

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. The 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.