the game; I was tired of losing.

"The penny," I finally managed.

She looked puzzled. I don't blame her.

"They're phasing out the penny as currency. Money," I said.

Jesus, where the hell was I going with this?

"And?" she asked.

Think, THINK, you bastard.

"They say it costs more than a penny to actually make a penny. So they have to phase it out."

Again, she just looked at me. I don't think I was wowing her. Actually, the word 'boring' came readily to mind.

"Well, what about a penny for your thoughts?" I finally added.

Her puzzled expression suddenly turned into a small smile.

"What is it now? A nickel for your thoughts? I mean, you talk about inflation. The cost of someone's thoughts has risen five hundred percent, just like that. Now I've offered people a penny for their thoughts, and when they told them to me, I have to admit, I felt a little ripped off. I'd wanted a refund. Now, if I have to pay a nickel, my expectations are that much higher. I'm looking for value for my money."

Surprisingly, her small smile turned into a bigger more engaging smile. It lit up her face.

“This is what you worry about?” she asked.

“Sure. What if someone offers me a penny for my thoughts? That’s not so bad, but a nickel for my thoughts, that’s a lot of pressure. They’re going to expect me to come up with something significant, thoughtful, and meaningful. What if the only thing going through my mind at the time is, ‘How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?’”

CRAP. I was trying to engage this beautiful woman with observations about the penny and rambling incoherently about woodchucks. If that was channeling smooth, I was definitely going to die alone. Surprisingly, she laughed.

“You understand my dilemma.”

“Not really,” she said, playfully, “although, based on what you just told me, I would be looking for a refund on my nickel.”

She smiled broadly and moved away, heading back to the counter.

Me?

I was smitten.

The lines of communication were open, and while that would be enough for many men, it was going to take a little bit more before I could actually work up the nerve to ask her out, which I guess makes me more than a little pathetic, or does it? When you think about it, meeting that one person with whom you’re hoping you’ll spend the rest of your life, shouldn’t be so easy. Those guys who can talk easily to a million women, they’re just playing a numbers game, and if they get lucky they find that one woman. They’re not actually putting any thought into it. In actual fact, for the most part, they’re really just looking for a one night stand; a sexual partner and, I guess, in doing so it sometimes turns into something more. Finding true love, well, it shouldn’t be easy; it should be damned hard. When you think you’ve finally met that woman – THE woman – it should knock you back on your feet like a boxer who failed to block an incoming blow to the head. It should be intimidating and frightening. Why? Because it’s a once in a lifetime occurrence - at least hopefully it is. This woman should take your breath away. You should be living in fear of saying or doing something that would get in the way of the two of you developing a relationship. As much as you yearn for the relationship to develop, you should have a healthy fear of it slipping through your grasp.

That was how I felt sitting there pathetically in the coffee shop. My first thoughts, of course, were that she must all ready be in a relationship. Someone as stunningly beautiful as her must be. A stupid and simplistic assumption, I know, but one I was sure was right. Secondly, even if she wasn’t in a relationship, why would she want to go out with me? My parents were very supportive of me as a youth growing up, I was fairly popular in high school, so I didn’t suffer from an inferiority complex or anything like that, I just couldn’t see someone as exquisite as her wanting to have anything to do with me. Hell, after our brief exchange about the penny, my first opportunity to discover more about her than just how she looked, my fear that she wouldn’t want anything to do with me only increased. She was well spoken, engaging and had a sense of humor. That’s what I got out of our brief conversation. What did she get? The knowledge that I might be a really cheap person and that I knew too much about woodchucks?

Things changed after our brief encounter - for the better. I no longer had to sit silently in the coffee shop, sneaking furtive glances at her. Now, when I entered Koffee Krisp, she looked in my direction, smiled and greeted me with a cheerful, “Hello.” We were on a talking basis. It was wonderful, although, I knew, in the long run, not enough.

I continued my daily journey to the coffee shop, each day promising myself that today would be the day that I finally officially asked her out. And, you know what, on many of those days I actually came close to doing so. In my brief lifetime, I've watched many a movie where a character has been beating around the bush, trying to say something to another character, but just not able to get the words out. Always, in my mind, I'm screaming, 'Why don't you just say it, stupid. Just say what you want to say. How hard can it be?' It always seemed so simple; but now, in real life, I found myself unable to say what I wanted to really say. We engaged in some pleasantries and the conversation would be going well; I'd even manage to make her laugh from time to time, but when it came time to turn the conversation towards a date, the words always got stuck in my throat. I just couldn't turn that corner, and I'd kick myself all the way home for being such a coward; for not having the balls to do what needed to be done.

Now I'm being hard on myself, but you also have to look at it from my perspective. First off, rejection is never fun, and by officially asking her out I was potentially inviting it into my life; if I asked her out and she said, "No," then our present relationship, as tenuous as it was, would also change, and not for the better. My asking her out would always be out there; a point of tension between the two of us. On the other hand, we were now communicating and it was fun. I enjoyed our little talks, even though they were superficial in nature. I loved the sound of her voice; her little laugh, and her bigger laugh, when I finally managed to be wittier than I thought I could be. All of this was great, and I got to enjoy it every day, or at least every day when she was working. The more I continued to put off asking her out, the longer I got to enjoy those *moments*. I'd heard there was a study done on gamblers, and it was revealed that the real high they received from gambling was not in the winning, but in that *moment*, seconds before a card was turned over to reveal either victory or defeat - that was the real high. My conversations with her were my high; that was the *moment* before reality set in, when I asked her out and waited for any answer, which could possibly be, thanks but no thanks. If I did ask her out, I'd get an answer, and if I didn't like it, the high would be gone. As long as I procrastinated on that front, the high still existed; the possibility in my mind that she would say yes. That was my high, and while I knew I couldn't ride it forever, it was what was sustaining me through my cowardness.

I should also mention that having spoken with her and had the ice broken, I now got serious about my work. Rather than writing out lists and playing solitaire, I now set about the business of actually writing in the coffee shop.

"So, are you actually writing something, or still just working on your thought of the day?"

She took me by surprise. I'd been lost in my research notes and hadn't noticed that she had moved close and was wiping down the table next to mine; our usual little dance.

"Huh?" I said, looking up from my laptop. I needed to get a better opening line; she's going to think I'm an idiot.

Things were quiet in the coffee shop that morning. Unlike our past conversations that only lasted a few seconds, a minute if I was lucky, this time she seemed intent on talking longer, or at least I guess she did as she sat down in the chair across from me. She was looking at me intently. She was beautiful.

"You wouldn't believe how many people come in here order a coffee and open up their laptops. Are there that many writers in the world? What is everyone doing, writing about?"

"Probably surfing porn," I said.

That's right, it always impresses a girl to bring up the subject of pornography. It didn't matter whether or not she thought I was an idiot, I knew I was an idiot.

"Coffee and porn. An interesting combination," she said, smiling. "So what is it you're doing? Why is it you don't have a day job?"

"This is my day job."

"Really?"

"I'm writing a book. My second book actually." It all came out sounding a little too rushed; not as cool and confident as I would have hoped.

"Your second book? You've written a book? An actual published book?"

"*The Sinful Delusion*," I said.

She just looked at me blankly. The book had sold extremely well for my first effort; enough to get me a healthy advance on this second book, and enough to turn me into a full time writer, so I was hoping that maybe she had heard of it. I mean, that's the only cache you're going to get with a woman as a writer; the hope that she has either heard of the book you wrote or, if the Gods are smiling on you, has read the book you wrote and loved it. That's our only hope for a rock star moment as writers. Based on the look on her face, I knew this was not one of those moments. Instead of feeling like a Rolling Stone I felt like a Bay City Roller.

"I'm a journalist, or at least I was, full time. *The Sinful Delusion* is my first book; a look at, well..."

Okay, I was stuck here. Something deep down within me told me that she wasn't going to be impressed about a book on strip clubs; that she'd put two and two together and realize that to have written it I must have been a patron of strip clubs – a regular, so to speak. Talking pornography and strip clubs was definitely not the way to impress this woman.

"...actually it's boring," I finally continued. "It did very well, however, so here I am, working on my second book."

"It's boring but it sold well. Is that what you said?"

I just shook my head, 'Yes.'

She smiled. "Impressive. *The Sinful Delusion*. Never heard of it. What is it you're working on now?"

This was all very disarming and unexpected.

"It's a historical piece. Somewhat of a biography, or biographies, I guess."

She just looked at me.

"At one time, the magician and escape artist, Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, were friends. But along the way, they had a falling out. You see, Houdini, the one in the relationship who relied on subterfuge and trickery to wow his audiences, set out to discredit and reveal all psychics and mediums as frauds. On the other hand, Conan Doyle, whose claim to fame was creating a character who survived and thrived on using cold hard reasoning and facts to solve crimes, was very much into spiritual beliefs, and supportive of mediums and psychics. Their differing opinions on the matter led to a feud between the two that became very public. I'm writing a book that explores that relationship between them."

That wasn't sexy and I knew it, but it was the truth.

"I take it you've been working hard on this book. It's been keeping you up nights, consuming all your time and thoughts?" she said.

"Well, not exactly." I had to take a moment to look at her. She seemed to be talking with some purpose, but I didn't know what. It was intimidating. "Not keeping me up nights."

"But consuming all your time. Keeping you very busy," she repeated.

“No more than usual, I guess.”

“Really?”

There was now a twinkle in her eyes.

“So it’s not keeping you up at night or taking up all your time, so that begs the question, why in the hell haven’t you asked me out all ready?” she asked.

It’s true; I wasn’t the one who made the first move in our relationship. It was her - all her. And in doing so, she took me by surprise. I just looked at her in disbelief. I was tongue-tied and she knew it.

“A girl can’t wait forever. I suggest you get your act together.”

With that she stood up from the chair. I just stared at her, hoping my mouth wasn’t hanging open in a surprised or shocked expression.

She smiled broadly. “Something tells me if I paid you a nickel for your thoughts today, I’d be definitely getting my money’s worth.”

She turned and headed back towards the counter.

Damn, she was something.