

**THE
TERMINATION
OF
ALEK
KRASINSKI**

JAMES McMILLAN

**ONE
SHOT**



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I

There is not a working person over the age of thirty who is not aware that jobs come and go. One gets them and one leaves them, either of one's own will or otherwise: either because one finds something better—more attuned to one's personality, or paying more money—or because one gets fired from them. Depending on how desperately one needs income, or liked or felt secure in the job from which one has been fired, the shock or anger at losing it is proportionate; but generally speaking, whatever one's emotions, the necessity of having to make a living leaves one little leisure to obsess over one's loss. As always the rent will be due on the first of the month, and the electric bill, the gas bill, the telephone bill are unstoppably on their way. When the immediate future is so pressing, one cannot spend more than a few days wallowing in stagnant anger and disappointment.

For the last thirty years Alek Krasinski had been in a different and better case. He was the superintendent of an apartment building in New York City; in particular, in Forest Hills, a nice area of Queens characterized by clean streets, trendy shops, several bars, and two movies houses, all within easy walking distance. He had held this position for thirty years so that it might be said he had in large part grown up with it. Certainly the job had become an essential part of his identity. He was proud of his role. It carried a certain prestige, albeit of a very circumscribed sort, that is to say, a place of respect among the three hundred or so persons who occupied its

hundred apartments; although, no doubt, the tenants were nice to him out of self-interest because they might need him one day to fix something in their apartments. On the whole he had been dutifully responsive in this respect, never keeping anyone waiting too long when they requested his services. He would show up at their apartment with his tools and a cheerful, eager, friendly demeanor, addressing them formally and happily as he dutifully did whatever needed to be done;—and just as happily pocketing the tips which were discreetly passed into his hand with a grateful, “Thanks!” These little jobs were done consistently throughout the year, and the tips added up to thousands of dollars. And of course at Christmas most of the tenants handed him envelopes filled with cards sandwiching cash, amounting to thousands of dollars more, all of it tax-free.

Though there could be intensely busy days, as, for instance, when several apartments at once had problems, or a large water pipe broke, it was on the whole an easy, slow-paced job in which he spent most of the time doing as he pleased. He would spend hours every day away from the building, either shopping or visiting friends. Several days a week throughout the summer he took off whole afternoons to play tennis. But of all the perquisites associated with his job, the main one was his free two-bedroom apartment on the ground floor. Freed from this major expense, which soaked up the majority of most peoples’ incomes, he had been able to treat himself and his wife very well. He had been able to buy expensive furniture, high-priced electronics, two cars (free parking for both of them in the lot behind the building), and go on yearly vacations. He had also been able to

save a lot, to make investments, and build up personal wealth in a way impossible for people whose money had mostly to go to their landlords. After thirty of saving and investments he might have been considered a fairly wealthy man. For him the streets of America had indeed been paved with gold.

For Alek Krasinski was an immigrant from Poland. Forty years earlier he had come to the country when he was twenty-four years old and with no more than three-hundred American dollars in his pockets and the address of a second cousin whom he stayed with for two months. He had gotten a job quickly as the assistant to a plumber, and he had learned that trade. Then he had gone to work as a porter for a few high-rise apartment buildings in Manhattan, and watched the wealthy and privileged sweep in and out polished marble lobbies on their way to or from expensive restaurants or cultural events;—not envying but admiring them, and hoping that one day he might share in their good fortune. For eight years he worked in this capacity to several superintendents and picked up the skills of painting, carpentry, plumbing, tilework; and so became the handyman a superintendent has to be. During that time he also met his wife, Erika, a Polish immigrant whom he had met through friends. When they married he was thirty-one and she was twenty-six.

He had not gone to school to learn English. He was one of those deluded people who think that learning a language is only a matter of time, of imbibing it from those around oneself;—which is possible when one is a child and has an absorbent and easily impressionable mind, but not at all possible to the less-receptive mind of

adulthood, and in his case the less so because the majority of the Americans he came into contact with spoke slangy ungrammatical English. Thus over the years he picked up enough of the language to be conversational, though with a thick Polish accent and often fumbling for the right word. He and Erika spoke Polish at home, which further prevented his becoming proficient in his adopted tongue. Nevertheless he prided himself in it because he had committed to memory several short English poems, and he also knew the names of several important English writers—though he had never read any of their works because that would have required time and effort.

After ten years he became a citizen. Why not? He had come to feel American. The life of the country had become his own. NFL football, Fourth of July and fireworks, Thanksgiving and its turkey, Christmas at Rockefeller Center, Labor Day and barbecues, Democrats and Republicans, the notions of civil rights, of personal freedom, of “diversity”:—they had all become a part of his vocabulary, of his thoughts, of his conversation, and consequently of his personal identity. This had become so much the case that once, while on a two-week vacation during which he had visited relatives in Poland, he had looked about him and felt strangely and uncomfortably out of place, and had thought, “I can’t wait to get back home.” It was America which had given him a life happy, peaceful, respectable, and well-off.

—And then he got fired.

It was all Mrs. Brushella’s fault. The old lady, who never opened her mouth but to complain about something, had asked him to come up to her apartment to fix a leak. She had been asking him to do so for the last

three months. He had held off on it for two reasons: first, because he wanted to avoid her unpleasant personality, and second because she had cried wolf plenty of times before about things which, when he saw them for himself, were quite minor. She had a leak? Well, a few drops of water falling from the kitchen sink every day was hardly something to worry about. When he finally got there he discovered that it was worse than an occasional drop; it was a steady trickle amounting to ten gallons a day; nevertheless it was only a matter of changing out a rubber washer in the valve beneath the faucet handle. As he did so, Mrs. Brucella stood over him like a watchful hen, or rather like a caviling harridan. She was a thin woman of seventy years old, a widow of ten years, and a creature whose years-long dissatisfactions with her life had turned down the outer edges of her mouth into a permanent expression of disgust.

“What took you so long to get here?” she demanded.

“Oh, I’ve been a little busy,” Alek said, and began working.

“You should have been here the first day I asked you—the first day!” she said. “Instead I’ve got to wait three months? That’s ridiculous!”

“Well ... things came up—”

“Came up nothing! What have you been so busy with for three months—three whole months—that you can’t take two minutes to come up and look at a sink? It’s been leaking all this while! Look at it! Leaking and leaking, just using up water day and night for three months!”

“Yes, yes, well .. I’m here, I’ll fix it now ... I’ve just been a little busy—”

“Busy! Busy with what? Yeah, I know what you’re busy with—playing tennis! Think I haven’t seen you going out to play tennis, dressed up in your little white shorts and carrying that stupid racket? I’ve seen it! Everyone’s seen it. You think people don’t know what’s going on? And during the weekday when you’re supposed to be working! But you don’t care, do you. You don’t care. That’s why this building is going to pot. Everything is so dirty now. The floors in the hallways, in the lobby—it’s all so filthy, even black in the corners! Don’t you see it? What’s wrong with you? Let me tell you something,” she continued, her cranky voice growing louder, more vituperative, as she stood close to him, her hands on her hips and often shaking her head with an expression of disgust, “I’ve lived in this building a long time—way before *you* ever got here—and I can tell you that it never used to be this way. No sir! We used to have a good superintendent before you got here. He kept things in order. He didn’t wait around to do things. He didn’t take off to play tennis when things had to be done. He would *never* have never allowed the building to get so filthy! You know what your problem is? You’re lazy! That’s what it is. You’re a lazy man! You don’t care anymore. You don’t want to work anymore. You just want to take it easy all day, and play games. Well, it ain’t right. People pay a lot of money to live here, and they have a right to live in a nice place instead of the pig pen that you’ve turned it into!”

She went on and on. Alek largely held his peace as he went about fixing the leak, unscrewing the knob of the faucet, then with a wrench removing the valve beneath and finding the rubber gasket worn and proceeding to re-