

LESSONS IN LIFE

by Kevin Grant

Shortlisted in the “PEP Short Story Competition”

When I woke up, I heard something that sounded like cracking ice. Waking is weird! Where did *that* impression come from? There wasn't ice here during the last Ice Age.

I slitted my eyes against the glare that filtered through the curtains. Though alarm had barely rung, sweat already sheened my skin and dampened the sheets. I lost the thought in the mundane round of coffee, shower, shave and dressing for work.

Walking from the station to the office, a tattered derelict stepped in my way.

"I'm here to give you life." His piercing eyes held me immobile.

I fumbled for a note.

“Keep your money. It can't buy anything of value.”

He placed a grimy palm on my chest.

“Until you learn to truly live, you'll live to repeat the lesson.”

I knocked his hand aside, stepped round him and made for the office, brushing his marks from my shirt.

Filthy bum! Who did he think he was?

The security guard greeted me with his usual enthusiasm. I smiled and waved, but didn't bother to look his way.

Helen was already at her desk. She gave me today's itinerary and smiled. Something was wrong – her hair was slightly out of place, her mouth was hard and her eyes bleak. I caught the white against her tan where her wedding ring had been.

I let it go. Problems at home have no place at work.

It was one of those long, grinding days: decisions to make; papers to sign. Yet late that evening, I wondered what I had achieved.

Walking to the station, screams pierced the traffic hubbub. In the gloom of an alley, a dark figure forced another to the ground, while others stood around. An arm came back. There was the thud of flesh on flesh. The woman's screams abruptly ceased.

Don't get involved! It's not your problem! Keep walking!

Too late! Footsteps thundered from the alley. I ran. In moments, I stopped – wheezing. Hands grabbed my jacket and dragged me back into the alley that now echoed to my screams.

They hoisted me into an ice machine. The lid dropped. They leaned on it, forcing me into the ice. The lid clicked home. I pounded on the walls, but the insulation muffled my hardest blows to dull thumps. They laughed, fading into the distance.

Caught between lid and ice, I could only lie, shivering, while the ice below melted and a chute clattered fresh blocks around me. The cold was bad enough, but the darkness was a living death. My toes and fingers achingly froze, then burned and slowly numbed. The darkness grew and engulfed me.

A maintenance man found me. The light of the opening lid lanced into my unmoving eyes. I saw him distorted through the sheet of ice over my face. I saw his horror. I saw him take chisel and hammer to free me, as my sight greyed into blackness...

When I woke up, I heard something that sounded like cracking ice...

Word count: 499