

Ripple

Colleen Sayre

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For my brother Brad Sayre

*The only person I know who has truly lived his dream
(and survived to tell about it).*

With much love and admiration.

Ripples moved through the earth. Waves of turgid magma meandered out of sync. Time, that amorphous thing that doesn't exist except in man's perception, was bending, changing, taking on a life of its own, shifting from wave to particle and back again, feeling the sensation of the shift, experiencing the oohs and aahs of existence. Time was basking in its glorious existence, jumping for joy, skipping in its exuberance, dancing to a new rhythm. Time was finding itself in the now, creating in the moment with no past and no future. Just this instant. At random. In its own time.

Chapter 1

Aftershocks don't always come immediately after an earthquake. Sometimes it takes days for the earth to finish its shudder and the last little quivers to flow through the layers of rock, inching their way farther and farther from the epicenter. Occasionally, the tremors take on a life of their own, cascading in a ripple to gather force, collecting debris and detritus, moving like an underground tsunami, ebbing and flowing with the rhythm of the earth it moves through, following its own path along fault lines unseen and unknown.

Maureen Shelley thought her life was like that, shifting along unseen fault lines, cracking and breaking away in huge chunks while also wearing away surreptitiously layer by layer. She was afraid

she would wake up one morning to find that she had worn away in the night, dissolved between the sheets into a layer of fine silt. Just reward, she thought. She would become the sand in someone else's crack, the pain in the ass for a change. Oyster-like, that person would probably be able to turn that sand into a pearl and she'd find that she had become, once again, exactly what she was in this incarnation: an undiscovered pearl trapped in shit. Would her life ever change?

The snooze alarm went off again and Maureen rolled over and smacked the clock a good one. The clock sat firm but the glass of water she kept on the nightstand tipped and spilled dust-flecked water across the paperback she'd borrowed from her sister, the brief she'd promised her boss she'd edit, and a half-eaten chocolate cupcake. Maureen covered her head with her pillow and sighed. If she didn't know for sure it was Thursday, she'd have sworn it was Monday. Thursday! Shit! She was late. She'd forgotten about meeting Sharon for breakfast. In one fluid motion (well, not quite fluid, more the consistency of herky-jerky jello), Maureen sprang from her bed, grabbed her cell phone, and landed on the toilet seat dialing Sharon's number.

"Don't even say it," Sharon answered on the third ring.

"I can be there in thirty minutes," Maureen said loudly while trying to pee as quietly as possible so her sister wouldn't know she was calling from the bathroom.

"Don't bother," Sharon said in that breathless tone Maureen hated. "I have to be at work by eight this morning. Besides, I've already ordered . . . hold on a second Moe . . . thanks, yes, I'd love more coffee . . . and a little more cream . . . thanks. Okay, Moe, as I said, don't bother by the time you get here, I'll be gone Bruiser's in the car I have to drop him at the vet and then pick up Derek's dry cleaning . . ."

"Enough!" Moe said. "I get it. Busy morning." She snapped her cell phone shut and smiled. Dodged another bullet, she thought. This might not be a bad day after all.

Vanessa was waiting for Moe in the lobby of the Andright Building. "I thought you were going to be late this morning?" she asked in that annoying ends-every-statement-with-a-question lilt in her voice that drove Moe nuts.

"Then why are you down here waiting for me?" Moe replied, trying for the same tone.

"I got coffee at the corner and if I go upstairs with this in my hand, Cheryl will ask why I didn't get her one," Vanessa said, chugging hot coffee as she and Moe walked toward the elevator. "I can't afford to buy her coffee every morning. And the last time I did, she asked why I didn't think to bring her a muffin!"

"Then you walk in, coffee in hand, and tell her to fuck off and buy her own coffee," Moe said as they boarded the car and both reached for the eleven.

"I couldn't say that," Vanessa laughed. "She'd fire me!"

“And you’d get a better job with a better boss and make more money and be happier. And the downside of that would be . . .?”

“I’d miss you!” Vanessa said and leaned into Moe. “You’re what keeps me coming into this crappy place every day, you know?”

“You just like to watch me get yelled at, is what you mean.” Moe had been walking the fine line between good and bad employee for a long time. She’d found that at Alster, Rolf, Fisher & Fisher, there was a very, very slim middle ground: you were either an exemplary employee or you sucked. She happened to be one of those very few people who could suck in such exemplary ways that the brethren could never quite tell where she stood in their narrow appraisal. Was she wholly stupid or quirkily brilliant? They couldn’t decide, but their clients loved, loved, loved her and she was fast, efficient, and always ready for a challenge. Well, almost always.

The Fisher brothers’ partner Alistair Alster had once asked Moe out for cocktails and she’d politely declined. It seemed he was one challenge for which even she could muster no excitement. And the feeling was mutual, or at least that was Alster’s story and he would stick to it to his dying day.

“Gotta run,” Vanessa said, turning into her office.

“See ya!” Moe pulled the tail of her untucked shirt down over her wrinkled khakis, smoothing both as she walked toward her own office. Her excuse for wearing khakis today would be that the files in the

back office needed attention and she couldn't see wearing dress clothes for grunt work. It had worked before and would keep her out of client conferences today while she worked on the brief due on Friday. She waved at the myriad smiling faces, haggard faces, tired faces that turned in her direction as she walked the length of the glass-lined hallway to the very end. Howard Fisher's office sat at the corner, of course, and her office across the hall was, at least, a real office--sans windows--and not an allotment in the cube farm.

Sandra from down the hall, a new girl working for a junior associate, paused in the doorway just as Moe flipped on her computer. "Henry from tech support was looking for you. Your new laptop's ready."

"Cool!" Moe said and sat down wearily.

"He says he's been trying to catch you for days."

"Jeez, it's not even eight o'clock and I'm wrecked."

"Big night?" Sandra asked, crossing her arms. Moe couldn't quite tell if this one was a nice girl floundering for a friend or a gossip gathering fodder for the lunchroom.

"Editing briefs is not what I'd call a big night," Moe said and laughed. "Thanks for letting me know about the laptop. I'll let Henry know I'm in. Better yet, I'll run over before lunch and pick it up, save him a trip."

Sandra left and Moe shifted into work mode. She checked email, read her horoscope, and caught up on the news banners on her homepage. Now thoroughly ready for the day, she clicked into the server and pulled up her file of assignments. She was finding it harder and harder to find the thrill in her job. She'd worked for several large law firms, a few smaller teams, and occasionally for a lone ranger who didn't play well with others. Alster, Rolf, Fisher & Fisher were at least middling to good attorneys who handled worthy cases and once in a while, really important cases. But Moe was finding her work veering away from the important stuff and leaning more toward the client control stuff which she was good at but not happy to be stuck with.

Not everyone could talk a client down from an hysterical high, but Moe seemed to have that knack and her fellow employees knew it. She could sometimes feel it moving in her direction, that sense of urgency when the voices leaking from the conference room became shrill and the associates began milling around in the hallway, watching the shadows dance behind frosted glass. It would ooze down the hallway, turn the corner and waft into her office like a green fog calling her name.

Moe got up and closed her door. She'd finish this brief, pick up her new laptop, take a long lunch, and then hide the rest of the day.

Two-thirty in the afternoon rolled around and Moe was still head down, plugged into the brief. She'd missed Vanessa's tap on her door mid-morning,

the knock-down, drag out dissolution mediation in the conference room, and the birthday-cake-lunch two doors down. Suddenly aware that she needed water, Moe shrugged off the kink in her neck and ache in her back and headed for the water cooler in the kitchen. Holding down the little blue button as she filled her favorite office mug with a black lab on the side, Moe watched the clock on the microwave blink 2:37.

Now this was one of Moe's pet peeves: blinking clocks on radios, microwaves, VCRs. Someone had obviously left the timer on which meant that someone else would have to punch reset and then set the timer all over again. Wasted motion, Moe thought.

She took a deep drink from her mug and walked to the microwave. When she punched the reset button, it stopped blinking but continued to read 2:37. Then 2:38. Moe stared, perplexed. What time is it? Moe didn't wear a watch, never had. Her internal clock was pretty damn good and she almost always knew what time it was, give or take a few minutes—especially right after the switch to daylight savings time. If it was 2:38, now 2:39, that meant she'd been in her office six and a half hours with no break, no lunch, no interruptions. That couldn't be right. That never happened. That *couldn't* happen, not at ARF&F. Phone calls were constant. There was always someone knocking on her door, barging in for a quick favor, distracting her from getting her work done so

she could go home on time. Six and half hours would be a record. Hell, thirty minutes would be a record!

And where was everyone? Why wasn't she fighting her way to the water cooler? It was Thursday, after all, the day after some big show aired on TV (which was every day this time of year) and there were always at least two or three filing clerks or secretaries hanging around the kitchen talking cars or clothes or comparing notes on something.

Moe took her mug of water and walked back toward her office. There were people in the conference room, people working at their desks, all diligently and quietly focused on whatever they were doing. *Hmmmm*, Moe thought skeptically. Maybe this is just one of those rare days when everything just slows down and work actually gets done.

The door to Howard's office was closed so she tiptoed back to her office and pushed her own door closed. She drained the mug, sat it on the corner of the desk and sank back down into the brief. Funny, for a second it looked like she was on the same page she'd read earlier in the day, about eight o'clock that morning. For the next four hours, Moe lost herself in the pages on her computer screen. She surfaced for a very brief moment, thinking it was almost time to pack it in. With a little luck, she'd be home in time to . . .

Sixteen hours later, Moe finished that thought.
Eat.

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Thanks for reading!