

a novel

# IMPLEMENTATION

They were numb for a week like everyone else, Kilroy worse than Francine, probably. He knew one of the guys at the Pentagon—the ballbuster who'd been his drill sergeant. He'd hated him, but hell, he shouldn't have gone like that. Francine's father used to golf with this securities lawyer who was killed when the first tower fell. Probably not a good time to try for a kid again. He was on inactive reserve. He had a bad feeling about it.

Kilroy never quite forgave his parents—not for the name, not for anything. He called his wife at work right after he got the call. He picked her up and asked if she would drive. He spent most of the drive on the cell phone, when there was reception, calling friends and saying goodbye. Francine didn't say anything. At the airport she kissed him and drove off. Kilroy got through security quickly and boarded the plane. That's how Kilroy left Implementation.

The places Kilroy visited were typically not places he intended to visit. Kilroy followed orders. It wasn't that he lacked free will or the ability to think and speak clearly. It was a lack of ambition, more or less. Kilroy didn't feel "driven" by anything within himself. His journey was a matter of drifts in changing tides.

Kilroy loved Francine more, for instance, than he had loved Karen Ross, who took his virginity behind a stack of tumbling mats in the Implementation High gym. He loved her more than he loved a steaming plate of liver and onions. He loved her more than the touchdown pass he caught that would always be the stuff of reunion legend. He loved her more than America. A child shouldn't be necessary for that kind of love. Why did they need more?

Implementation's more folk song than symphony, more doggerel than sonnet, more cherry pie than creme brûlée, yes we ate peanut butter and jelly, yes we wore denim overalls at times, but the town's got its own flavor, and its people their own eccentricities, nightmares, and ambitions. Roxanne never wore trousers. Frank was the cardboard box king. Samantha made exquisite graffiti. Kilroy was here.

"You should've gotten out after you got back from the Gulf."

"I know Francine."

"Or at least last year when we talked about it. They dangle Officer Training School. So what?"

"You're right Francine."

"How long will it be?"

"Months, maybe. Until they call back and tell me to report, you mean? Days."

It was just Kilroy who entered the hotel but Warrant Officer Berge was who emerged. He went on to base by bus, saluted at the gate, and went in to report to the captain, who pronounced his last name almost perversely. Then, he went on to his post, his station: Power it up, grasp firmly, click. The campaign was beginning. He started typing the first bullet point.

There were orders and email waiting when Kilroy reported. Shuffle the papers, enter the data, compute the multivariate ANOVAs. The battle for hearts and minds was on, the struggle for infinite justice. Kilroy was enduring freedom. He was back to doing that dance of marketing and military might, the thirty-seven foxtrot: assisting in the integration of psychological operations planning.

Kilroy lay in the hotel room, blinking rapidly. Maybe it would make him tired. The ceiling went dark gray, then black, then dark gray. He thought of an open field. Not a desert. A field. He imagined ordnance. At this delirious moment of sleeplessness, even incoming ordnance would be preferable. He began counting cluster bombs. He tried to forget the desert.

"Isn't there some old-timer, or town historian—"  
"The thing is, they claim not to remember—"  
"So you're telling me that there is actually no one in Implementation who knows the origin of Implementation—"  
"It was the military—tests of some kind, some say. Or maybe it had something to do with religion."  
"Brigham Young passed through?"

"He looks great."  
"They did a wonderful job."  
"He looks thin."  
"And dead."  
"Frank."  
"He wasn't thin. He was fat. A fat friend. A pig."  
"Frank. Stop."  
"Did you ever see the man eat? He enjoyed himself."

"I grew up in Superior."  
"It's nice there, yeah?"  
"Not really. Kind of seedy. Petty people. You?"  
"I'm from Implementation."  
"Oh, I've heard of it. Never been. Nice?"  
"I don't like to talk about it."  
"Really? Why?"  
"Look—there's lot of memories there, okay?"

"Okay—a guy walks into a priest and a rabbi—"  
"You're going to the moon Roxanne."  
"How about this one: Three genies come out of their bottles and are trapped on a desert island—"  
"Why aren't there any good jokes about war? Huh?"  
"You know who has jokes about war?"  
"What?"  
"The Russians have jokes about war."

"I'm sorry it had to end like this. It's really for the best, though. We couldn't keep going on this way. It was getting so stifling—I know that you needed more space. We were seeing each other for six, seven, eight hours as day. It's better we end this relationship now," said the television.

Everybody's got a story in Implementation. It's that kind of town. Everybody knows everyone else, at least halfway. You see him on the street, you recognize him from the bus station, the waiting room at the dentist's. You recognize her high heels, the nape of her neck. You open the door for her at the funeral parlor, on Third Street. A brief smile. She is there for a visitation, not the funeral you're attending. No one speaks.

It's not as if you actually leave Implementation. It never felt like home, but it sticks with you still. You might be sipping an espresso in a Florence piazza or drinking a margarita at a bar in Athens, Georgia and you find yourself tasting the joe from the Main Diner or the rye and soda of Implementation. As simple as the young Jimmy Stewart, but less sentimental. Implementation is the high school dance that you went to with your mother's best friend's daughter.

There are dozens—hundreds—of middle-American towns like Implementation: Springfield, Normal, Intercourse. But no others could claim leadership in cardboard box manufacturing; and even neglecting this, few others could boast as active and diverse a group of micro-industries, which ranged from desktop publishing software development to advanced mechanical poultry harvesting.

There was a library in Implementation at the center of town. No courthouse—it wasn't the county seat. The library was made of stones and seemed only the size of four or five bookmobiles. Outside was a statue of a man sitting in a chair. On the pedestal there was a discoloration where a plaque used to be. Samantha did not know who was depicted in the statue. Kilroy and Roxanne and Frank didn't care.

For a moment, it seemed as if everybody in Implementation would dance—might dance—the way that they intended to dance at the Senior Prom but never did. Here it was, an off-year reunion—the fifteenth—and still they came. Would they dance. Most of them moved muscles in their back, in their neck, just-about-dancing. They moved without standing up. They looked down the bar at each other with long-ago wishes. They moved. They did not move.

Roxanne hated the song "Roxanne" and she hated the Police. By extension she hated police and in fact any man in uniform. And yet she felt a kind of self-defeating attraction to the same. She hated Sting. And bees. She hated Paul Newman, by extension. She fucked a cop she met in a bar one night who looked vaguely in the light of three gin rickeys like Tom Cruise. In the morning she told him he was a lousy lay, get the fuck out.

Through a series of coincidences Roxanne ended up leaving the state for college. She fit right in when she started school in Iowa. As others found themselves off-kilter, she took to her studies and social life with equal aptitude, mastering the early math classes with ease and finding that her new friendships were deepening even as her circle of friends grew. It was a perfect time. Looking back to it made her sad.

The circle of high school friends had held steady at nine for the past few New Year's parties; they were glum to be reduced to eight. Frank remained the most successful, yet still needed to impress everyone. At five 'til midnight, he opened the trunk and announced that the fireworks would be "Mexican style" this year. He handed the handguns around, drew out a .38 for himself, and unloaded it into the sky.

Samantha is asleep; reams of paper fill her dreams like an ocean or swamp. Then there is an interruption—a paper jam of the mind—and the landscape is suddenly full of clowns. They cavort and honk their spherical red noses; they pile into a Volkswagon. The honking of noses—or is it the Volkswagon?—grows louder. She wakes to her ringing alarm. Time for work.

Samantha could tell stories. She could do counseling at Kinko's if she were so inclined. The old woman photocopying her husband's obituary for friends who couldn't come from out of town for the funeral. The man duplicating his wife's unsent letter to her lover, pushing the button each time like it was violence. The homeless man with his poems. Her recipes for rhubarb pie. His folk trio's first gig. Her unpublished memoirs. A life worth saving. His lost dog. Her missing pussy.

Roxanne's tendonitis flared up. It was crunch time, and there was page after page of specification to turn into code. Two days of code to type; about five hours left before the deadline. Her wrists ached. Her lumbar was not adequately supported. Her eyes were aching, or itching, or in some vague way feeling uncomfortable. The bastards could have given her a decent chair.

Roxanne painted teddy bears when she was young. She painted teddy bears in the colors of  $\pi$ . She drew a correspondence between ten colors and the digits, and she outlined a grid on the bears and painted them in the progression of the digits of  $\pi$ . She found them at second-hand shops and yard sales for a buck or two. She painted them in shades of pink. She painted them in blues, greens. She painted them in  $\pi$ .

Frank was twenty-seven years old when he got his hand cut clean off with a circular saw that had no guard. Surprising how little pain. The disbelief and wailing. The bag of ice. The gurney. Recovery that took only weeks. A microsurgeon was on duty—the reattachment was a cinch. It seemed like some surreal sitcom episode to him now; he was embarrassed to relate the experience, even when someone noticed the hairline bracelet of a scar.

Samantha makes stickers. Stickers from aluminum plates, velour stickers, velvet stickers—feelies, collage stickers with lists from the *New York Times*, lists from the *Implementation Star*, crushed glass stickers that change color in sun and rain, stickers of onion peel and orange skin, stickers that mention revolution, stickers that pay tribute to Japanese films and Afghan women in burkas, stickers recounting what talking Barbie dolls say, stickers made from locks of hair.

Thanks to her routines and the lack of further calamities, Samantha was doing well. She felt stupid. She shouldn't have gone to donate blood: it made her sick, it was unnecessary even in New York, and she was hundreds of miles away. Of course her second cousin who lived way out in Queens was all right. She did not send Christmas cards that year. The only one she got was from her landlord. She figured she must be the only one who paid rent on time.