

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 Humvee. 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 had been 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 after-school 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 check-out.

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 dazzler, 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 dream-flying 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, hand'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.

