

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 Ritchie. 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 fastmoving 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."