

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 Nighthawks 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 Pythagorus. 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."