

When a bill becomes a law. When a Shield becomes a Storm. Awaiting in Kuwait for Gulf War Redux. They couldn't locate a power supply for the machine they had set up for him, but he'd brought his laptop and an autoswitching power supply and a bag of weird adapters. The lieutenant was glad to see him. Didn't look like the kid had cracked apart yet. Kilroy was there.

Kilroy had been inching toward her the whole day. There was a natural tension between the liaison, the handler, and the embedded journalists, but also some affinity. Several times she complained that the side streets would be better for photographs, but he repeated that they couldn't spare an escort squad. She seemed to have a talent for looking unimpressed, but she was warming up to him, he could feel it.

Marie, the AP photographer, told Kilroy that whenever she was on assignment she made a point of visiting the nearest art museum, even if it hadn't been reduced to rubble. She found depictions of God everywhere she travelled. Kilroy touched her arm just lightly, thought glancingly of his wife. Marie spoke of iconic depictions of Jesus, of Christ's wounds, stigmata. In Bulgaria, his blood was purple, brilliant and luminous.

"I take a lot of pictures of feet. It seems like less of a violation. Full body pictures aren't really publishable anyway, not in the Western market. Nobody wants to see that. The damage is represented by what you see on the periphery. Strewn household items, shoes, dolls with their heads blown off. Automobiles with gaping holes. We can show violence done to machines."

Implementation was never invaded or occupied or really threatened, but wartime seemed to suit it like a ready fist suits an arm. There was a VFW memorial to the fallen of the town with one plaque that dated back to the Civil War. When the new Iraq war started, yellow ribbons went back up on the trees and the recruiters started making regular appearances at Implementation High assemblies again. There was still plenty of room for other plaques.

"Kilroy, we'll need you to babysit the embeds."

"If you need me to sir."

"We're short on public affairs people and you're a lot closer than what else we got. I'm guessing you know the basics of this?"

"Keep them fed, show them all the technology, make sure they're either at the base or the hotel."

After orientation, they had a picnic with the embeds. Lots of photos of GIs eating fried chicken in front of red, white, and blue bunting. They got some apple shipped in, too. A couple of bottles of Scotch floated around. Kilroy found himself off in a corner alone with the photographer as she smoked a Gitane. Filtered. Kilroy looked to the box, saw it was empty. "Sorry, it's my last one," she said. "I guess for a while." She smiled.

"I was a fashion photographer for a few years."

"Is this more exciting?"

"I got tired of spending so much time around almost-naked women who I didn't find beautiful. Made me feel empty."

"And how does this make you feel?"

"Scared. How about you?"

"Less bored, I guess."

"Are you married?"

Kilroy didn't think of it as infidelity until well after he was spent, his boxer briefs rolled up in a ball on the other side of Marie's room at the Kuwait Hilton. He did pause momentarily as he mounted her, thinking of the implications of sleeping with a reporter, but the only orders were to show her a good time. They were sort of in the same business. There was some real heat to it, too. He didn't feel any regret the next morning or even the morning after that.

Afghanistan, and now Iraq. A few more flags went up around Main Street around when Baghdad got the ultimatum, though the whole town had been decked out in the Stars and Stripes since 9/11. Liquor store owner dumped a case of French red in the gutter. Diner put up a sign, THESE FRIES DON'T RUN. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down* were all checked out at Blockbuster. And business as usual. Maybe North Korea or Iran would be next, why not?

*The Implementation Star* ran a story about the library's decision to hand over all its patron records to the FBI for the investigation. All the remaining records, which didn't amount to much. Frank wasn't worried—all the authorities would find there was his penchant for Russian novels. But Samantha was a little perturbed. Seems she had habitually made modifications to the books she had checked out, bits of cutting and pasting to improve the texts.

They looked for the contact lens for twenty minutes and finally started laughing about it. "We're going to miss the movie at this rate," Frank said. "Can't you wear your glasses?" "I didn't bring them." "We could go ... get them." They'd always gone to his place. He had no idea where she lived.

"Shouldn't we be getting to the movie?"

"It'll be on for another few weeks, Samantha—I mean, let's go if you say so. But I'd really love to keep looking at this, if I can."

"Frank, it's not really ready for other people to see."

"I thought the stickers were your creative thing."

"Yeah, when I get bogged down on this I do the stickers for a while."

"That not art. That's pornography."

"Come on. It can't be porn when you do it with a Xerox machine."

"You really have something against the manager here, don't you?"

"Maybe. I would have enjoyed this anyway."

"I've still gotta wash my hands. When's the maintenance guy supposed to show up?"

They added another shift and kept the floor running 24/7. Frank spent a lot of time checking to see that the manager didn't crack and helping to keep an eye on the new guys. Some of the trainers joked that they ought to sleep in the warehouse with this much overtime going around. Some of the guys would make upwards of \$6,000 this month alone. Frank didn't like the idea of war, but it was damn good for business.

"For whom?"

"Why?"

"For what?"

"Take off your pants."

"No."

"Yes."

"For yoummm."

"Because you deserve."

"For nothing."

"You're kidding."

"Right now?"

"Yes."

Worse than he'd imagined, but not a slum. Not even a trailer. Samantha shook the peeling door open, flipped the light on, and went to find her glasses. Around the light switch and everywhere else the walls were tacked with sheets, pinned a dozen high. Creatures like hieroglyphs engaged in all manner of activity and wordless conversation upon them, conducted epic battles, tremendous journeys. Samantha was back from the counter. "Ready?" she asked. "You drew all this?"

"We don't have enough to do the ad agency thing, but we could pay you to draw something for the library fund drive campaign."

"Like the lead singer's girlfriend, playing the tambourine."

"No! Hell, I can't even sing. Look, I'll put it to the committee. Get their ideas for artists, too, put everything in front of them and have them vote on it."

The engineer flew in from Wisconsin to figure out how to place the new machinery, run the power lines. The military specs called for boxes of irregular shapes and sizes, durable, coated cardboard. They asked for 50,000 Class 27 containers, multipurpose, handy for the shipment of HRs. Easy to pack them up and send them to the home village or overseas, one size fits all. Marked so you could see which way the head was, so those human remains didn't settle during shipment.

The 7-11 was shut down for couple of weeks while the FBI interrogated its owner about the library bombing. People felt bad for Hassan. He had been there almost twenty years by now and he donated money to the animal shelter and he seemed harmless. Still, they figured he must be connected somehow. When they went to fill up they'd smile and say hi and try to remember everything that happened in the store in case the information would turn out useful later.

The kids were psyched, ready to war. Some of them were nervous about the biological and chemical weapons and all the other WMDs that might lay ahead, but mostly they took comfort from the veterans' war stories. Last time it had mostly been a matter of taking in strays who were desperate to surrender and cleaning up after the daisy cutters. A lot of digging. A lot of awful smells.

"I think that a lot of questions have gone not only unanswered, but unasked."

"Like what?"

"Like for whom is the funhouse a screaming from the sky above the port, the color of ... television?"

"You're drunk."

"Is that even a question?"

"Ape Boss, I had one honorable discharge last night!"

"Hunnnh."

"Say, you the only one in the platoon didn't get the Victoria's Secret catalog in the mail yesterday?"

"I don't care to talk about fucking myself, Widget."

"I bet you just snuggle that M240, whisper to it—dontcha, Ape Boss?"

"The weapon is for fucking Iraqis. It's for messing up those elite Republicans and shit."

When Roxanne told her father of her plan to accept the new position in New York City, he looked at her as if she had just announced her intention to jump off a cliff or told him that she was a lesbian. New York is terrorist target number one. And the muggers. Her father kept a homeland security kit in the closet and had prepared the basement as a safe room.

On the flight from Cleveland to New York, Roxanne sat by the window, near the back. A man in a suit with a blue tie took the aisle seat. Roxanne hoped that nobody would take the middle. The man had a brushcut. When he shifted in his seat, something like a gun bulge. Death in flames. A dozen movie-scene disasters. William Shatner going crazy about a man on the wing in that *Twilight Zone* episode. The man smiled at her. Air Marshal. He must be. Homeland Security.

"The orders were to shoot anything that moved."

"Sir, it was a flamingo."

"Did it move?"

"It was a fucking flamingo. Sir."

"Your leave this weekend is canceled."

"I thought I'd be all freaked about it, but I really can't wait to pop a cap in one of those sand niggers."

"Motherfucker! Didn't you see *Three Kings*? You can't say that shit—call them 'haji' or something. It's offensive to our troops and shit. Sarge will bust you one."

"Uh, Widget, in case you haven't noticed, I'm black, just like you and the sergeant."

"No shit, nigger! Still, don't use those racial epithets, talking about how you'll cash those motherfuckers."

"Men, this militia protects the liberties of this country. We have opposed the federal government's tyrant intrusions, but we know this government does have authority over matters of defense against foreigners. In time of war we know where we stand, with America. I have been contacted by a good American company that wishes to employ members of this militia to protect its goods and services from aggressors in Iraq. From towelheads. And the pay's good."

The moving van looked pitifully empty. Car sold. Huge dresser and table sold. Roxanne had whittled many of her miscellaneous possessions away: given some sentimental objects to her father, sent others – the snowglobes, the boxes of *Wired* magazines – to Goodwill or the landfill. The desktop and monitor were there in the original boxes, boxes that would not live long once she go into her cramped quarters in New York. They're just things, she told herself, they're not my life.

Roxanne was close enough to work in Midtown, close enough to the Village. Kip's Bay wasn't the most happening part of town, but compared to Implementation? She hesitated at the small photo album. The order and calm of the streets in gray and blue. Her parents' house. That trio of high school friends. She slapped it closed, kept working to empty the boxes into the shelves and drawers. Along with the excitement for Manhattan there was some pull there, greener grass.