

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 get into 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.

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 decide that together. What I'm doing here is important. But I also feel how you're the most important thing to me.

"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 didn't. 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.

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.

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. It was standard. A ritual, like bees dancing. Drafting the letter of resignation. It'd 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 and she felt the silence stretch out as she handled cuts of meat wrapped in plastic.