

Ripple

by J. Brosinski

So this is what it feels like to stare death in the face. I've always heard that your life flashes before your eyes, but with me it was different. I saw the faces of family and my friends and then I saw "his life"; the Life of the man that I inadvertently ruined. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I wanted those words to come out of my mouth but my brain was too scared to send the proper signal. Instead, I looked down the barrel of his gun and the only words that I could produce were, "Please don't kill me".

I saw his lips move in response to my plea but my ears had turned semi-deaf. I heard a human voice but couldn't quite make out what it was saying. The gun was still pointing at my head so I struggled to find something else to say to him. I had to convince him that my life was worth sparing. During the search for the right words, my mind transported me back to the beginning of the ripple which landed me into this deadly predicament.

The clock read 10:42 when I went to bed. Tomorrow was an important day, my first day of work, so I decided to turn in early. Usually your first real job is crap, but not mine. Somehow, I managed to land a job at the most coveted company in Apple Valley. rLife, an insurance company, really knew how to take care of their employees with decent pay, health and dental insurance, stock options, and lots of vacation time. Their motto is "Happy employees make happy customers". As simple as that sounds, it really worked.

I'm almost too excited to sleep but I need to be fit for my first day. I must have drifted off because I was jerked awake by a thumping noise coming from my wall. My clock was slightly blurry and read 12:08. "Thump, Thump, Thump". It drove me mad! Just when I'd decided to get out of bed, the thumping stopped. 'Hallelujah' I thought and tried to go back to sleep. It wasn't long before I heard "Thump, Thump, Thump" again. I quickly got out of bed, grabbed

my robe, and went to bang on my neighbors door. Kaler opened the door with a tennis ball in his hand.

“Hi, I’m Trent from next door” I said trying to be as polite as possible.

“I know who you are.”

“Are you bouncing a ball off the wall? It makes a really loud thumping noise and I really need to get some sleep.”

“That wasn’t me.”

“Are you sure? I mean, you *are* holding a ball.” He gave me the meanest look and shut the door in my face.

I went back to my apartment and threw myself on the bed. “Please dear God let him stop bouncing that ball off the wall” I prayed.

“Thump, Thump, Thump”

“Thanks for listening, God” I said annoyed with the world.

With nothing left to do, I put my pillow over my head.

Despite the lack of sleep, my first day of work was a success. I came home tired, but happy and feeling proud of myself. As I passed Kaler’s door, I got a whiff of his stinky shoes which he kept outside his apartment door. Inspiration struck and in that moment I decided to get back at him. If I had known then what I know now, I would have simply kept walking but there was no way for me to foresee the havoc my actions would later unleash. . .

Kaler tip toed passed his boss’s cubical hoping not to be noticed. He was relieved when he was sitting at his desk. As an editor for the local newspaper, Apple Valley News, there was always a big pile of work waiting for him. He began his work thinking that he was off the hook until his boss, Mr. Conner, entered his personal space twenty minutes later. Even before Mr. Connor opened his mouth, Kaler knew their conversation would end badly.

“You’re late again, Kaler; 45 minutes to be exact.”

“I was only 30 minutes late.”

“Only?”

“You know what I mean.”

Mr. Connor noticed Kaler’s shoes. “Okay, I’ll bite. What’s with the house slippers?”

“I couldn’t find my shoe and that’s why I’m late.”

“Are you telling me that you only own one pair of shoes?”

“As of now, I suppose I do. If you count these house shoes as *shoes*” Kaler pointed to his fuzzy navy slippers.

Mr. Connor shrugged his shoulders. “I’m sorry to do this to you Kaler, but I warned you too many times about being late. You can stay the rest of the day if you want, but as of tomorrow you don’t work here any more.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! Come on Mr. Connor, don’t be like that. I need this job.”

“Kaler don’t beg, it’s degrading. I’ll give you a good letter of recommendation but that’s all I can do.” He patted Kaler on the shoulder before leaving.

Kaler looked at the pile of work on his desk. ‘Why should I do any of this now’ he thought. He packed his personal belongings which included: a coffee cup, reference books, a big cozy sweater, a few odd knick knacks, and a framed picture of his girlfriend, Marcy.

Four months past... then five months. This was the sixth month that Kaler was job hunting.

Since he had lost his job, he lived in his sweat clothes and hardly left the apartment building. He was removing a pile of bills from his mailbox in the apartment lobby when Trent walked in, on his way home from work, wearing a suit and tie.

“Hello” said Trent out of obligation.

“Hi” Kaler responded half rolling his eyes.

Trent quickly checked his mailbox and continued walking toward his apartment. Kaler lingered at the mailbox sorting through his mail.

“Son of a fucking bitch!” Kaler suddenly yelled. His profanity echoed through the lobby reaching Trent’s ears. He stopped and looked back but was too far away to see what Kaler was holding in his hands. It was obviously bad news.

Kaler just stood there re-reading the letter. Was he really holding an eviction notice? He knew that he was a bit behind with his rent but an eviction notice? Can they really do that? His world was spinning too fast and he was bouncing off the hard concrete of reality.

There was a sinking feeling in Kaler’s stomach. He knew that finding another apartment with his current income of zero dollars was *not* going to happen. There were only two options for him; the second being his last resort. As he walked closer to the phone his stomach twisted and turned. He felt nauseous but he forced himself to pick up the phone and dial her number. It was ringing...

“Hello” a warm voice answered.

“Hi Marcy. It’s me, Kaler.”

“What do you want?” The warm voice turned to ice.

“What do you mean? Can’t I call my girlfriend?”

“Your girlfriend? Kaler, I haven’t heard from you in two months. I even left a few messages that you never returned.”

“You know I’ve lost my job. I didn’t have any money to take you out. I was embarrassed so I didn’t call you.”

“Do you really think I’m that shallow?”

“Look, I’m sorry. I know that I’ve messed up by not calling but if you could forgive me. I really need your help. I was wondering if I could stay with you for a while until I get back on my feet.”

Marcy hesitated before answering. Kaler didn't interrupt. He held his breath hoping to hear a favorable answer.

"Kaler, I'm sorry but I've already moved on. I'm dating someone and I really like him. If I let you move in with me I'd only be sending him mixed signals." Her answer stabbed him in the heart.

"Oh... I understand. I guess this is goodbye then."

"Goodbye, Kaler" said Marcy with a quivering voice.

He hung up the phone. His emotional pain was so severe that it materialized itself with physical symptoms. He ran to the bathroom and threw up. When he was done, he found himself too weak to stand up so he laid on the bathroom floor and wept.

It was a busy Saturday afternoon. Kaler's mom was helping him pack his belongings into large cardboard boxes.

"Too bad that you have to move out. I've always thought this apartment was lovely. I don't know what my friends will think now that you're moving back in with me."

Kaler rolled his eyes. "It's just a temporary arrangement, Ma, until I get back on my feet."

"You should have tried harder to keep your job. You know we're going through a recession. The new President is doing everything he can to dig us out, but he said it's going to take time. The last President made such a mess of the economy. Anyhow, my point is, you should have known better."

"Ma, it wasn't my fault."

"No, it's never your fault..." She continued rambling. Kaler tuned out and concentrated on packing. Every now and then he would look at her and nod without having heard a word she said. That trick he learned ages ago during his childhood.

Packing didn't take that long because Kaler didn't have a lot of stuff. He began carrying the boxes down the stairs to the moving van which his mother had rented. Trent passed him on his way up with two bags of groceries in his arms. There were no exchanges of acknowledgement. The two worked diligently on getting their tasks done as quickly as possible. Both of their apartment doors were left wide open and Kaler glanced into Trent's apartment as he walked passed. His eyes caught of glimpse of something that he thought belonged to him and since Trent was down the stairs retrieving more groceries, he went closer to get a better look. Kaler could hardly believe his eyes. 'Why would he do this to me' he thought. All the emotions were drained out of him and he was left hollow. Nothing made any sense.

"Ma, I can finish up here by myself. There's only a few boxes left. Why don't you drive the van home. The rest of the boxes can fit in my car."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, Ma. Thanks so much for helping." Kaler gave his mother a rare hug which startled her.

"Are you feeling Okay?"

"What? Can't I give my mother a hug?"

"Don't worry, Kaler, it'll all work itself out. See you in a bit."

Kaler was the opposite of a pack rat. He threw away things immediately if they were no longer needed or broken, but he kept the shoe. He was holding it in his left hand.

"Why shouldn't I kill you?" Trent's ears were now fully functional.

"I didn't mean for any of this to happen. My intention was just to annoy you, not to destroy your life." He was in tears.

"You know, if you had stolen both shoes, I wouldn't have wasted time looking for them because it would have been clear that someone took them." Kaler was speaking in monotone.

"I'm really sorry. I don't know what I was thinking" sobbed Trent.

“By taking one shoe, you took away my job, my apartment, my girlfriend and, now that I have to live with my mother, my freedom.” Kaler paused before continuing.

“You took away my life but I will not take yours. Instead, I’m going to change it” having said that, he put the gun in his mouth.

“No! No! Please don’t!” Trent pleaded frantically.

There was a loud bang. Trent was splattered with Kaler’s blood. His ears went deaf once again and he fell to his knees and bawled. He was left alone to his own conscience and his soul was in agony. He wished that Kaler had killed him; it would have hurt much less. He was now permanently scarred and forced to carry around the guilt of having destroyed another man’s life.

“It all seemed so innocent” he cried.