

Life's Little Lottery
by Chris Zell

It's just the way my life is and I've learned to tolerate it. I'm not happy with it, but I know that you've got to play the bounces. It all started a few months ago, why don't you come back with me. Watch your head.

I was hired by this guy to write a book. He visited me at my palatial estate on the lake one day and said,

"Hey, want ten bucks?" And, being the type of person who knows the value of my abilities, I said.

"Sure, who do I have to kill?"

But it was nothing like that. I had to write yet another guide to something. This is the second book in a row that I've written containing the word 'guide' in the title. I'm hoping the next one won't have the word 'guide' in the title. But don't let that stop you from making offers (check your local listings). Like I said before, I know the value of my talents.

So, on the first day of my journey to discover just how boring this subject was, I stopped at this little restaurant to get some lunch. I sat down and started going over my notes.

"What can I get for you?" Asked the waitress. I looked up from my notes and saw her happy smiling face and said the first thing that came to my professionally trained mind.

"Ummmm." Yeah, I'm pretty proud of my schooling. After we came to a mutual decision about my lunch (she would make whatever she damn well felt and I'd better eat every last bite and tip her exceedingly well) I went back to my notes.

I read them over again and started to wonder if I really needed ten bucks all that bad. I'd spend at least six months working on this project and would be bothered by all the hassles that are involved with putting out a book like choosing artwork and layout, research and the thing that I hate the most, actually thinking of things to write. The ten bucks, which was pretty inviting at the beginning, was starting to lose its allure. As a matter of fact, as the project came to a close and the final accounting was done, it turned out that I was paid .0006 cents a word. I'm glad I didn't use any that were tough to spell.

As I ate lunch, my new friend (I make friends fast, basically I'm a lot like a dog, once you feed me it's tough to get rid of me), who told me her name was Maureen, asked what I was doing. I think she was worried that I was from the Board of Health. When I put her at ease by telling her that I was hired to write a book, she showed more enthusiasm for the project than I've had for anything in my entire life. It took me a few minutes to figure out why she was so happy but I finally figured it out: she didn't have to write the damn thing. She didn't have to spend endless hours slaving over a hot keyboard. Or have to kick start her brain into conjugating another sentence. But mainly she wouldn't have to put up with the worst aspect of writing as far as I'm

concerned, getting all that ink off her hands at the end of the day. Geez, do I have a tough existence or what?

We talked for a while, her enthusiasm slowly winning me over. Either that or her sing song voice and slight Scottish accent was disorienting me. But by the end of her long list of reasons why I should write the book (Reason 87: Ten bucks is ten bucks), she'd given me the push I needed to actually start the project. And that push was the fear that if I didn't write the book she'd track me down and kill me. As a matter of fact, that was Reason 46. I thanked her for her good wishes and veiled threats and as I was almost out the door she said,

"Mention me in your book." I smiled and turned around to get the spelling of her last name just as she said, "Or I'll pull a Reason 46 on you." Well, who could resist a fan like that? I wrote down her last name and went about the ordeal of writing the thing.

Soon after I started I found myself getting into the groove of writing. What that means is I'd follow a set routine that would start when I'd get up at about four in the afternoon, watch The Flintstones (that Betty is quite a fox) then take a nap. One day my roommate came in with a bunch of his friends who saw me sitting there and asked Bill what I was doing.

"He says he's working, but it sure looks a lot like staring off into space to me." OK, so maybe to the untrained eye it looks like I'm not doing anything. But I can tell you, as a professional writer, when I'm sitting there staring at the paneling, I'm contemplating my next journalistic hurdle. Or trying to remember where I put the TV Guide.

Part of the writing rut, I mean groove, writing groove that I was in contained visiting Maureen about once a week to have lunch. She'd order for me, chastise me for not finishing the book ("I'm not going to wait much longer," was her usual greeting), and always make me want to get back to writing. I'd want to get back to the book because she made sure that Reason 46 was never far from my thoughts. One reason for that is she actually had an entree named Reason 46 added to the menu. Death threats can keep you focused, I'll vouch for that.

Sometime during these visits we added a little twist to the proceedings. When I was paying my bill, for reasons I still don't remember (but I'm positive that it was Maureen's idea), I started to buy a couple of instant lottery tickets and we'd each scratch one. I don't play the lottery and am pretty much gambling illiterate. The first time I tried to scratch one I couldn't get the rubbery gold paint off the ticket. I was doing a perfect Rain Man impersonation, looking at the quarter like it was defective (hey, I know what you're thinking 'it wasn't the quarter that was defective, you putz.' Listen you, go back to your reading and leave the funny remarks to me, OK?).

"Maureen, my quarter's broken." Let me give you some advice, don't use phrases like that in public places. People look at you like your crazed. Just some advice.

Maureen gently took my hand and deftly guided it across the card taking the paint with it. I was in awe. It took me a few times, but I can now do it almost all by myself. Sure, she still has to help me clean up the rough spots, but I'm getting quite good at it. I am. Really.

She also gave me some tips on proper gambling etiquette. Little things that a neophyte like me never would have known, things like:

If Person A is of the male persuasion (in this case, me) and he buys a ticket for Person B of the female persuasion (in this case, Maureen) and Person B's ticket hits, she doesn't have to split the winnings with Person A. But, if Person A's ticket hits, because he did the purchasing, he has to split, 50/50 of course, with Person B.

Now I never would have known that. But if you think about it, that rule does parallel life pretty accurately.

About the tenth time we went through this routine one thing struck me as odd. Maureen won something every single time. Only a dollar or two, but every damn time. Hey Chris, you may be saying to yourself, what about you? How much did you win? Well, thanks for bringing this up, in the entire time we've been doing this I haven't won anything, not even a free pen. But, it wasn't all a loss, I did gain knowledge and camaraderie that comes from losing money.

Just when I feel like I'm getting the hang of this whole scenario, Maureen decides that next time she'll buy the tickets. I thought that was a nice gesture and told her I'd see her in a few days.

After a meeting to finalize the layout and cover of the book, I stopped by to give Maureen the semi-good news (only the bound book delivered on horse back would be real good news to Maureen) and have a snack. As usual it was delicious and we started to tally up the bill.

"And don't forget the tickets." I say spending the last of my book advance.

"Chris, remember I said that I'd buy this time." I said fine as she reached for the first aid kit they keep the tickets in. Maureen rummages through until she picks out the exact tickets she wants. Handing one to me she reminds me of another law of the lottery,

"You know," she says pulling a quarter out of her pocket. "The etiquette, in cases like this where the female purchases the ticket, is that she doesn't have to share but, because it was a gift, the male is honor bound to split. But this time the split is 70/30 in favor of the female." Well, I've never been honor bound before and I'm pretty happy about that. But, as I sat there thinking, Maureen could be pulling a fast one on me.

I finished that thought and looked up and Maureen gives me her best innocent smile and eye twinkle (up until that very moment I had never actually seen anyones eyes twinkle, quite a Kodak moment). I knew that it was just my personal paranoia. Maureen would never mislead me. But there were two guys at the end of the bar pointing at me and laughing. Hmmm, just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean I'm not being snookered.

But I really didn't feel I had any worries. I hadn't won anything up to this point and I didn't think that streak would change. And, wouldn't you know it, I was right. But this card really insulted me. Instead of tantalizing me with dollar amounts that I never had a shot at winning, this card spelled out:

Hang it up, loser.

I can read the writing on the wall. You don't have to beat me over the head with a warm squash. As I started to tear up the last scratch card that I would ever let tease me, Maureen cried,

"I won."

"Yeah so, what else is new?" I answer still stinging from being insulted by the entire state lottery system. "How much did you win this time?"

"Five." Not bad, I think. I buy cards for her dozens of times and the best I can do is two dollars. She buys one for herself and wins five. There's just no justice in this world.

"Hey," I smile trying to build up any enthusiasm. I'm not having any luck, but you've got to give me credit for trying. "Five bucks, not bad."

"No Chris, five million dollars."

"Oh." If enthusiasm is contagious, no one was in danger of catching anything that night. But I'm going to try. Hey, she's now a millionaire and, you know, I think I like her even more. "Fantastic, we should celebrate." But before my sentence was finished Maureen had handed in her resignation letter (she must have kept it typed in her pocket just waiting for this moment) and was on her way to the airport.

"Toodles."

That was the last time I ever spoke to Maureen. I did see her once after that on 'The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.' It seems that she'd purchased an island off the Scottish coast, turned it into a gambling mecca and was now the centerpiece of the jet set. And I'm happy to say that she remembered me. As her interview was coming to a close she smiled into the camera and said,

"Chris, purchased your book, loved it. Would have loved it more if I didn't have to wait so long."