

Civil Duty

By Lorraine (Raine) Voss

On Monday evening at 7.27 pm Lindsey put down her coke can, pressed send and waited for the receipt code. Two minutes later she initiated shutdown clicked the Acer notebook closed and let out a huge sigh of relief.

“Right, that’s that sorted,” she said out loud but to no one in particular which turned out to be just as well because no one was listening. She stood up; packed the laptop into its carry case; hooked her retro duffle coat from the back of the chair; swung it casually around her petite shoulders; left the sleeves to sway in time like woolen pendulums and marched, quietly, toward the Library’s main exit.

Angela waved to catch her attention as she approached the main desk. “Did you get it off alright my lover?” she said, in her broad Bristol accent.

Lindsey smiled, nodded and raised a thumb.

“Well done! Let us know how you get on won’t you?” Angela added, and wrap up warm before you go out-doors mind, its brass out there tonight.”

Lindsey took the advice, slipped her arms into her coat sleeves and waved goodbye to Angela before stepping out into the cold, crisp, evening air. Lindsey loathed deadlines and this one in particular was proving to be an absolute nightmare. She’d been working on the same assignment for nearly six weeks now and last night she’d finally decided to show it to Josh; get some feedback. Josh, of course, confirmed what she’d already suspected. It was awful. Not just a little bit awful either; no it was totally and utterly bloody awful.

On Monday morning at 8.49am Lindsey stood on the front steps of Bridge Street Library and waited patiently for someone to come along and open up. She was calm now having reached the point where panic seemed pointless. Logic indicated that stress would only make matters worse. She’d just start again, from scratch. If the new fiction write worked she’d submit it, if not then she still had the other one to fall back on. She was just about to drift off into a ‘big up me’ daydream about the brilliant ‘new story’ and its potential Booker Prize win when she was brought back to earth by the friendly greeting of the Chief Librarian.

“Good morning my lover!” chirped the middle aged, portly key-holder while huffing and puffing her way up the steep, stone steps. Luvverly day! You’re here bright and early. Got a lot on

have you?”

“Yes, you could say that. I’ve got an assignment due in tonight. I’m struggling a bit to be honest. There are too many distractions at home so I thought I’d come here and see if the peace and quiet helps.”

“I’m sure it will my dear and if there’s anything I can do to help, you just let me know ok” she said, pointing to the badge on her jacket. A badge that said Mrs. Angela Kelly: Chief Librarian.

“Thanks Mrs. Kelly”

“Angela,” insisted Mrs. Kelly. “Call me Angela; no need for formality is there?”

“Thank you Angela, I’m Lindsey and it’s lovely to meet you.”

“Likewise,” said Angela and they shook hands to seal the introduction.

The Librarian opened the huge wooden doors, keyed a code into the alarm panel and both women crossed the foyer, Angela made her way to reception and Lindsey headed for a central staircase that lead to the quietest part of the Library. She looked for a table in the reference section and almost immediately found one that suited her perfectly. It was surrounded on three sides by tall bookcases and married to one wooden chair which had been positioned at its inside edge, dead centre, physically indicating its intent to house a sole occupant. Lindsey sat down with her back to geography and faced the room.

“This’ll do nicely,” she said, to one in particular (which was just as well because no one was listening). She stood up; unpacked her laptop from its carry case; allowed her three quarter coat to slip from her shoulders; caught it before it hit the high polished parquet floor; swung it nonchalantly over the back of the chair; sat down; pushed start and waited while the PC complied.

Angela, in the meantime, had completed her usual list of „first thing“ tasks and was winding her way to the staff kitchen to make a much needed cup of coffee. As the machine gurgled and spat its dark liquid drop by aromatic drop into the pre-warmed glass jug Angela trawled the main compartment of her handbag. After a moment of searching she pulled out a pack of Hermesetas and a white paper envelope. She shook two sweeteners into her own cup and a liberal sprinkle of something from the envelope into another; filled both cups to the brim with the delightfully fragrant coffee and headed back across the foyer. After placing her coffee

on the reception desk next to the sign that said “Back shortly” (A phrase that for some strange reason always made her think of Danny DeVito) she climbed the stairs, scanned the room, located Lindsey and gesticulated her offer of a complimentary beverage by lifting the mug in the air, pointing to it and nodding her head furiously.

Lindsey chuckled; nodded back enthusiastically and mouthed the words: “Yes please.”

Angela walked over, placed the coffee mug on the corner of the table and said, “I thought you might need a bit of a bump start?”

“Thank you!” Lindsey whispered.

“No problem, I’ll let you get on shall I? Don’t forget what I said though, if there’s anything I can help you with it’ll be no bother. I’ll be just downstairs ok?”

“OK, thanks.”

Angela navigated her way back to the centre of the room in an exaggerated tip-toe fashion and then bobbed out of sight like a bad comedian descending an imaginary, behind the couch staircase. Lindsey smiled to herself; took a large swig of coffee from the cheerful yellow mug; pulled a face that indicated ‘bitterness’ then closed her eyes and gulped down the remaining liquid. An involuntary shudder accompanied the coffee’s finale. The aftertaste was pretty bad. It didn’t take long for the caffeine to kick in either. Lindsey decided it was probably one of those extreme coffees that manic people buy

“Rocket Fuel!” she said out loud, to no one in particular.

“Shhh!” said a disjointed voice from somewhere behind a left side shelf filled with exceedingly hefty philosophy books. “Some of us have come here to study.”

“Sorry.” Lindsey whispered, feeling very self conscious and just a little bit paranoid. “It’s the coffee I think; too strong for me. I’ll not make another sound; not a peep. ‘Peep’, gosh that’s such a funny word isn’t it, I wonder where it originated? Peep, he he he, sorry I’ll be...”

“SHHHH!” again, from behind the philosopher’s bookcase.

“Shit! Yeah, sorry.” Lindsey turned her thoughts back to the task at hand; checked her watch and sighed. 9.41 am and not a single sentence so far. She was still staring at the blank word document, elbows on the table, hoping for a miracle when a rustling sound from behind the right side bookcase caught her attention.

“Would you like me to do it?” enquired a voice from somewhere in the general vicinity of English History.

“Sorry, were you speaking to me?” asked Lindsey.

“SHHH,” said the grumpy philosophy voice. “I won’t tell you again!”

The voice from English History, waited a few seconds before continuing in a more whispered tone.

“I’ll do it if you like;” it said “your assignment I mean. God knows I’ve got nothing more interesting on for today, or tomorrow, or for the foreseeable for that matter. I’d love to write it. Quite fancy myself as a bit of a wordsmith truth be known. Why don’t you let me give it a go eh?”

“Um, thanks, but it’s probably not a great idea really is it, ethically I mean,” said Lindsey. “Ethics! Ha! Don’t talk to me about ethics,” mumbled the Phil... voice.

“OK, we won’t,” said Lindsey and English H. in unison. “As a matter of fact we weren’t talking to you at all if I remember rightly; so Shhh,” added Lindsey in a somewhat self satisfied tone.

H simply smiled to himself smugly; a wasted expression because no-one was watching. Phil... having decided that the probability of gaining some insights from the conversation was rapidly overtaking his interest in the library’s aesthetics section anyway, coughed (for attention) before speaking with the authoritative tone of a primary school headmaster.

“You shouldn’t let H write it for you.”

“You’ve already heard me declined the offer,” said Lindsey defensively. My suggestion that it would be ‘unethical’ was a polite but firm refusal. I would never submit another person’s words and pretend they were my own. I could be described as a little bit lazy; I might sail too close to submission rule deadlines: I have on occasion relied on quotation – but never, not once have I stooped as low as plagiarism.

“I wasn’t actually suggesting you would,” said Phil. “What does occur to me though is that you do seem to find yourself in quite a unique position here. You have two unseen characters at your disposal. I, mainly in the interests of my own research, am prepared to donate an hour of my time and I’m assuming, from his previous offer, that H has all day to spare and some. Use us! Ask questions. Make assumptions; go with the flow. Be creative – That’s what your here for isn’t it?”

“Great idea Phil,” said H. “Sounds like a winner. I’ll stay as long as you like Miss, you can ask me anything. I can’t promise you riveting answers but I’ll guarantee at least some inspirational ones. Take what you want, disregard the rest.”

Lindsey thanked both voices and set to work with a series of tabloid-journalist type

questions. In no time at all she had an opening paragraph. From there on the story practically wrote itself. Her questions became fewer and further between. The tapping of the keyboard increased in ferocity. Eventually all things external were lost; focus was absolute and the write was unstoppable. The mid afternoon arrival of Angela with a ready opened can of peculiarly bitter tasting cola did little to distract - If anything it aided clarity. Lindsey absorbed the coke and the story absorbed Lindsey.

Phil stayed until three thirty, which was longer than he had intended. He scribbled notes relating to the questions that Lindsey had asked him; side-notes pertaining to the questions aimed at H and a paragraph of conclusions based upon the responses given. He packed his bag quietly and then, completely unnoticed by Lindsey he left. He caught the three forty five bus back to the halfway house and arrived in the nick of time to comply with his curfew restrictions.

H stayed until 6.30 because home was cold and empty. The constraints placed upon him by a meager pension were quite severe. Municipal buildings were a source of free heat, light and entertainment. Monday was Library day; on Wednesdays he would spectate at the Leisure Centre and alternate Fridays would be spent either at the Crown Court or the main waiting room of the local General Hospital. Apart from the cost cutting benefits there was also the opportunity to chat with such interesting people. Unfortunately these people rarely noticed when he went. Lindsey didn't notice when he went.

Angela, on the other hand, usually noticed almost everything. She waved as Lindsey left and content with her day's work, smiled.

"Quite often, talented people need a bit of a bump start. Some powder; some pointers, some prompts and hey presto! There's no real harm in lending a helping hand is there? It could probably be described as a civil duty," she said to no one in particular. No one heard her either, which was probably just as well.

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