

a novel

IMPLEMENTATION

They were numb for a week like everyone else, Kilroy worse than Francine, probably. He knew one of the guys at the Pentagon—the ballbuster who’d been his drill sergeant. He’d hated him, but hell, he shouldn’t have gone like that. Francine’s father used to golf with this securities lawyer who was killed when the first tower fell. Probably not a good time to try for a kid again. He was on inactive reserve. He had a bad feeling about it.

Kilroy never quite forgave his parents—not for the name, not for anything. He called his wife at work right after he got the call. He picked her up and asked if she would drive. He spent most of the drive on the cell phone, when there was reception, calling friends and saying goodbye. Francine didn’t say anything. At the airport she kissed him and drove off. Kilroy got through security quickly and boarded the plane. That’s how Kilroy left Implementation.

The places Kilroy visited were typically not places he intended to visit. Kilroy followed orders. It wasn’t that he lacked free will or the ability to think and speak clearly. It was a lack of ambition, more or less. Kilroy didn’t feel “driven” by anything within himself. His journey was a matter of drifts in changing tides.

Kilroy loved Francine more, for instance, than he had loved Karen Ross, who took his virginity behind a stack of tumbling mats in the Implementation High gym. He loved her more than he loved a steaming plate of liver and onions. He loved her more than the touchdown pass he caught that would always be the stuff of reunion legend. He loved her more than America. A child shouldn’t be necessary for that kind of love. Why did they need more?

Implementation’s more folk song than symphony, more doggerel than sonnet, more cherry pie than creme brûlée, yes we ate peanut butter and jelly, yes we wore denim overalls at times, but the town’s got its own flavor, and its people their own eccentricities, nightmares, and ambitions. Roxanne never wore trousers. Frank was the cardboard box king. Samantha made exquisite graffiti. Kilroy was here.

“You should’ve gotten out after you got back from the Gulf.”

“I know Francine.”

“Or at least last year when we talked about it. They dangle Officer Training School. So what?”

“You’re right Francine.”

“How long will it be?”

“Months, maybe. Until they call back and tell me to report, you mean? Days.”

It was just Kilroy who entered the hotel but Warrant Officer Berge was who emerged. He went on to base by bus, saluted at the gate, and went in to report to the captain, who pronounced his last name almost perversely. Then, he went on to his post, his station: Power it up, grasp firmly, click. The campaign was beginning. He started typing the first bullet point.

There were orders and email waiting when Kilroy reported. Shuffle the papers, enter the data, compute the multivariate ANOVAs. The battle for hearts and minds was on, the struggle for infinite justice. Kilroy was enduring freedom. He was back to doing that dance of marketing and military might, the thirty-seven foxtrot: assisting in the integration of psychological operations planning.

Kilroy lay in the hotel room, blinking rapidly. Maybe it would make him tired. The ceiling went dark gray, then black, then dark gray. He thought of an open field. Not a desert. A field. He imagined ordnance. At this delirious moment of sleeplessness, even incoming ordnance would be preferable. He began counting cluster bombs. He tried to forget the desert.

"Isn't there some old-timer, or town historian—"
"The thing is, they claim not to remember—"
"So you're telling me that there is actually no one in Implementation who knows the origin of Implementation—"
"It was the military—tests of some kind, some say. Or maybe it had something to do with religion."
"Brigham Young passed through?"

"He looks great."
"They did a wonderful job."
"He looks thin."
"And dead."
"Frank."
"He wasn't thin. He was fat. A fat friend. A pig."
"Frank. Stop."
"Did you ever see the man eat? He enjoyed himself."

"I grew up in Superior."
"It's nice there, yeah?"
"Not really. Kind of seedy. Petty people. You?"
"I'm from Implementation."
"Oh, I've heard of it. Never been. Nice?"
"I don't like to talk about it."
"Really? Why?"
"Look—there's lot of memories there, okay?"

"Okay—a guy walks into a priest and a rabbi—"
"You're going to the moon Roxanne."
"How about this one: Three genies come out of their bottles and are trapped on a desert island—"
"Why aren't there any good jokes about war? Huh?"
"You know who has jokes about war?"
"What?"
"The Russians have jokes about war."

"I'm sorry it had to end like this. It's really for the best, though. We couldn't keep going on this way. It was getting so stifling—I know that you needed more space. We were seeing each other for six, seven, eight hours as day. It's better we end this relationship now," said the television.

Everybody's got a story in Implementation. It's that kind of town. Everybody knows everyone else, at least halfway. You see him on the street, you recognize him from the bus station, the waiting room at the dentist's. You recognize her high heels, the nape of her neck. You open the door for her at the funeral parlor, on Third Street. A brief smile. She is there for a visitation, not the funeral you're attending. No one speaks.

It's not as if you actually leave Implementation. It never felt like home, but it sticks with you still. You might be sipping an espresso in a Florence piazza or drinking a margarita at a bar in Athens, Georgia and you find yourself tasting the joe from the Main Diner or the rye and soda of Implementation. As simple as the young Jimmy Stewart, but less sentimental. Implementation is the high school dance that you went to with your mother's best friend's daughter.

There are dozens—hundreds—of middle-American towns like Implementation: Springfield, Normal, Inter-course. But no others could claim leadership in cardboard box manufacturing; and even neglecting this, few others could boast as active and diverse a group of micro-industries, which ranged from desktop publishing software development to advanced mechanical poultry harvesting.

There was a library in Implementation at the center of town. No courthouse—it wasn't the county seat. The library was made of stones and seemed only the size of four or five bookmobiles. Outside was a statue of a man sitting in a chair. On the pedestal there was a discoloration where a plaque used to be. Samantha did not know who was depicted in the statue. Kilroy and Roxanne and Frank didn't care.

For a moment, it seemed as if everybody in Implementation would dance—might dance—the way that they intended to dance at the Senior Prom but never did. Here it was, an off-year reunion—the fifteenth—and still they came. Would they dance. Most of them moved muscles in their back, in their neck, just-about-dancing. They moved without standing up. They looked down the bar at each other with long-ago wishes. They moved. They did not move.

Roxanne hated the song "Roxanne" and she hated the Police. By extension she hated police and in fact any man in uniform. And yet she felt a kind of self-defeating attraction to the same. She hated Sting. And bees. She hated Paul Newman, by extension. She fucked a cop she met in a bar one night who looked vaguely in the light of three gin rickeys like Tom Cruise. In the morning she told him he was a lousy lay, now get the fuck out.

Through a series of coincidences Roxanne ended up leaving the state for college. She fit right in when she started school in Iowa. As others found themselves off-kilter, she took to her studies and social life with equal aptitude, mastering the early math classes with ease and finding that her new friendships were deepening even as her circle of friends grew. It was a perfect time. Looking back to it made her sad.

The circle of high school friends had held steady at nine for the past few New Year's parties; they were glum to be reduced to eight. Frank remained the most successful, yet still needed to impress everyone. At five 'til midnight, he opened the trunk and announced that the fireworks would be "Mexican style" this year. He handed the handguns around, drew out a .38 for himself, and unloaded it into the sky.

Samantha is asleep; reams of paper fill her dreams like an ocean or swamp. Then there is an interruption—a paper jam of the mind—and the landscape is suddenly full of clowns. They cavort and honk their spherical red noses; they pile into a Volkswagon. The honking of noses—or is it the Volkswagon?—grows louder. She wakes to her ringing alarm. Time for work.

Samantha could tell stories. She could do counseling at Kinko's if she were so inclined. The old woman photocopying her husband's obituary for friends who couldn't come from out of town for the funeral. The man duplicating his wife's unsent letter to her lover, pushing the button each time like it was violence. The homeless man with his poems. Her recipes for rhubarb pie. His folk trio's first gig. Her unpublished memoirs. A life worth saving. His lost dog. Her missing pussy.

Roxanne's tendonitis flared up. It was crunch time, and there was page after page of specification to turn into code. Two days of code to type; about five hours left before the deadline. Her wrists ached. Her lumbar was not adequately supported. Her eyes were aching, or itching, or in some vague way feeling uncomfortable. The bastards could have given her a decent chair.

Roxanne painted teddy bears when she was young. She painted teddy bears in the colors of π . She drew a correspondence between ten colors and the digits, and she outlined a grid on the bears and painted them in the progression of the digits of π . She found them at second-hand shops and yard sales for a buck or two. She painted them in shades of pink. She painted them in blues, greens. She painted them in π .

Frank was twenty-seven years old when he got his hand cut clean off with a circular saw that had no guard. Surprising how little pain. The disbelief and wailing. The bag of ice. The gurney. Recovery that took only weeks. A microsurgeon was on duty—the reattachment was a cinch. It seemed like some surreal sitcom episode to him now; he was embarrassed to relate the experience, even when someone noticed the hairline bracelet of a scar.

Samantha makes stickers. Stickers from aluminum plates, velour stickers, velvet stickers—feelies, collage stickers with lists from the *New York Times*, lists from the *Implementation Star*, crushed glass stickers that change color in sun and rain, stickers of onion peel and orange skin, stickers that mention revolution, stickers that pay tribute to Japanese films and Afghan women in burkas, stickers recounting what talking Barbie dolls say, stickers made from locks of hair.

Thanks to her routines and the lack of further calamities, Samantha was doing well. She felt stupid. She shouldn't have gone to donate blood: it made her sick, it was unnecessary even in New York, and she was hundreds of miles away. Of course her second cousin who lived way out in Queens was all right. She did not send Christmas cards that year. The only one she got was from her landlord. She figured she must be the only one who paid rent on time.

The first cut is the deepest—and he knew had it coming—every Lire he could remember—dad, grandda, great-grandda, and stories deep, each had his hand cut off by a well-sharpened machine. Like penance for the industrial revolution. It was when Frank was working on the damn sled, for his niece. He just thought “motherfucker”—no workman’s comp for this young executive, he’d think a moment later—as he slipped and severed off his right hand.

Frank went to work with gusto. Decisions awaited him like levers on slot machines. Work was delirious, luscious, a treat. Not that he liked lording over people or making the hire-and-fire decisions—no, not at all. He wasn’t about *power*. He loved *payoff*. He saw the options before him as promising but risky wagers, so what if people’s livelihoods were at stake.

Frank has been lying since the day he was born. He would cry for his mother’s breast, not because he was thirsty for milk, but because he simply loved the feel of her nipple between his gums.

Samantha doesn’t consider the marijuana part of her motivation problem. She uses the marijuana not as a crutch, but as a part of her creative process. A useful substance. And she is a connoisseur. Purple sensimelia. Thai stick. B-52. Northern lights. Terry, a tow-truck driver with dreadlocks, hooked her up in exchange for color copies at 4 a.m. Samantha had figured out how to unhook the counter.

When Samantha was five years old she looked straight ahead as a boy with a knife lunged toward her, thrusting out with the knife, reaching towards her with it. She looked as the handle of the knife pushed toward her, into her, as the blade touched her skin and disappeared. It was a fake knife. Collapsible. But she was already dying inside.

Every wound heals and scars all fade. Unless you die. Then you’re dead. You dead? No dad. Fucking dad. Then treat it as a scratch. We all get ‘em. Family curse. You’ll feel a ghost. We all do. Always. Feels like it’s there, doesn’t it? It’s gone, son, but it will always be there, forever—get? You’ve got it now, so you don’t need to worry about when it’s gonna come. It’s gone, gone. Fucking dad. But they got it back on.

Frank rarely used prostitutes, and never with his own money. He only took a hooker when he won, and only in Vegas or Atlantic City. And he tipped well. And he always felt a bit guilty afterwards, and gave money to the Red Cross. And wanted never to do it again. Still, he did like the lack of complication. He remembered when he last found himself back on the ranch, after a big night on the craps table.

He’d promised the sheik he would go on board himself to make sure that the full shipment of cardboard boxes was there, stowed securely. Frank hated water, did not like being on a ship even if it was docked, couldn’t know if something was stowed securely, but he’d promised. He was on the ship for no more than ten minutes when the motorboats sped up alongside and cut their engines. The grappling hooks clattered. And then the pirates boarded them.

Samantha sometimes thinks that she has Borderline Personality Disorder. But she checks through the symptoms methodically and finds she does not. What does this compulsion mean? Does her obsessive behavior itself indicate some psychological problem? It gnaws. She thinks about the friends she could call, and imagines how the conversations would go. She eats ice cream and feels better. She goes to sleep.

Close friends: 5. Family: 1 sister, 1 mother, 1 dead father. Pets: iguana, cat. Shoes: Only 8 pairs. Books: 317 volumes, mostly mysteries and sci-fi. Marijuana: 18 grams, 4 varieties. Spices: 58. Jackets: 3. Dresses: 12. Jeans: 5. Skirts: 8. Blouses: 21. Health Insurance: none. Car: ‘93 Civic, red. Paints: 47 pigments. Salad dressings: 12. Funerals: 8. Weddings: 8. Trips to Europe: 2. Lovers: 3. Years: 29.

They were strapped for housing and buzzing with buildup at base. New NCOs would stay in the hotel in town until the quartermaster got the situation back into its usual fucked-up state. A huge shipment of loudspeakers arrived, and linguists and shrinks were everywhere. The hotel, Kilroy noted, had a small but serviceable bar.

Kilroy clicks to the PowerPoint background that has a big globe. He thinks of the world: Begin and Sadat, Boutros-Boutros Ghali. He thinks about his home town—he thinks about Implementation. Extraction of special forces. He thinks about cows. Cowlicks. Reagan's hair. It was so perfect. Reagan is—still alive? Reagan's face superimposed over the globe. Kilroy was there.

Sometimes Kilroy did question what he was doing. The leaflets were addressed to two audiences: the civilians on the ground and the world that would or might know of these leaflets through the press. He did not question asking the civilians to welcome downed pilots into their homes. It was this matter of writing for more than one audience that bothered him.

Cages are easy. Cages are easily made, even in Cuba, with rolls of chain link fencing and posts. Six by five by five. No room to stand, but hardly torture. Add some guardsmen with guns. It's easy. Surrender or you die. Surrender now or die. Surrender or die. (Sometimes simplest is best.) Make a move I will kill your mother. The guardsmen with guns all lost their sisters on 9/11.

"How about we stop at the Diner and get some supper?"
"How about we go home right away? Aren't you glad to see me?"
"Francine it's only been two weeks. We can do that later."
"Kilroy!"
"Shit. I didn't want to start my leave off like this."
"Do you still love me?"

Base food was actually better than Francine's cooking. She was a lovely woman, a wonderful wife, but truth be told Kilroy preferred the spaghetti and meatballs, the chicken florentine, the pork chops, burritos, salad bar, rib roast, veal parmesan, even the poached salmon at the canteen over most of what Francine pulled out of the oven. It's a myth that military food is bad. An army marches on a full belly.

Kilroy wasn't born a manipulator. He seldom had bad intentions, but his surprisingly silver tongue and his other organs sometimes got the best of him. Truth be told, the psych major at State, after the war, wasn't so much in pursuit of the secrets of the human mind as about unzipping the dress of the psyche. Kilroy never understood women, neither his mother nor his wife for example, but he found them endlessly fascinating.

He took the book to lunch with him. Kilroy wasn't the only Army geek, wasn't the only one reading. The Psychological Operations Group was here, after all. But he put the Emily Dickinson book in a plain brown cover anyway, and as he read he held it so the other noncoms couldn't see that the text inside was shaped into stanzas.

"Terror is easier to sell than shoes. Everybody knows it and you need no athlete nor spokesmodel to sell it to them. Everybody lives in fear like they have never known otherwise. We just give them colors and conditions, we let them express that fear. We make fear a kind of weather. It's okay, that fear."
"I just say 'Surrender or die' over and over again."

Kilroy found it easy to readjust. The rigor and routines of life on base weren't much worse than life in Implementation and work at Codem. He was between projects there, so no big deal that he was activated. He missed Francine, but he saw her every other weekend, a vacation each time. He was like an old hand on base, helping out those with fewer stripes. He could save lives, right here in front of the computer.

Roxanne fondled her iPod as she listened to the music of Lionel Richie. She wondered when she'd bought the CD that she'd just ripped. And why did she still have it? Who had she been when she bought the CD? She closed her eyes and placed the palms of her hands up against them. She began to weep.

She always loved the word spool. She found it in yarn, she found it on the street, she found it on the way to the printer. She loved Beckett and had an aversion to Pearl Jam. Bach fugues a major turn-on. She laughed quietly at funerals and wept at weddings. She loved spotting the errors in code. She would listen to John Cage for hours, for hours.

Roxanne stopped wearing pants her senior year in high school. Perhaps she noticed the way that heads would turn and eyebrows raise when she strode by older men in her plaid skirts—but she explained the change in her personal style as a disdain for the strictures of trousers. She had worn long, flowing skirts since then, quite abbreviated miniskirts, all varieties of skirt—but she had always maintained her pantlessness.

"I know you aren't into war and everything, but can't you get excited when we win a battle or bomb a target or anything? A good target?"

"No."

"No thrill?"

"Do you have any relatives in the military?"

"Yeah, well, my uncle was in ... World War II."

"Not pulled out of a downed helicopter in Vietnam and brained."

"Do you have any idea how many people have their first sexual experience while on a religious retreat?"

"Has this been studied?"

"Mormon teens are notorious. I think it's the idea of seeing God. The souls having different sexes."

"What is it you said you do?"

"I write the leaflets that we drop like bombs of fear on the unwashed nomads of the desert. Instructions on how to stay alive."

Roxanne went to the kitchen. She liked her kitchens; this current one was redolent with Pine-Sol at the moment and hung with pots, skillets, and implements of many sorts. Her new workplace had a kitchen, probably because it used to be someone's house. No one would ever cook an omelet there, she thought as she pulled a bulb of garlic from the rope and opened the refrigerator.

Roxanne recalled her mother's death with a great deal of horror, a simple cancer, long undetected and fast-moving through the lymph nodes. She did not blame her mother for her fear of the doctors with their chemicals and knives, for her reluctance to attend to the lump in time, but she could not forgive her father. The long silent hours spent in front of the television, ignorance that was two parts fear and no parts bliss. He could have touched her, he could have known.

Roxanne approached Internet dating with trepidation, but paid the Match.com fees for 6 months. Girls she had known from high school were in the pool, along with many of the boys she had avoided. Amazing that they used computers. She decided to date exclusively men from outside Implementation. An accountant from Cleveland who was kind but had a harelip. A lawyer in Cincinnati who bragged of his sexual stamina. A mechanic from Toledo who picked his nose.

"And to what would you account her fear of public places where people dance—clubs, weddings, municipal festivals and what have you? Why did she have such trouble shaking her bones?"

"I account that to an event in her childhood."

"An event of what nature?"

"We're still working on that."

"Lions and igers and ears."

"Ions?"

"What's your name again?"

"Eons."

"Doesn't matter. Who the hell is anyone?"

"Aesop."

"I've always loved fables."

"A guy walks into a bar."

"Always the threat of being—eaten."

It wasn't that he was dissatisfied with his life. Frank had friends, girlfriends in several cities, even. He'd become a member of the Elks. He often visited exotic ports of call, and many bartenders knew him by name. He did not have a wife. He had never served in the military. He was not a hero, not a politician. Many thought he was a Republican but in fact he had never voted in his life. The only levers he'd pull were those of slot machines.

Some of the pirates nonchalantly held their guns on Frank and the prone crew. Would they be enraged when they found that the ship held nothing but Frank's company's largest-ever order of cardboard boxes? Frank wanted to vomit. He was about to be killed by an angry pirate. "Wrong ship," one of the pirates said. "Arrrrr," said another. They left without killing anyone. Frank slowly stood up. The massive dock worker next to him was sobbing and had wet himself.

Then the cameras and the vans with satellite dishes. "I thought it was a put on at first but it makes sense and I've read in *Business Week* that a lot of inventory is lost like this." Man she looks just like a girl you'd see on TV, the kind Tony would fuck in a hotel room on *The Sopranos*. "Nothing heroic, the guy fell in the water, I dragged him out." TV girls are busy editing stuff after. A shame. "Anybody would have." Big hotel room long night. "Just a regular Midwestern guy."

Frank returned to the Implementation library and wandered the stacks until he reached the spot. In front of Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*. Here. Just far enough from the information desk. The first time he had ever jacked off in a public place. He'd been thinking of Janna Spoonfil. Here. Right where he had discovered Russian literature. Where he had decided he would always take risks. He decided to take a risk again.

Got to do it yourself to fucking do it right. Client name misspelled all over two different ways. Kluelin spelled Kludge. Secretaries stayed three hours late doing this hatchet job, too. Completely unfair. Yes he was the CEO goddamn it but it was his fuckup too for letting them go home. So do it, Frank, just peck out the changes in Microsoft Whatever and put on your coat and walk over to Kinkos your goddam self. Hot number behind the counter. Yes, yes you can help me.

"You're a fucking pirate? In fucking Jersey? There are no pirates in New Jersey."

"Arrrrr. Ye'll be given me yarr booty. Yar Rolex. Yar gold card."

"Come on. Who put you up to this—where'd you get that eye patch?"

"Keep ye quiet ar I'll cut ye. Ye'll be wearin these."

"Cable ties? Shit."

At every black-tie affair, Frank had another minor injury: a cufflink caught in a fountain, a slip and fall on a marble floor that left a goose-egg on his forehead, a dip that went too far, a foot caught in a car door. Always embarrassing, never serious, but always a bit painful and most embarrassing.

Frank read extensively in fields he did not fundamentally know about. Frank gleaned a cocktail party understanding of ergonomics, economics, calisthenics, behavioral psychology, neurophysiology, astronomy, tarot reading, the games that were played with tarot cards, and theoretical physics. He knew baseball more seriously, not just statistics but stories, more about the Boston Red Sox than anyone in the Midwest should know.

"I'm telling you she's starting to drive me nuts."

"Like what?"

"Like Friday night in Cincinnati. Nice dinner out.

Holding hands. Smooching on street corners. She's getting hot. I'm getting hot. We get home, get onto her bed. Then she can't find her special pillow."

"Pillow?"

"The special one. Lights go on. Half hour later, still no pillow. By then all I want to do is watch Letterman."

Samantha didn't tend to like it when a guy in a suit walked into Kinko's. They had demands, they didn't understand the concept of self-service. She liked the cut of this one though, even if he had the usual face-scrunch of executive stress. Tie still in place at this hour. And she recognized him, sort of. "Did you go to Imp High?" "Class of '89" "I was a freshman when you were a senior. Most likely to succeed, right?" Frank blushed. "No, that was Ted."

There was a time when Roxanne and Samantha found themselves in the same aisle at the South Side Supermarket. It wasn't Roxanne's usual grocery but she was looking for pico de gallo that was not in stock at Bert's. They did not know each other. They both pretended to look at the hot sauces with great determination when they found themselves uncomfortably close. Samantha wondered if they would be together again during checkout.

In Samantha's current apartment, smaller than the ones before, the miniature ceramic cat collection has to share a shelf with the matchbook collection. At first she was hopeful and tried to pair up matchbooks and cats, but, inexorably, the two collections robbed each other of their power, made each other seem trite. She began to doubt collecting altogether, except, of course, for snowglobes and orgasms.

She had always felt that were she to "get" a tattoo, to have her flesh inscribed by the hand of another, to be a canvas for another scribe, that the tattoo should be textual, the text one of her choosing. Not some phrase of hers—no, a classical inscription would be best. Her knuckles went white on the sides of the table as the needle cut into the flesh of her left asscheek.

ad astra per aspera

"Both in the same day?"

"No Sam, one in the day, the other that night. That sounds bad. I didn't expect office hours to go anywhere—certainly not to the Holiday Inn. Bad bad."

"No—I mean, I'm sure you know what's right for you."

"Well I probably should have skipped seeing him that night. But it was like break-up sex, you know?"

"Mmmm—I envy you, really. In a way. I can barely remember the last time."

She has a wild side I bet. Probably into dress-up and role-playing and leftistism. Leftism. Whatever. She even laughed when I made that really stupid joke as I was trying to imagine what she was into. Maybe I should go back to pick the packets up and I'd get to talk with her some more. Duh, she's not going to still be working at 8am. Silly silly.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm posting a sticker."

"I work here. This is our parking lot."

"I'm sorry."

"What's that? What does it mean?"

"It's cheese."

"I see, it looks like cheese."

"No, it is cheese. I made this sticker from cheddar."

"I see. I used to paint teddy bears."

Samantha retreats inside her room when the rain comes. If she is out and it rains it does not bother her so much. But when the rain comes and she is in her apartment she stays in, taking no comfort in the coziness of spending a wet day indoors. Beneath the surface of the world she imagines a sewer of neglect into which she might be washed. Sometimes when it rains she takes a knife with a short hooked blade and slices the linoleum she has stacked up in the closet.

Yes I feel divided about the labor involved in removing my stickers from the walls. The janitor, the super, the maid—they did nothing to deserve this. Their occupations are otherwise intended. And yet—and yet—well—it's a distraction from their usual routine. A moment of strangeness to break up the workday. I hope they don't hate me. I think of them. I think of their scrapers, peeling away my art, and I love them.

Samantha wasn't crazy about the night shift. For some reason it reminded her of horror films from her youth, although none of those had taken place at Kinko's. It was busy at times, sometimes desperate. Like Night-hawks at the Diner, except the lonely hearts all had mission statements and debate cases and deadlines. Or just got done with band practice: Plastic Gear Shift and the Knobs, all ages. A hundred on hot pink.

Maybe he'll come in again he seemed to like me. Silly silly we probably wouldn't have anything in common anyway but he did seem to like me a bit and stammered. No ring. Wouldn't have taken it off before he came into Kinko's. Secretary will pick it up in the morning. That joke he told about "Kinky" and reproduction was just awful. Is there a band named that? He'll be back. They all come back. Everybody needs copies.

Roxanne thinks more about the past than the future. But mostly she thinks of the monitor, phosphorescent window, once a portal of teenage wonder. Now it's just the parts of a corporate machine, splayed out in code she's here to service. She started as the fifth wheel in a homegrown smalltown software company. After the acquisition she seems to be the only one doing any work. She gets paid, has health insurance, sure. But where is she going? She hits *return*.

Roxanne played with her hair whenever she was being pleased down below. She played with her hair like Shirley Temple played with hers, twirled locks of it round her fingers while finding pleasure down below. Roxanne would moan softly and play with her hair. Play with me here. Play with me there. She kept her long long hair.

Roxanne liked to tie and to be tied and also to tie things together. Roxanne was a connectionist. She understood that she was connected to things she could not comprehend, and to people she had never met. Sometimes perfect strangers appealed to her for this reason, particularly ones in cities or in other towns.

"I'm really more down with the baby Jesus than the crucified one. He's just sexier—I mean, more passionate, you know—than the grown-up Jesus Christ guy. Than the raised-from-the-dead Jesus. All-powerful infant being given gifts by kings, on the one hand, and then a sort of moldering corpse—I mean, I like the jelly beans. Don't get me wrong, Christmas is bullshit too. Easter is okay. But Thanksgiving, there's a holiday we can all appreciate. You like to eat?"

"So have you killed anyone?"

"With my hands?"

"Or whatever. A gun, a knife, a smart bomb."

"We say 'precision guided munition.'"

"Well?"

"Let's not talk about it."

"Too horrible?"

"Most of the guys who I work with now have at least one kill. I'm sort of sheepish about the issue."

Roxanne stands by the printer, waiting for the print job. Other print jobs that have been completed are already situated on the printer, face down. She peeks. eBay listings. As if anyone else here did work. She wonders about her own affinity for mathematics. She wonders about Euclid and Pythagoras. She resolves to read some biographies. She reminds herself to not be rude. She waits.

She loves chocolate in a well-lit place, a clean room, in good company, or alone. Fuck it, Roxanne loves chocolate—the rush—it's like God, or forgiveness. She prefers dark chocolate to light. She wants chocolate, desires it with a part of her brain that cannot shape thought into language. She wants chocolate in a way she can't control. She wants chocolate now. She wants chocolate.

Kilroy had frequented hotel bars even when he was only visiting the city for the day—certainly when he was staying in a hotel. He looked to the sad girl in the bunny ears and the white pantsuit, looked back to his own reflection in the brass. He wagged his finger and sent her a gin and tonic. He thought of his mother. He picked up one of the Peeps from the bowl on the bar after carefully detaching it. Openers. Say something about rabbits. Nothing about Jesus.

"Beyond the pale—that means something good."

"That's the exception that proves the rule."

"How about—in the black?"

"That's the other exception that proves the rule."

"Come on, it's just language!"

"These days they spend millions of dollars to drop language on people from military jets."

"It's not so black and white."

"So this is a life and death matter?"

"Yeah, if the enemy gives up a lot fewer people die.

But it's not rocket science. 'Surrender or die'—it's simple, really."

"You must need to be concise, direct, so, kind of, communicative, and, universal."

"Live free or die. Remember the Alamo."

"Seems like a human endeavor."

"Sure is. I have a king-sized bed. Room 802."

As the fireworks exploded, Samantha looked left, looked down, looked to the crowd surrounding her. The bombs bursting in air, white, red, blue, yellow, and green, and also purple, and off-white, and artillery. Samantha wondered not only at the explosions and their simple, luscious, audiovisual display, but also at the collective awe, the spectacle of fifty thousand faces bathed in red light, looking the same way and wearing the same expression.

The square was cordoned off. People in hazmat suits poked at the shards of the car, pieces of the library, while men in Brooks Brothers suits chatted and pointed only a few feet away. "My office is over here," Roxanne said. "The area is closed," said the guardsman. It was like *Close Encounters* but without the aliens and the weird mountain. "We have an important deadline tomorrow." "You can talk to the Economic Assessment Officer if you'd like."

After the bombing of the library they decided to have a parade. It's not certain who decided. The mayor, the head librarian, the editor of the *Implementation Star*—none of them were involved early on. It was as if a groundswell simply proclaimed *parade*. They decided somehow who would march—police, firemen, librarians—and who would watch. Uniforms were put on, flags unfolded. Tears were shed. Pictures in the paper the next day.

Why bomb libraries? Were they illiterates, anti-literates? Why not army bases, Hollywood studios, skyscrapers, subway systems, nuclear power plants, Starbucks, the obvious targets? An editorial in the *The People's Defender* suggested eco-terrorists had targeted the repository of "dead trees." A poorly copy-edited leaflet appeared linking the incident to the destruction of the Library of Alexandria. Alexandria was in Egypt. Egypt was in the Middle East. And so on.

"The new library will be a fine facility, a fitting memorial."

"Memorializing what?"

"Those killed by terror."

"Sounds like we're supposed to feel guilty that no one was killed when our building got blown up. No one but the bomber."

"Whatever. We should remember the old place. And the guy whose statue was blown up. And the bad things that happened."

A Chevrolet Capri pulled up to the main civic structure in Implementation, the library. You couldn't smell the fertilizer unless you were mere feet away. No one was that close; no one but the driver. It was Sunday, and on the summer schedule the library was closed. The blast pulverized the statue out front and sent a million pages into the air, language disjoint, fluttering in the wind like cherry blossoms.

Kilroy was doing his hour in front of CNN when he first learned about the bombing of the library in Implementation. Hadn't been there in years. Decades really. Mom took him there to check out picture books, then chapter books. He'd sit around there and read. That's what you do in libraries. Good training for how to shut up.

In Missouri two weeks after the incident in Implementation another library, a high school library, was taken out in basically the same way. Neighboring cities sent their bookmobiles. Ford Fiesta this time. Red. Driver didn't stay in the car to get blown to smithereens, but the rest was the same—down to the time and day of the week, the empty building, the mix of fertilizer.

The architects arrived from Columbus, Akron, Cleveland, and Dayton with presentation boards, effusive with imagined libraries. A library with food court. The library as community center, with attached gymnasium, with three-lane bowling alley. A terrorist-proof structure; a library with reinforced beams, one that could crumple a Mack truck at full speed. Integration into the existing town center. Incorporation of the cornerstone of the previous structure.

Roxanne overheard a woman in the supermarket talking about the counselors the school had brought in to help manage the crisis. They utilized Lego models of the library and teddy bears with detachable limbs and there was some kind of drum circle. The PTA arranged for story hours to be held in private homes. Roxanne decided she would mention it at her next appointment with her therapist. All the talk had brought some old things back to the surface.

She liked also to take a man, a man she liked, into her mouth and to perform a subtle gymnastics with her tongue. Total control, total loss of control. She never performed this as a service, nor as a gesture of adulation. She preferred this, to give this gift, to perform, to act upon, to implement pleasure in this way. She liked to hold him in her hands just as he was about to let go. And she always looked up, to see the look.

So Roxanne found herself alone in New York at the Guggenheim Museum standing in front of a painting one of the Futurists had done of his mother. It seemed to deny beauty, to replace it with strength, control, noise, movement, and violence. Two women were speaking French next to her. Roxanne decided that she would find a young man here, and have a drink with him, and invite him back to her room.

He commented that he could discern a great deal about a person just by hearing her speak her name. He had a theory that all of us in a way fashioned ourselves into a certain personality type described by that name our parents or guardians had chosen. We become our names. No strong-willed Mortimers, Roxannes always a bit wilder than you'd expect. He bought her a drink. She accepted but talked for a few minutes to his friend, studiously ignoring him.

"So my point is that narratives of the apocalypse are ultimately personal narratives. We won't be around for the Big Rip or the Big Crunch or whatever. Statistically, actuarially, you're more likely to die from the malfunction of a small electrical appliance than from terrorism. Or a crocodile attack. A lightning strike."
"But there's no preventing that kind of—accident. We can fight terror."
"Maybe. Maybe we can only go on fearing death."

"They're still ramping up forces."

"Still? In Afghanistan?"

"The Gulf. I think it's gonna happen down there. November, I'd say."

"They won't need me. They can just translate all the new 'Surrender or Die' into Arabic, or use some of the stuff we wrote last time."

After they shipped the plug-in, after the dust had settled, Roxanne had a vacation ready, one she had settled on back when crunch time first started to grip the office. She picked out her clothes a week beforehand, dancing in nervousness from the deadline that was approaching at work, and saw the nights she'd quickly booked at the Midtown hotel. How did she not realize it? Mid-September. No wonder the flights were so cheap. She'd be there for the anniversary.

There were hints of it, however nonchalant they were in Midtown. The bilingual newspaper headlined "Once Negro." Maybe a hush in Times Square—maybe it was in her mind. Ron had told her a trick, on a previous visit: walk to the middle of an avenue when the light changes, if you're turned around, if you don't know which way is downtown. Look in both directions. You can tell which way downtown is because you can see the towers. On the East Side Roxanne got turned around.

"We have much yet to do—in Afghanistan and beyond." The guy in leather was right. They had actually closed the street in front of the U.N. for the President's motorcade. Even in the world's capital, she had to hear it from *USA Today* to be sure. "America stands committed to an independent and democratic Palestine, living side by side with Israel in peace and security." Roxanne didn't want to go back to the three-story splotch of Implementation. "If Iraq's regime defies us again ... "

Roxanne woke in the bed of a simultaneous translator from Monte Carlo. Quiet talk of politics and contemporary mortality had shifted to modern art, then to a martini bar, and then, several chocolate martinis later, this small, tastefully decorated apartment on the Upper East Side. There had been bossa nova and undressing. Five A.M. now; he was giving her an espresso, a quick explanation that something had come up at the U.N. Roxanne fell back asleep as he left.

Kilroy was an expert in persuasion, but that didn't stop him from being outrageous and offensive at hotel bars, so that the women he flirted with, who, he was sure, would have come up to his room, would think again. Like a dance, putting his left foot into infidelity, taking his left foot out ...

First Frank thought he would put a love letter in the packet, saying something subtle like, "Promise me you'll run these off yourself." Who knows if she would have looked. She was in there at lunchtime—thank goodness for that bell-jar floor to ceiling glass. Nobody waiting. Staring off, head tilted. He walked in. Should he buy a white-out thing to have some excuse. Hell with it. "Would you like to, um, sometime ...?" She grinned. "When do you get off work?"

It weighed on Frank some days. Mom dead, Dad dead too and no offspring. A war on and more box orders than they had machines to produce. Dog of childhood dead. To be honest no visits to graves. Memories. Work. Vacation. Shorthand and secretaries with cute smiles, short skirts. The odd business social function now and again. It weighed very little really, not much. Time on his hands.

"So Frank, who'd you vote for in the last election?"
"Ah, I didn't. It's not some anti-political thing. I just didn't really care. Who did you vote for?"
"Nader. Some would say that's the same thing."
"You have a pretty smile. How's your tuna steak?"
"It's good. I'm glad you're not some serious Republican, you know. A big Dick Cheney fan."
"The last thing on my mind is politics. I'm more of a Dostoevsky fan. You like Russian literature?"

Frank sat before the board of directors. At a two-year high in production Adam Wescox from Akron told him he would have to fire two dozen people to give the company the push it needed to automate further. He said "lay off" but they call it fire in the common parlance. Did he understand this? Yes, he answered. The board meeting was adjourned and Frank stood and walked away.

"It just finally hit me about the library, Samantha. I started crying. Sure it was just a building. But I sort of grew up in there."
"A man died too. In the car."
"The terrorist, yes. But I don't know why I feel so bad, I mean—"
"It's okay. To cry."
"And I was walking by the pond and saw this dead bird, this dead robin, and I just started to you know, like weep. I needed to call you. I need to hold you."

First he would need a good program, like a well-worn notebook, like a personal grotto. He missed the comfort of sincere prayer. He wanted to write her a love poem. Maybe it wasn't love, but he felt something and needed to express it. The program seemed to betray him. He fumbled at the keyboard, dreading that the paperclip would pop up with advice. It should come from him, it should speak of his feelings for her. He should write it. Type it. Maybe actually write it out.

The governor was campaigning outside of Kinko's after a speech about the library and a disaster area declaration and such. She might as well meet him, she thought. She spat her gum into her left hand, glanced back to make sure the day manager wasn't in sight, and ran around the counter. The governor had an infant in a kind of headlock; he suddenly reached to greet Samantha with his left. The yelp he made when he felt the gum brought security running.

"So I was thinking we could hit the Floridian."
"That would be ... great. But, you know, we don't have to do anything fancy. We could just get some pizza and hang out. You know where I haven't been in a really long time? The arcade."
"It's still open?"
"I think so. I used to really like Frogger."
"I kicked ass at Galaga."

Frank had only fired people twice, personally. He didn't care if people downloaded porn, as long as they weren't jerking themselves or offending the office ladies. But when the projection screen filled with animal sex pop-ups during Herman's sales presentation—that was over the line. Then the night floor manager had snapped, started yodeling and wandering through the factory like a wraith. Frank was the CEO; he didn't have to fire people directly these days. Unless there was an order from the board.

If the board wanted to fire his employees, the board could do it by itself.

Frank knew that the board was already looking for his replacement, after that memo. But they couldn't just dump him. Not until they found someone who could run a cardboard box company. Frank didn't really have a plan for what was probably inevitable. Instead he decided to hustle up as much new business as he possibly could. Light some fires. See if they'd ditch their rainmaker just as easily as some forklift operator with twins in college.

In the dream they are on the beach, and the sun is setting, and they have been eating slices of a ripe juicy mango. In one hand Frank holds a jeweler's box. Its contents: an engagement ring. In the other hand he holds a gun. They kiss, and the sky grows dark on the four edges of horizon. They are standing inside a cardboard box, and the flaps of the lid are flipping closed, one by one.

The presentation at the Pentagon went well. Frank had promised fast fulfillment of an order that was frankly beyond them. If they got the contract, he and the board would need to hustle up the short-term financing for new equipment. The floor would need to be operational 24/7. He'd have to skip the weekend in Mexico with Samantha—lucky he hadn't yet asked her. And the board would have to eat their words and bless him for refusing to sack any employees.

There'd been an odd flag above the barracks on base. Kilroy had stopped to look at it. Two privates walking ahead of him had noticed it, too. "Horsefuckers," one of them said knowingly. "Bad news for the rest of us." Bad omen, at least. That was the week before he got sent to HQDA for the presentation blitz. Arlington. The Pentagon.

Kilroy had run into a guy from an infantry unit he'd been briefly attached to, years ago. A corporal then, the kid got linguist training and had made sergeant. Just back from Cuba. They went for a drink. Walking back to the Metro, he was bitching about being stationed in Guantanamo, the hell of summer. Closed base. He'd just really wanted the promotion. A girl with a German Shepherd walked by and the guy stopped and stared off and waved Kilroy back, suddenly starting to hurl.

First night there, and Frank had a little hotel insomnia. Ring Samantha at the Kinko's to talk dirty with her? He wasn't sure she'd be into that. He read of a bit of the Bulgakov novel he got at the airport, in which the Devil came to Moscow and wreaked havoc. What would the Lord of Darkness do if he came to D.C.? Frank ordered up some pay-per-view porn and grabbed a pillow. Afterwards, he fell asleep, thinking of Samantha lying naked on green green grass.

Frank was ready to plug in if they'd let him. Or use the Zip disk or the CD. He wasn't sure what crusty old machine they'd have in the Pentagon. He'd had a fright imagining a dusty 386, no way to hook his laptop to the projector. But the AV setup was better than in his own boardroom and even better than on the Sheik's plane. "Must run some really demanding applications over here," he told the civilian AV guy. "Damn straight. PowerPoint all day long."

Washington had a strange feel to it the whole time Frank was there. Whatever grief remained from the year before was muted, weight of it supplanted with a cocktail of fear, anger, and adrenaline. The Pentagon was hardly the bureaucratic tomb he had expected. Construction not done, but that part of the building looked almost healed. The largest office building in the world. And it felt like the center of the world. Buzzing, almost conscious.

Kilroy would sometimes get to put on civilian clothes and come up the Red Line, a quick hop from the Pentagon, to visit one of the areas where there was some nightlife. Of course, he'd seek out a wood-paneled, TV-blaring hotel bar, not some trendy club. It happened Frank was in the District, staying at the Omni. Frank hadn't been to D.C. since middle school. He wanted to visit monuments. But they'd rolled those missile launchers out onto the Mall.

"They need you down in the theater, Berge."

"Loudspeaker work, sir?"

"Yes. The Major wanted the best. Asked for you by name. Kilroy, they have twenty-seven teams to prep. Lieutenant down there is just out of college. Boy from Wisconsin. Needs your help."

"Psych major? Communications?"

"Cultural studies."

"That bad, sir?"

Sweet Francine,

Thanks for not hanging up on me just now when we talked. Me getting sent out of the country isn't any fun, I know. Call Tara and Darcy, will you? You've all been through this and will make it again. I don't see the point in blaming me for not getting out of the reserves. You're right, but it's past. The men I'll be preparing do need experienced help. I don't have to repeat how it's life or death for them.

Frank ordered hot wings at the hotel bar. The guy beside him was starting in on cheese sticks and a Michelob draft. Frank tapped his class for a second Manhattan. He glanced down the bar at the man. Jeans and a knit shirt, but some formal bearing left over from work. A military bearing. Kilroy nodded hello. Neither of them could voice what was crawling in the back of their minds, where they'd seen each other a handful of times before: Implementation.

"Did you ever go out to the swimming hole?"

"The pit? A few times, yeah."

"I can't believe we used to swim in that thing. Did you ever see the car?"

"At the bottom? No, but I heard about it."

"First time I got laid was out at that swimming hole. Yeah. Yeah ... I still wonder about that car. I think Ted just made that up out of whole cloth."

"So you said you're off to ... Afghanistan? Iraq?"

"We'll know when I get there."

"You're a career military guy?"

"Reserves. It's a job. Got me through college, then I kept, well, moonlighting. My income wasn't predictable. Wife's day care business had folded. Wasn't much more dangerous or interesting than any other job. You said you're in business?"

"Cardboard packaging industry."

She'd been making stickers from various skins: onion skins, drum skins, her own skin, bits of the undersides of fur things she'd bought from Salvation Army racks. Stickers in the shapes of hearts: human hearts, valentine hearts, hearts of palm, and reference books maps of the Midwest. Missing Frank. An executive, for Christ's sake. Not much in common. That was typical. He was good in bed, had a goofy sense of humor. Samantha made stickers of hearts and skins.

Chain bookstore they got here is like in one of them city malls. Has a section for homosexuals. Has a section for minority race appreciation or something. Negroes are okay and everything but they didn't even have Tribulation Force in stock as a book on tape. And the radio stations and television stations. Halftime nipples. Fox leaning to the left. If it ain't the end times it's gonna be a pain to wait around on this earth.

"Imagine the chances. I come to D.C., sit down at a bar, and start talking with somebody else from Implementation. Somebody actually named Kilroy."

"I've stopped being surprised. Just in general."

"When are you heading back to town?"

"I'm here another week, but I'm not heading back to town. I'm shipping out."

"Wow. Where's the Army sending you?"

"We'll know when we get there."

"I got caught breaking a window once, when I was ten. They hauled us into the police station. Called in my dad. I spent all summer mowing grass to pay for that damn window."

"We used to throw snowballs at cars."

"Did you ever get chased?"

"That's half the point, isn't it?"

"Yeah, we did a job for your company. Office on Main and Maize, right? Box factory on South?"

"Well, yeah? Did a job?"

"Codem. Where I worked before I was called up."

"Oh, yeah. Computer guys. Office systems."

"Yeah. I wasn't running that project. It went well?"

"It was great to be able to turn to somebody local."

"How's the cardboard business?"

"People are always going to need boxes."

Coming into Kinko's at six A.M. was the worst, but Samantha figured she might as well serve her time this week. Slow on the door. Keep the bells from tinkling. Still quite a while until sunrise. Ozzie's corpulent form was perched on the roly chair, undulant beneath his work apron. His head was tilted straight back, mouth open, resonant, like a Sounds of Nature cassette. Samantha leaned to place her mouth next to his ear:

"We're at code orange!"

There had never been a meeting of the Organization. Not a full meeting. Never could be. No one, not even the ones or one at the highest level, knows many others in the Organization. Individual cells are small, no more than 5 or 6 members. The lieutenants know only a few of each other. No fancy Internet mailing lists. No mailing lists—their own drops for dispatches. Wouldn't send 'em through the system.

During hunting season it was easy to get away from the shop. He'd of liked to actually hunt, of course—lots of 'em would. But this was more important. Filing down the hammer, precision sniping supplemented with practice in commando tactics. Groups like these—they were basically how the country got started. Hell, this camp was most patriotic thing he'd ever done, besides the petition drive for LaRouche.

That Unabomber had some good ideas. Not any of that egghead stuff he wrote, but the method worked pretty well. Got attention. And the computer stuff just makes it easier for 'em to track you down. He knew it. Got to respect that. That was one case study in the Manual. What worked what did not. The Tim McVeigh thing sorta worked, but was a screw-up in lots of ways. Got to attack the structures, not kill kids. Can't rent any trucks.

Sex with the simultaneous translator wasn't what made Roxanne decide to move to New York, and it wasn't work. She'd spent most of her life, most of the parts she didn't like, in Implementation. She could die there, doing the same things her mother and father had done. Not getting married straight out of high school or working at a factory or teaching elementary school, but still. She should have gotten out in her twenties. She could have. Still can. Time to go.

She boxed her things up, stacked the boxes on her desk. Had to empty out the reams of paper to get the last box. She bid farewell to the things which had been hers but which did not belong to her, the three-hole punch, the stapler, the computer monitor with antiglare screen, the coffeepot in the kitchen. She said goodbye to her work friends and coworkers. There was a little emotion, sure. A little. Maybe some uncertainly. Maybe some anticipation.

I wish I could be back with you in Implementation. I'm glad you'll get to D.C. Next weekend before I go. Given the economy and the way we weren't getting any projects at work, it's not the worst outcome. It could help me as an officer. If we decide that it's best for me to stay in after the war. We'll talk it over. What I'm doing here is important. But I also feel how you're the most important thing to me.

He only knew of two other cells but there were lots of 'em and each of the other lieutenants knew, he supposed, of two more. He'd not speak of one group to the other. Hell, one of 'em might of even been the ones that took out that first library. Too bad for that militiaman. But it wasn't a bad plan. One piece of the welfare state that would crumble, at least. Post office would of made sense. But they distributed tax forms in libraries, too.

Loose connections soldered by shortwave radio programs, typed newsletters of unknown origin. Never talk of it at the NRA meetings. Personal connections: Marine Corps, fire department. No blacks or spics. Watch out for them real serious Ku Kluxers, too: could be feds, or attract 'em. Independent guys, let down by the welfare state, sick of the lawyers and eggheads. Offer them to come train.

Most of 'em think there is a leader. Got to be. Those in the Organization refer to him sometimes, but never by name; simply as The Head. It must be The Head who had the idea about the libraries. Some say he lives in Montana. Some South Dakota. Maybe The Head is just a legend. But somebody makes the decisions. Somebody real smart.

Negotiating. Trying to sound unsure if she'd go. An extra 5K, the laptop she wanted, moving expenses. Standard stuff. A ritual, like bees dancing. Drafting the letter of resignation had been easy, but shopping with her aunt at Kroger's, trying to help her pick out the right roast for her father's birthday, picking the words to explain she was leaving Implementation—Roxanne found this difficult. She felt the silence stretch out as she handled shrink-wrapped cuts of meat.

When a bill becomes a law. When a Shield becomes a Storm. A waiting in Kuwait for Gulf War Redux. They couldn't locate a power supply for the machine they had set up for him, but he'd brought his laptop and an auto-switching power supply and a bag of weird adapters. The lieutenant was glad to see him. Didn't look like the kid had cracked apart yet. Kilroy was there.

Kilroy had been inching toward her the whole day. There was a natural tension between the liaison, the handler, and the embedded journalists, but also some affinity. Several times she complained that the side streets would be better for photographs, but he repeated that they couldn't spare an escort squad. She seemed to have a talent for looking unimpressed, but she was warming up to him, he could feel it.

Marie, the AP photographer, told Kilroy that whenever she was on assignment she made a point of visiting the nearest art museum, even if it hadn't been reduced to rubble. She found depictions of God everywhere she travelled. Kilroy touched her arm just lightly, thought glancingly of his wife. Marie spoke of iconic depictions of Jesus, of Christ's wounds, stigmata. In Bulgaria, his blood was purple, brilliant and luminous.

"I take a lot of pictures of feet. It seems like less of a violation. Full body pictures aren't really publishable anyway, not in the Western market. Nobody wants to see that. The damage is represented by what you see on the periphery. Strewn household items, shoes, dolls with their heads blown off. Automobiles with gaping holes. We can show violence done to machines."

Implementation was never invaded or occupied or really threatened, but wartime seemed to suit it like a ready fist suits an arm. There was a VFW memorial to the fallen of the town with one plaque that dated back to the Civil War. When the new Iraq war started, yellow ribbons went back up on the trees and the recruiters started making regular appearances at Implementation High assemblies again. There was still plenty of room for other plaques.

"Kilroy, we'll need you to babysit the embeds."

"If you need me to sir."

"We're short on public affairs people and you're a lot closer than what else we got. I'm guessing you know the basics of this?"

"Keep them fed, show them all the technology, make sure they're either at the base or the hotel."

After orientation, they had a picnic with the embeds. Lots of photos of GIs eating fried chicken in front of red, white, and blue bunting. They got some apple shipped in, too. A couple of bottles of Scotch floated around. Kilroy found himself off in a corner alone with the photographer as she smoked a Gitane. Filtered. Kilroy looked to the box, saw it was empty. "Sorry, it's my last one," she said. "I guess for a while." She smiled.

"I was a fashion photographer for a few years."

"Is this more exciting?"

"I got tired of spending so much time around almost-naked women who I didn't find beautiful. Made me feel empty."

"And how does this make you feel?"

"Scared. How about you?"

"Less bored, I guess."

"Are you married?"

Kilroy didn't think of it as infidelity until well after he was spent, his boxer briefs rolled up in a ball on the other side of Marie's room at the Kuwait Hilton. He did pause momentarily as he mounted her, thinking of the implications of sleeping with a reporter, but the only orders were to show her a good time. They were sort of in the same business. There was some real heat to it, too. He didn't feel any regret the next morning or even the morning after that.

Afghanistan, and now Iraq. A few more flags went up around Main Street around when Baghdad got the ultimatum, though the whole town had been decked out in the Stars and Stripes since 9/11. Liquor store owner dumped a case of French red in the gutter. Diner put up a sign: THESE FRIES DON'T RUN. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down* were all checked out at Blockbuster. And business as usual. Maybe North Korea or Iran would be next, why not?

The Implementation Star ran a story about the library's decision to hand over all its patron records to the FBI for the investigation. All the remaining records, which didn't amount to much. Frank wasn't worried—all the authorities would find there was his penchant for Russian novels. But Samantha was a little perturbed. Seems she had habitually made modifications to the books she had checked out, bits of cutting and pasting to improve the texts.

They looked for the contact lens for twenty minutes and finally started laughing about it. "We're going to miss the movie at this rate," Frank said. "Can't you wear your glasses?" "I didn't bring them." "We could go ... get them." They'd always gone to his place. He had no idea where she lived.

"Shouldn't we be getting to the movie?"
"It'll be on for another few weeks, Samantha—I mean, let's go if you say so. But I'd really love to keep looking at this, if I can."
"Frank, it's not really ready for other people to see."
"I thought the stickers were your creative thing."
"Yeah, when I get bogged down on this I do the stickers for a while."

"That not art. That's pornography."
"Come on. It can't be porn when you do it with a Xerox machine."
"You really have something against the manager here, don't you?"
"Maybe. I would have enjoyed this anyway."
"I've still gotta wash my hands. When's the maintenance guy supposed to show up?"

They added another shift and kept the floor running 24/7. Frank spent a lot of time checking to see that the manager didn't crack and helping to keep an eye on the new guys. Some of the trainers joked that they ought to sleep in the warehouse with this much overtime going around. Some of the guys would make upwards of \$6,000 this month alone. Frank didn't like the idea of war, but it was damn good for business.

"For whom?"
"Why?"
"For what?"
"Take off your pants."
"No."
"Yes."
"For yoummm."
"Because you deserve."
"For nothing."
"You're kidding."
"Right now?"
"Yes."

Worse than he'd imagined, but not a slum. Not even a trailer. Samantha shook the peeling door open, flipped the light on, and went to find her glasses. Around the light switch and everywhere else the walls were tacked with sheets, pinned a dozen high. Creatures like hieroglyphs engaged in all manner of activity and wordless conversation upon them, conducted epic battles, tremendous journeys. Samantha was back from the counter. "Ready?" she asked. "You drew all this?"

"We don't have enough to do the ad agency thing, but we could pay you to draw something for the library fund drive campaign."
"Like the lead singer's girlfriend, playing the tambourine."
"No! Hell, I can't even sing. Look, I'll put it to the committee. Get their ideas for artists, too, put everything in front of them and have them vote on it."

The engineer flew in from Wisconsin to figure out how to place the new machinery, run the power lines. The military specs called for boxes of irregular shapes and sizes, durable, coated cardboard. They asked for 50,000 Class 27 containers, multipurpose, handy for the shipment of HRs. Easy to pack them up and send them to the home village or overseas, one size fits all. Marked so you could see which way the head was, so those human remains didn't settle during shipment.

The 7-11 was shut down for couple of weeks while the FBI interrogated its owner about the library bombing. People felt bad for Hassan. He had been there almost twenty years by now and he donated money to the animal shelter and he seemed harmless. Still, they figured he must be connected somehow. When they went to fill up they'd smile and say hi and try to remember everything that happened in the store in case the information would turn out useful later.

The kids were psyched, ready to war. Some of them were nervous about the biological and chemical weapons and all the other WMDs that might lie ahead, but mostly they took comfort from the veterans' war stories. Last time it had mostly been a matter of taking in strays who were desperate to surrender and cleaning up after the daisy cutters. A lot of digging. A lot of awful smells.

"I think that a lot of questions have gone not only unanswered, but unasked."

"Like what?"

"Like for whom is the funhouse a screaming from the sky above the port, the color of ... television?"

"You're drunk."

"Is that even a question?"

"Ape Boss, I had an honorable discharge last night!"

"Hunnnh."

"Say, you the only one in the platoon didn't get the Victoria's Secret catalog in the mail yesterday?"

"I don't care to talk about fucking myself, Widget."

"I bet you just snuggle that M240, whisper to it—dонтcha, Ape Boss?"

"The weapon is for fucking Iraqis. It's for messing up those elite Republicans and shit."

When Roxanne told her father of her plan to accept the new position in New York City, he looked at her as if she had just announced her intention to jump off a cliff or told him that she was a lesbian. New York is terrorist target number one. And the muggers. Her father kept a homeland security kit in the closet and had prepared the basement as a safe room.

On the flight from Cleveland to New York, Roxanne sat by the window, near the back. A man in a suit with a blue tie took the aisle seat. Roxanne hoped that nobody would take the middle. The man had a brushcut. When he shifted in his seat, something like a gun bulge. Death in flames. A dozen movie-scene disasters. William Shatner going crazy about a man on the wing in that *Twilight Zone* episode. The man smiled at her. Air Marshal. He must be. Homeland Security.

"The orders were to shoot anything that moved."

"Sir, it was a flamingo."

"Did it move?"

"It was a fucking flamingo. Sir."

"Your leave this weekend is canceled."

"I thought I'd be all freaked about it, but I really can't wait to pop a cap in one of those sand niggers."

"Motherfucker! Didn't you see *Three Kings*? You can't say that shit—call them 'haji' or something. It's offensive to our troops and shit. Sarge will bust you one."

"Uh, Widget, in case you haven't noticed, I'm black, just like you and the sergeant."

"No shit, nigger! Still, don't use those racial epitaphs, talking about how you'll cash those motherfuckers."

"Men, this militia protects the liberties of this country. We have opposed the federal government's tyrant intrusions, but we know this government does have authority over our defense against Arabs and other foreigners. In time of war we know where we stand, with America. I have been contacted by a good American company that wishes to employ members of this militia to protect its goods and services from the aggressors in Iraq. And the pay's good."

The moving van looked pitifully empty. Car sold. Huge dresser and table sold. Roxanne had whittled many of her miscellaneous possessions away: given some sentimental objects to her father, sent others—the snow-globes, the boxes of *Wired* magazines—to Goodwill or the landfill. The desktop and monitor were in their original boxes, boxes that would not live long once she go into her cramped quarters in New York. They're just things, she told herself, not my life.

Roxanne was close enough to work in Midtown, close enough to the Village. Kip's Bay wasn't the most happening part of town, but compared to Implementation? She hesitated at the small photo album. The order and calm of the streets in gray and blue. Her parents' house. That trio of high school friends. She slapped it closed, kept working to empty the boxes into the shelves and drawers. Along with the excitement for Manhattan there was some pull there, greener grass.

Soldiers of Iraq! You serve a noble post that befits your great civilization, which had many great leaders in the past. Now a pathetic man vomits lies on your country and tries to use you as a puppet. Saddam seeks to bend you to his illegal purposes, to protect himself and glorify and enrich himself. He does not care if you die for nothing.

Saddam dishonors you as soldiers by playing at being your commander. He crushes the liberties of the Iraqi people and prepares for war, neglecting your health, roads, and education. He spurns the world and your brother countries. All of the world can see that Saddam is a violator of laws who lives like a king at your expense. Decide for yourself!

A single possible escape remains for you. Approach the United States forces slowly with your hands in the air. Have your weapon across your back with the muzzle pointing down, and with the magazine removed, and empty of rounds. Those who do this will be spared and will reunite with their families. Only surrender will let you avoid death from our swift and powerful forces.

In Umm Qasr Kilroy advises on and oversees the distribution of candy to Iraqi children, Hershey's bars, with and without almonds, crates of Kit Kats and M&Ms. He smiths lines for soldiers to offer, in translation, on little Bazooka-gum-style addenda. Statements to play on the loudspeakers as the kids arrive for their candy bars. Words to set the parents more at ease, words to clear the air. You need to build trust. Everybody likes chocolate.

You can't just take down a statue of a dictator. Production values must be considered. It's a photo shoot and a dance party. The locals are often ill equipped with proper tools, pick axes, heavy chains and the like. Children must be involved, at least in the celebration. Kids in ragged clothing. A boom box or two can supply the songs of liberation. Dollars, candy bars, and bottled water. Camera crews. It's not easy, but a statue falling with no one there to hear it might as well not have fallen.

Your leader prepares massive weapons in violation of his promises and agreements, though these weapons will not help him. He refuses to allow inspectors to assure that his military conduct is appropriate. He spurns the world and his own people. Saddam shames the soldier and the people of Iraq by being a false soldier.

Our planes and helicopters and tanks will swarm over you and overtake you before you are even alerted. Our swift and powerful weapons will end your lives. The bombs of the United States are accurate enough to strike right on your vehicle or hit you where you stand. They are awesome and massive in the destruction they bring, powerful enough to open the skies and the earth.

Remember that Saddam placed mines behind those troops he threw into the desert without equipment, after the invasion of Kuwait. There is no path away from us where you can flee. Sling your empty weapon toward the ground, on your back, and hold your hands up, surrendering to the United States forces. Only this will allow you to live.

"Good work with the children, Kilroy. Now we want you to do some similar work for stickier situations."

"Stickier situations, sir?"

"Woman walking towards a checkpoint pushing a baby carriage doesn't stop as ordered. Warning shots fired. Woman still won't stop. She is fired upon, is hit. Turns out it's a baby, not a bomb."

"My assignment?"

"The letter to accompany the compensation."

Kilroy wonders about Marie now and then. She never wrote him after. He follows the movements of her unit and thinks of slipping it in the first time, of her rising and falling in that hotel room, her moan, the quiver of her lip. She never calls. She never writes. Not that he does. Sometimes he thinks about his wife. Sometimes the two of them talk on the phone or video. He will never tell. She will never know. He feels distant from her and from himself; he thinks about this late at night.

"Ape Boss, it's totally fucked up that the people from the Bible used to live here."

"Ain't it."

"Bad guys living here since the Old Testament.

Pharaohs made slaves outta the Jews. Then the Jews smoked 'em. Wrath of God type shit."

"'member that sniper doin' card tricks in Abdali?"

"Kline? He must have bagged a dozen haji by now."

"He ain't gettin' any more. Got hit by an IED."

Some of the guys in the Unit are sitting in the middle of the Humvees with plates behind 'em, guys lucky enough to have flak jackets on the outside. The active-duty guys are dressed for the dance, sure, armored head to toe. The reservists have the same uniforms, more belly, less kevlar. This guy from Implementation, Ted, tells about manning a machine gun in a convoy. Without ammo. Haji snipers were probably up and down the route. His CO ordered him to look mean.

How graphic is an image of a body bag hoisted over one marine's shoulder, really? Does the black bag's anonymity remove from us the horror of that death's singularity? Does it make it possible for us to regard the fallen man as waste? It is the same color as the bags seen at lawn and leaf collection time. The skin is thicker, holding fluids and other things that are falling out. We can show the body bag, not the body. We can put the bag in a cardboard box and ship it home.

The Implementation Star was busy covering high school basketball and the four-cell annex on the jail. There was not much written about the war until the special section explaining each of the playing cards. When the National Museum of Iraq was looted, for a about half an hour, three elderly women held placards that said "Security must preserve culture, too!" at the site of Implementation's demolished library. Nobody driving by really understood what they meant.

"Widget, what's the first thing you're gonna do when you get back home?"

"The first thing I'll do is take a nice long piss, 'cause I can barely stand to go the can on a Herc. Latrine, no troubles, but the plane gets me plugged up."

"I wasn't asking about your bodily functions."

"Then I'm gonna go to the mall, or to a proper PX, and get me an Xbox. Fuck yeah."

"Call of Duty kicks ass, Widget."

"Yo Ape Boss."

"Get on with that blanket drill. We roll at 0600."

"I had that dream again, motherfucking haji kid with his face half blown off, calling my mama a ho."

"Guess you showed that motherfucker."

"Kid was my little brother's age. Didn't know shit."

"You know, my little brother got his brains blown out on a street corner in Compton. Happens everywhere. Shut your eyes and sleep."

"Saddam's art collection was shit. Think oil on velvet. Think heavy metal posters. Lots of bare breasts and swordplay. Gold faucets, but you would think the guy would have like frescoes, or one of those tile things—"

"A mosaic?"

"Yeah, about the fertile crescent of civilization and all."

"The guy had poor taste."

"A Monet or something. He coulda bought a Picasso."

"Philistine."

"I don't think they should show the corpses on TV."

"Honestly, they're savages."

"Yeah. Rumsfeld looks like Skeletor—that hideous laugh—that dry chortle. He's enjoying this."

"No, I mean the Iraqis. What they've done. What they would do if we didn't stop them."

"You mean like invade another country and try to topple the regime there, for no clear reason?"

"This mess is a fucking zoo. I mean, shit, you know."

"Widget was crying about the monkey house."

"One of the fucking lions got out and ate a horse."

"You seen that tiger? Skinnier than Gwyneth Paltrow. People don't know how to take care of animals."

"This is a humanitarian crisis. We gotta get these cats some meat."

"It's not a humanitarian crisis, sir. Technically. They are animals."

"I think the motherfucker looks like a test chimp what they would send into outer space."

"Nah, that's Alfred E. Neuman in a flight suit."

"Mission accomplished, thank you very much. When am I gonna get to drink my celebratory six pack?"

"When I get home, I'll go to Yale on the GI Bill."

"I think I'll invest my combat pay in a baseball team. The Expos are for sale."

"Fire in the hole!"

Knowing nobody and having little else to do, Roxanne worked with great intensity. The apartment was small and unfamiliar, the office large and open, filled with people at desks. No cubicles, but it didn't matter. They hardly ever talked on the phone or with each other. Keyboard activity, the rolling of designer chairs. She reconfigured her life. The smiling people who hustled in the street and stood looking sexy at subway stops. It turned out they were shy.

Roxanne gives up cornflakes for bagels and lox. She eats pre-cut slices of mango served in plastic packages, bird-seed-like brittles wrapped in deli plastic. She wonders at the people performing youth and beauty. For a second time she walks to the gaping hole in lower Manhattan, just to look again. She wonders what kind of life her mother would have had, if she had lived, if she had lived in New York City, if she had left him when she was young.

Samantha and Frank are having their first real argument. It starts out innocently enough: They are naming an imaginary child. The child is a boy or a girl, it does not matter. What matters is that Samantha thinks Frank should have a political consciousness. Frank says that he's against much of what's going on but that he does not think one can make a difference. Once, when she is angry, Samantha says this is bullshit. The child's name may be Leah, it may be Lee. It does not matter.

Having come, the war doesn't go away. It lingers, like a cloud of dust, or data. Frank feels bad. Business is good. He could have made other choices. She is right. He cares about her, about the new library, about his new chair and getting her a piece of jewelry that will be appropriate (she would not want expensive) and yet show the way he feels. He'd supposed to care about the kids over there, he knows. He ships boxes. He feels guilt. He carries on.

Frank is invited to address the VFW the weekend Samantha drives up to Cleveland with a group from some arts mailing list she gets over the Internet. Frank is introduced as a patriot, a supplier of materials necessary for the invasion. Samantha is going to put up stickers at the protest. Neither is quite certain what the other is doing. Frank tells her he has a business meeting, she says she's meeting some old artist friends from college. Neither lies. Neither tells the truth.

Roxanne calls her father once a week. She plans to become a Yankees fan so that the antagonism between her and her father, on the level of baseball, will lead to a better relationship. She consults a co-worker about how to become a fan and he looks at her as if she has asked how to grow arms. She gains to courage to ask a bartender. "It's not that tough to become a fan. Had to do it for this job. Sports page is required reading. You like hot dogs?"

Most of the others in Roxanne's building were polite but distant. They say apartment dwellers only get to talk to their neighbors when they're standing outside watching the building burn down. The five punk kids downstairs in a one-bedroom were responsible for the all-night pulse of sounds. From right above her there was often male and female Slavic yelling. She tried to ignore it. But there were slaps and thumps and screams this night. Roxanne picked up the phone.

After the police conversation was over upstairs and no noises flowed in its place, neither the earlier sounds of domestic violence nor the punk soundtrack, Roxanne went to her small separate kitchen. Her mother was there, closing the refrigerator, looking over, and understanding how she felt without needing to hear a word. Her mother handed her a glass of milk. Strange that she was here and not in Implementation. Roxanne looked up from the glass. The kitchen was empty.

Samantha took out another notebook that already had scraps of her evolving society in it. The hieroglyphics that were also characters of another sort, conversing and interacting in peaceful, playful primate ways. She picked up a pencil, then a pen. She looked over the pages of different sizes that were pinned around her room. Maybe by the time she reached the end of the notebook she would know who they were.

Frank fucked Samantha with the TV on, volume low. The TV said that 2,000 or so Iraqi troops had been killed. The TV said at least three Americans were dead. Samantha was a good ripe fuck on top. Frank let Samantha fuck him like that for a while, just like that. Frank watched the TV. "All those dead," Frank said, "miraculous." "Oh god."

Kilroy finds himself scanning the photo credits in the *Herald Tribune* Sunday mornings in the Mess. He drinks too strong coffee and eats Rice Chex with bananas and thinks about Marie the photographer and wishes he had pictures from that night. He thinks about Francine too. His leave coming up. Their anniversary coming up too. Ten years. Where did the time go?

Kilroy's circle of dead friends grows, as it only can. Friends of friends, casual acquaintances, and beyond the circle enemies and civilians he will never know. Death wears on, tires you out. Sand gets in everything, is everywhere, on papers in the filing cabinet, in his toothbrush. The projects tire him out sometimes, not that the projects at Codem were any better. That life was a desert, though nobody was shooting at his head then.

So many bones were shattered, the doctor said, Kilroy would have to be flown to Frankfurt to be treated by a podiatric surgeon. But the doc told him not to worry, they'd have him back on one foot in a week or two. He'd have to change the plans for their anniversary. Maybe she could fly over and meet him in Paris. Francine had always wanted to go there.

Roxanne takes the train back to Implementation. One of her co-workers laughs at this plan, which isn't very nice considering that she had just said she was going to an old friend's funeral. She spends about an hour looking at old photos on her PowerBook but there aren't outlets, so she flips the lid shut and shuffles through a stack of printouts, waiting for the motion and hum to soothe her.

Roxanne parked in the lot next to the arts and crafts store. She imagined an East Village hipster boutique with middle-American "home sweet home" and "gone fishin'" craft items, birdhouses and clocks in the shape of Ohio and the teddy bears she used to paint. It might work. Hush Puppies caught on, didn't they? Roxanne went in and picked up fake flowers, materials for constructing dreamcatchers.

"Long time no see. How's it in psyops?"

"Garbage out, garbage out. What's been up?"

"We've been blowing things up. Lots of 'em. Say did you know Ted Brewster?"

"Yeah. He picked on me in middle school. Fighting Elk football. Two years ahead of me."

"Shit, Kilroy. He's going home in a box. Shot in the back of the neck."

The specialist was starting to fall apart. He panicked when that car backfired, steering into the crowd, sending bodies tumbling in flight. Kilroy backed away and stumbled, fell forward, and his fucking foot was crushed to the ground beneath the breaking wheel of the Hum-vee. BACK BACK BACK he screamed to the specialist who was too stunned for four seconds to do anything, but finally managed to jerk the vehicle into reverse. Kilroy fell to his left knee, blood bubbling from his boot.

In the hospital bed in Frankfurt, Kilroy spent little time thinking of his foot, which gave him only a dull ache. He thought of the lieutenant and the loudspeaker teams. He winced at and ached for the others. A guy half his age without legs. A guy older than him who had no injury to be seen but who woke up sobbing for his mother. Some of them seemed headed for the living tomb of the VA hospital; he'd be making love to his wife next week in a Paris hotel.

At the train station, Roxanne finds her father waiting. Got there forty minutes early, no doubt. They talk about weather and food. City mouse and country mouse, amicable. Summer waves by them outside the car. He says little about the funeral but to mention that it's at least good that so many old friends can have some time together. Roxanne describes the Hudson and the East River, the parks, the museums. Her father says the Cracker Barrel shut down.

Ted was special to Roxanne. He was her first. When she was seventeen she had felt that he was the right one. Later she figured that at least he was the right one for right then. He was attractive, more popular than the other guys she'd dated, sort of tender, and she had been tired of waiting. He'd dumped her a couple nights after the turnabout dance, after the big night. She didn't know what resolution she ever expected, but not him dying now, not like this.

Blood donations had gone down. There were more volunteers for the fire departments in neighboring towns. Reality TV branched from love into plastic surgery and home improvement. Alcohol consumption up, other carbohydrates down. Threat level stayed at yellow with occasional jumps to orange. Church attendance up, consumer spending steady, a few more letters to the editor submitted. Weeping more frequent. Same amount of uncomfortable laughter.

"This is absolutely the right choice for the company. It's the way to keep growing this business, keep these jobs here in Implementation."

"I don't understand you, Frank. You're telling me, you're telling us on the Board, that we should sell the company out from under you?"

"Bill, I'll find another job. You aren't going to find another buyer like this, and the company is going to hit a lid soon if you don't take this offer."

"You did a great job on the program."

"Thanks. It's not-art or anything."

"It's nice. The things on your walls, though, they're beautiful, so detailed, and, well, exotic."

"Sometimes I wake up thinking of people dying."

"We all do, Samantha. New York and D.C. Afghanistan and Iraq. The library."

"Frank. Nobody was in the library."

Samantha dreams less often now but she wakes up with ideas, configurations of images, plans for utopias, work-from-home moneymaking schemes, particularly strange and disturbing things for her to be thinking of. A few times she rolled over, found a sketchpad, started to write these down. In the afternoon light they read like rantings. Now she silences the thoughts by building to-do lists, remembering the restaurants where she has recently eaten.

Another dream about the library. Frank sits in an afterschool circle. An apple tree grows very quickly in the center. The story about the guy who went around planting seeds. Samantha beside Frank, her hair in lovely braids. Frank reaches up to pluck an apple for her. As he touches one, his hand goes numb, falls off of his wrist, dissolves into earth. He looks over at Samantha. She pretends not to notice, but she does.

The grand opening banner flapped in front of Bounty Cow. There were professionally printed signs, carefully designed to look handmade, right down to the superfluous apostrophe in "avacado's." International aisle, and an espresso machine at the end of it. The people of Implementation drove by, looked over. Some came in, bought star-spangled ribbon magnets for their cars, admired the Tae-Bo videos by the checkout.

Samantha gave her two weeks' notice first thing that morning at Kinko's and started thinking. It was just what she never wanted to have to do: think at work. And next, she'd be a salaried artist. She let out a wail that turned all five heads in the place. "You okay? I thought you got caught in the binder." "Just a paper cut." "That's pain for you." "Under the nail." "Man, it's like the Passion of Samantha. You better stay away from the heavy machinery in case it's some curse."

"Look, Samantha, I just want you to know, if you want, you can move in. Take the guesthouse for a studio. I know you're settled in at your place, but think about it."

"Frank, I don't know what to say."

"So think on it. I'll be lonely during the day, otherwise."

"It went through today?"

"The deal is sealed. We're both unemployed now."

The night before Ted's funeral, Frank felt the ache at his wrist, at the scar. His hand throbbed with a dull beating, and he knew that it would rain for the funeral the next day. Twist of fucking fate really, that Ted, most likely to succeed, the dream date of every girl at Imp High, had his pick, even if was statistically the second-best receiver, was killed in Iraq with a beer-belly and a command of truck drivers. Sniper's bullet in the neck. A noble way to go, sort of heroic.

As Frank cleared out his desk, he thought about what he might do, which was whatever he wanted. He'd helped to negotiate the sale, and his parachute was golden enough for him to take his time before moving on to the next company. Find the right challenge. He ordered a crate of Tolstoy from Amazon before unplugging his laptop. This would be the summer he'd finally read *War and Peace* again. His cell phone rang. Another headhunter.

Everybody thought blue-eyed Ted would do something great, run *Newsweek* or replace Walter Conkrite, but he didn't even make the *Implementation Star* masthead. Roxanne would see him around town, wave, talk about the new restaurant that opened where the Italian place used to be, not say anything about their lives or their memories. High school dazler, college dropout, carpet salesman, U.S. Army Reserves, a last chance at greatness.

As Kilroy sleeps his knees twitch. He's back in the darkness of the woods outside his first childhood home, in *Implementation*. He is there with three friends and they are playing *Search and Rescue*. He is dreamflying when he gets to the ravine, coasting up above the trees. The town in lights. His dream has forgotten the others and he settles down alone by the church where he went since his infancy, St. Francis Xavier, where he married Francine.

Frank hadn't been to Mueller's Funeral Parlor since Big Jim wasted away to a twig. Roxanne hadn't haunted the place since her mother passed. The smell of mums made Samantha think of the bouquet the volunteer firemen sent for her father. Frank gave Roxanne a hug, hadn't seen her for years. Samantha nodded to Roxanne. "The—teddy bears," she said. "Cheese," Roxanne replied.

These are the people of *Implementation*, Ohio, in the United States of America, in the World, in terror. They believe in freedom of speech and religion and arms, although they do not agree about what freedom means. They think that weapons of mass destruction are prepared in a faraway place or else they think they are not. They believe in progress or the Lord, or they doubt. They suffer themselves, they marry, they raise their kind.

Four shovels at the ceremony so Frank and Mayor Harvey and the two biggest donors could smile and sink the blades into the sand at the same time. The real groundbreaking with the backhoes wouldn't come for another week. The city, Frank, and the architects had settled on a plan for a larger but still modest library, a meeting room where the Oprah book club members could get together, a media room and plenty of computers. They waited for the flash.

The proposal to name the meeting room of the new library after him met quick approval. There was a Ted Brewster memorial ceremony at the high school, recounting his track and field achievements, his patriotism. A lot of people in black, women with kids in middle school choking back tears, thinking of when they'd gone out. Ted was well known. The first to come home like this.

The French didn't seem to be any worse than any other people. They could cook. Kilroy tried out snails, they tasted like garlic, and he slid his hand to Francine's inner thigh, pleasingly plump, warm, and squeezed. She smiled and he felt good. He wanted to tell her something, he wasn't sure what. Nothing felt wrong but there was something he should tell her. Things he'd seen and done. The kid with the cracked-open skull on a stretcher—she didn't need to know.

"I swear to you this place will be a battleground too."
"What channel are you tuned to? Are you the backup library bomber or something?"

"I don't mean that. Some people want the present to work out at any cost. Some people think there can be something better. You wait and see. The election comes around, there'll be a real fight."

"Nah. Look at what's been happening. The tragedy. The war. It's a uniter, not a divider."

Everybody weeps for something different. There are those who knew him well, those who knew him only briefly, those who knew him not at all, those who truly weep for their own mothers and fathers, those who weep for their mortality, those who weep silently for the abstraction made flesh and brought home. Of course it rains, and there's mud all around as they lower Ted Brewster into the accommodating ground.

