

A Special Assignment

by Todd Maupin

All told, it was a day like most others for Vick. The extra time devoted to cleaning up his spilled coffee catastrophe had delayed his departure by a few costly minutes which meant especially brutal traffic. As per usual, there was no catalyst for the litany of accidents and random lulls, the incompatible array of slow and fast drivers each reacting diversely, enhancing their own frustration just as much as that of their counterparts at the other end of the speed spectrum. Vick's optimism typically lasted until he reached the on ramp. If this were his last day on Earth, would he have felt fulfilled if Death's angel came for him, to dispatch him?

Angela had been paid handsomely to complete her assignment before the end of the day. The close of business, or COB as cobbled together in an acrimonious acronym. Even the most open-minded people like closure. That extra monetary motivation, along with maintaining her record, rating, and reputation were all of the ingredients necessary to fulfill the task as specified. She would make a killing. As always, her employer had meticulously planned and drawn out the logistics for her; just needing her to bring it all to fruition. No need to sweat the details and she could leave the sweating bullets to Megadeth. Sometimes she reflected on the gravity of her actions. Was her work life changing or life ending?

Not the end of the world. Traffic delays compounded his late start, he realized as he turned onto the final approach; en route he had effectively tuned out whatever chatter that was tuned in on Sirius radio. Had Timothy Leary been amongst the gridlock on I-310 that day, he would have just shrugged while he acidly glared at someone. Vick would be the victor; his slightly late arrival was small enough to be rounded into 8 hours. Was there a rounder number than eight? Vick was a well-rounded guy after all, he thought, patting his gut.

Angela's gut feeling had success in her sights. She verified her appearance in the mirror one final time, brushing out some askance crosshairs. Her grandmother used to say that she was as smart as a pistol; if only she could see her now. Angela's jumpsuit was drab but fit her well, a slimming overlay to her tall and slender figure. Whenever she met someone new, inevitably, her height was mentioned first. She used to joke that she had been courted by the basketball teams at Connecticut and Tennessee but she had declined because she did not want to put all of her eggs in one basket.

Weekdays bask in their own vainglorious mundanities, and this one was even dragging more than most. He had filled his mug - twice - at the coffee mess, and had been careful not to repeat the mess he had made at home. From caffeinated grounds, he continued on to the rest of his rounds, ducking his head into his boss's office and showing his diligent mug as just a subtle reminder of his existence, chatting a bit with his colleagues, checking the kitchenettes for free food, all of the things he did each day to stave off beginning his actual work. Looking at his watch, the wall clock, and the clock in the system tray on his monitor, he accepted the grim reality. It was time to start working.

More exacting than clockwork, she grabbed the tablet and keys and headed out the door. All other necessities were already in her vehicle or at the designated location in the industrial complex. The key combo lock was constantly updated but she had already been provided with the current code. The door popped open, exhibiting all of the customary and expected items, already clipped and calibrated. She rifled through the contents, swapped out tablets, exchanging the previous day's information for the new. She emptied out the clipboard and pumped her mechanical pencil full of lead. The writing was on the wall for someone, but she doubted she would have to jot anything down. She added the remaining items to her arsenal, leaving only the old tablet behind for her employer to collect it later.

Fresh coffee and ideas had ceased percolating. To the victor go the spoils; to the Vick, they are diluted. And yet, one of the tasks in his working queue was less dull than the others, actually intriguing enough for more inspired effort than usual. The hours passed quickly while he was caught up in his workload. Not even the lure of a taco lunch with his colleagues had dragged him away from his desk, more taken with the task at hand than enticed by a taco in hand. His boss might have been impressed to see him working through lunch, but she had gone for tacos too. If you are going to make a taco, you are going to break a few shells. Even the soft ones.

Soft targets were hardly worth her time and her employer knew it. For precision, Angela was known as one of the big guns. Locker locked, vehicle loaded, and preparing to depart once again, she glanced at the new tablet and scanned the images and information about her quarry. The address was unfamiliar to her but it was a vast city and she knew the general area reasonably well. She would find the dwelling and fulfill her duties and provide the confirmation necessary to satisfy all parties. It was all within the scope of her abilities. A dearth of professionalism would not be the death of her. Being too casual was a casualty.

A casual hello brought him back to reality. "Vick." "Tim." Tim's greeting came when it was 2pm and Vick had officially run out of steam. The empty calories he had used to fuel his taco-deprived lunch had long since spiked and crashed. And it was at that point in the day when anyone wanting coffee from the coffee mess would have to prepare a fresh carafe themselves. Vick's lack of steam was not nearly extreme enough for such measures. If anyone saw him brewing coffee, they could be assured that trouble was brewing, or even a storm. He opted for a quick walk outside to clear his head and circulate his blood, which was more going with the flow than flowing to his liking.

She could feel it in her blood that she was close, as well as see it and hear it as the GPS chirped at her, complementing its crude and jerky animation. She had amplified its jerky voice to emulate that of Anthony Bourdain's. This could have been a recipe for disaster but Angela found it charming, and sometimes made deliberate wrong turns just so Bourdain would snap at her. As she rounded the corner into the neighborhood of her destination, she realized that she had timed it perfectly to coincide with the golden hour. Few would have been home from work and traffic should not have been horrendous for her escape upon completion.

The day was becoming a *fait accompli* for Vick. Trying to recall more Latin, his mind wandered as he wondered about various things he noticed out and about in the vicinity of his office building. Is each Starbucks aware of the others, or does each think it is the only one on the block? How often has a vehicle blocking a hydrant actually had to be towed so that a fire engine could have access? And what if that car itself caught on fire? How ironic would that be? Ultimately, he bought a bagel sandwich from the Dunkin' and returned to the office, munching mindlessly like grazing livestock.

Angela's eyes glazed over at the still life depiction of the roadwork ahead of her. The flagger was noticeably bored and seemed to be waving a white flag on life as he alternated between his sign between its stop and slow settings. The other reinforcements standing around nearby were engrossed in their phones, avoiding eye contact with the flagger, should he need to rest. The fellow ravaging the pavement with the jackhammer gazed longingly at the others. She fought the temptation of her lead foot to just gun it. This window into inhumanity cost Angela several minutes and threatened to fire a silver bullet into her golden hour ambitions.

And he shot off for home, as soon as he was within seconds of his eight hours, which almost coincided with Vick's return from his afternoon excursion. Having realized that his inspiration and

motivation had evaporated, there was no need for further perspiration. Perhaps he could even avoid the lion's share of the afternoon traffic by fleeing like a gazelle. Human nature prevailed, but when he thought of how he might spend his extra minutes of freedom, he realized that he needed to put out the trash and recyclables for the morning.

1473 Kradley Court. This was it. Bullseye. Her golden hour aspirations were not yet tarnished, but would be shortly. Angela would have to act quickly and efficiently. Not that she ever acted below that threshold. As she pulled up next to the curb, she noticed that a car was parked in the vicinity. Not a catastrophe, nor hazardous but she set the hazards anyway as she set the lever to the Park position.

He was dragging the recycling bin to the curb when he saw her on the front steps, at the front door. He did not recognize her but instantly understood her intentions. It was like seeing something and someone that he was never meant to see just before it happened.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him, but only after hearing him exert strenuously with amassed plastics and cardboard. Her laser sharp focus would not be deterred. Her aim would not be rattled. Her reflexes did the rest in a rapid-fire motion.

It happened so quickly he could barely register what had transpired, what had triggered the sudden excruciation. Had sorted plastics begat a sordid fate? There had been a flash, then blinding, piercing pain as he was thrust to the concrete.

Done. She had terminated her mission and had the photographic proof.

The anguish, the agony, was he losing consciousness?

As she started toward her vehicle, Angela noticed the man at the house next to where she had just taken the photo of the delivered package. He was lying on the ground next to an overturned recycle bin. She frowned at the delay but went to help him.

The delivery woman snapped Vick out of his delirium. He had just rolled his ankle and the pain was subsiding but still intense. His tolerance for most feelings and substances had always been low. To be fair, so was the tolerance of most people for him.

“Sir, are you okay?” Angela asked, standing over him, offering an arm to help him up.

“I think so, thank you. I will be okay, but I better not stand until I rub my ankle a bit and move it around. I’ll be fine. It is feeling better already.”

“Okay, that’s good to hear. Well, have a pleasant evening,” she smiled and continued toward her van, the blue arrows gleaming in the late afternoon sun. Before she could open the door, he called out to her.

“You’re so tall! You must be an Amazon woman!” How many times had she heard this one? She laughed politely, in the interest of customer service and satisfaction, only groaning inwardly and suppressing a sigh, before continuing on her way.

As Angela drove away, Vick continued to massage his ankle and prepared to stand and put weight on it, now believing that he had not rolled it. Only another twist.

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