2.

Mike felt momentarily elated as he crossed the border into Nevada, the eleventh state on his trip. Mike drove through hundreds of miles of desolate landscape that day. The vastness of the unpopulated land was even more intimidating than the sand and cactus TV images that had formed his notions of what the West looked like. At first the stark beauty of the land awed him, but now he was just waiting for it to end.

He'd spent most of the last year waiting. At first he'd waited for the decision of the M.I.T. admission committee. M.I.T. was his first choice because it was the best engineering university in the country. His grades were excellent and his standardized test scores were among the highest in the United States. He received a letter from the bishop congratulating him for being nominated for a National Merit Scholarship. The letter itself didn't mean that much to him, but he liked the respect it inspired in both his classmates and his family.

In spite of his excellent academic record, Mike was not sure if M.I.T. would accept him. His palms sweated as he spent hours with a rented manual typewriter and a bottle of correcting fluid working on his application. He wondered how many hours of people's lives had been wasted creating perfectly typed pages. He wished that he had a computer-controlled printer so his application could look absolutely perfect. He was still wondering if he could have put something more on his application when the deadline forced him to submit it. Waiting for the admission committee's decision was especially lonely because his family did not support his choice of M.I.T. His father wanted him to go work instead of college. His mother wanted him to go to a Catholic college and study for the priesthood.

While he waited M.I.T.'s decision, Mike's relationship with Mary Liz developed. On their second date, Mike took her to the Bronx Zoo. As they walked back to the bus from the zoo, she took his hand in a way that it forced him to stop walking and turn around and face her. The expectant, vulnerable expression on her face demanded a response. He put his arms around her. Her back felt sexy under his hands. She half closed her eyes as he tentatively pulled her to him. As her lips brushed his, he closed his eyes and felt instinct take over. Suddenly his mouth was the most important part of his body. He felt the warm wet softness of her tongue. Until that point, a kiss was just something he did to be polite to his female relatives. Now, it became the most exciting act of his entire life. They made out for fifteen minutes. He wanted to go further, but she gently stopped his hands from exploring. She took his hand and walked the rest of the way to the bus stop.

"What is it that you like so much about those computers you play with?" she asked as the bus chugged down Pelham Parkway.

"I like programming them," he said.

"What is programming exactly? I mean I know what it is in general, but what is it exactly?" she said.

"It's O.K. not to know something," he said. "It doesn't make me like you less. I like to explain things to you."

She smiled.

He smiled back and continued, "Programming is using a computer to turn ideas into reality. If you can define an idea in enough detail, then you can turn that idea into a computer program. First, you convert the idea into an algorithm. Next, you 'code' the algorithm into a computer language. After you've coded the algorithm, you have a program."

Mary Liz gave Mike a look of total incomprehension.

"Programming a computer is like baking a cake," Mike said. "The algorithm is like the recipe. The computer language is like the butter, flour, and all the rest of the ingredients. Coding is like the process of combining the ingredients and baking the cake. The computer does the same thing as the oven. It takes the ingredients and turns it into something usable. The program is like the finished cake. The programmer is the cook that makes it all happen."

"So that's all there is to it?" she asked.

"Not really," Mike said. "The program is usually filled with lots of little problems, called bugs. Debugging a program is like decorating a cake. It takes most of the time, and it's the first thing that people see."

"What's so fascinating about turning recipes into computer languages? It sounds boring," she said.

"Well doing stuff like math problems isn't all that interesting," he conceded, "but there are simple things that people can do, like driving this bus, that nobody has figured out how to get a computer to do. I like to think about those kinds of problems."

"Driving a bus seems easier than solving math problems," Mary Liz said.

"It does until you really think about it. You've got to consider everything that could happen and have rules to deal with any possible of emergency, like making sure the bus didn't hit cars or people running across the street. That's really hard."

"Why?" she asked.

"First, because computers can't see. Second, because they don't have emotions," he said.

"So computers can't fall in love?" she asked.

"I really never thought about it," he said, "but I guess not."

"Then I won't have to worry about competition," she said and kissed him again.

From then on, he French kissed Mary Liz whenever he got the chance, but pleasure quickly began to turn to frustration. Whenever his hands moved near her waist she quickly and firmly removed them. He was obsessed with sex, and it seemed unforgivably cruel that she should deny it to him. Everyone except him, even his parents, seemed to know this secret. But Mike curbed his frustration as much as possible for fear of losing her. He went to Carl for advice.

"If she won't put out, forget her," Carl said when Mike explained the situation. "She's trying to get you to do something like marry her. Find somebody else. There are plenty of other women in the world."

"I know, but I think I," Mike felt his throat go dry as he tried to say the next word, "love her."

Carl laughed patronizingly and clapped his younger brother on the back. "Don't tell her that, or she'll know she's got you. You definitely need to go out with somebody else. If you don't watch it, you'll end up marrying her."

Mike was afraid of getting married before he'd seen the world and gone out with at least a few more women, but he felt compelled to defend Mary Liz.

"What's wrong with that?" Mike asked indignantly.

Carl laughed again. "Because the world is full of women, and just being stuck with one is incredibly boring. Don't get stuck with just one until you're sure. You'll wake up with her more times than you'll want to go to bed with her."

"What if you're in love?" Mike said.

"You fall out of love, then it gets boring," Carl said.

"Don't you want to get married someday? Have kids?" Mike asked.

"I probably will, everybody does, but I certainly want to avoid it for as long as I can. There are other things in life I want to do first," Carl said.

Mike respected Carl's practical experience with women, but he couldn't bring himself to agree with Carl's conclusions. Even though he couldn't say exactly what it was, Mike felt that there was something deeply wrong with his brother's logic. Mike decided not to take Carl's advice about Mary Liz and since he didn't know what else to do, his relationship with her remained unchanged.

But something else did change. Mike was accepted to M.I.T. with a full scholarship. Even better, Roger was accepted too. Normally, M.I.T. accepted at most one applicant from St. Luke's, but both Mike and Roger had such outstanding academic records, M.I.T. accepted both of them. Mike and Roger started to live for the day when they would leave for college.

After Mike was accepted to M.I.T., time passed in the way it does when every day is indistinguishable from the one that came before it. A few weeks before his high school graduation, he found a job at the Five Boroughs National Bank in downtown Manhattan. He applied for a job as a programmer, but they gave him a job doing tape back-ups instead because they said he lacked experience. The building was old and decrepit, but he loved the computer room. Unlike the dark, decaying rooms he had grown up in, everything in the computer room was new, clean, comfortable, and in working condition.

The job left him plenty of time to read the computer's programming manuals. Two weeks after he'd started work, he'd successfully convinced his boss to give him some entry level programming tasks.

Mike commuted to work on the I.R.T. subway, the oldest, nosiest, and dirtiest of New York's three subway systems. One day, he bought a copy of Byte magazine instead of the newspaper to distract him from the tedium of the ride. Byte was one of a new crop of magazines dedicated to computers that could be built from kits costing less than one thousand dollars. The thousand-dollar price made computers affordable for average people for the first time. Since individuals instead of businesses could purchase these computers, they were called "personal computers."

Early personal computers were primitive machines that did little more than light up sequences of colored lights. Still, these personal computers had all the capabilities of their larger cousins. They even used the same computer language that Mike had used at St. Luke's. But it was not just the technical capabilities, or lack of them, that intrigued Mike and the early followers of the personal computer revolution. Personal computers were exciting because they were "homebrewed."

People built homebrewed computers out of kits and spare parts in their garages or basements. The people who built these computers wrote their own programs or got them free from other "homebrewers." Free software was at the philosophical heart of the computer revolution. By letting anybody run any program they wanted on a computer, the people, and not big companies and government agencies, would seize power from the bureaucracies that ran people's lives. The details of how control would pass to the people were vague, but it was the article of faith that was at the core of the personal computer revolution. Mike wanted desperately to participate in this revolution instead of merely observing it from the sidelines. He decided to major in computer science at M.I.T.

Mike began to dread reaching his subway stop because it meant leaving the exciting world described in the personal computer magazines for the mundane existence of

his life at home. The only thing he looked forward to about returning to the Bronx was seeing Mary Liz.

On one of the last days of August, he took some of the money he'd saved for school and took Mary Liz out to dinner at an expensive Manhattan restaurant.

"It would be great to live in a fancy apartment and eat dinner every night at a restaurant like this," Mike said with a dreamy look in eye.

"Why do you talk about things that won't happen?" Mary Liz said. "People like us will never be rich enough to live in this neighborhood.'

"Maybe we will," he said with a far away look in his eyes.

Mary Liz blew a puff of air. "You keep talking like we have a future. What are we going to do when you go to M.I.T. in two weeks?"

"We could see each other every other weekend," he said, knowing somehow this was the wrong thing to say.

"What do you expect me to do?" she snapped. "Just wait for you? Do you want to get married? I don't mean now, but I mean someday."

"I don't know. I never thought about it," he said, unsure of what to say.

"You're so impractical!" she said. "You think about life in other galaxies, but the idea of marrying your girlfriend never even crosses your mind!"

"It crosses my mind, but I'm just not ready to make that kind of promise," he said firmly. He wanted to tell her more, but he didn't like being pressured. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, but that his sexual frustration had poisoned his love for her. He wanted to tell her that he was afraid of not seeing the world if he married her. He could not find the words to express any of these feelings. He looked into her eyes, searching for compassion, but all he found was anger.

The lights of Reno Nevada in the distance made Mike smile with relief. He'd made it to the threshold of California. He had been driving all day and decided to get a good night's sleep so he wouldn't get pulled over again. Reno, with its thousands of blinking lights, looked tacky, but not dangerously sleazy. He had no trouble finding cheap lodging. He wasn't tired so he allotted himself twenty-five dollars to gamble with.

He walked into one of the casinos, bought a roll of quarters and began to play the slot machines. He wanted to play blackjack because he knew that he would have a better chance of winning, but with only twenty-five dollars to spend, he knew his entertainment wouldn't last long.

The slot machines reminded him of the poker game that he had developed on the computer at St. Luke's. Boys in the computer club whose egos and wallets were damaged by consistently losing at cards in real life liked Mike's power program because it was easy to beat. Mike was disappointed that his program did not play better, so he kept refining his program until it usually won.

The boys in the computer club wanted Mike to reinstate the old program. Mike threw away the paper tape that stored the first version of the program rather than reinstate it. He found himself alienated for being "a wise ass." Even Roger opposed his decision, but Mike wasn't going to present anything except his best work to the world, no matter what people thought.

Mike put another coin in the slot machine and lost. The machine was getting boring. He watched the cocktail waitresses move in their leotards and miniskirts, which highlighted their warm, sweaty bodies.

The sexuality of the cocktail waitresses made him feel the debilitating inferiority of his virginity. Mike remembered how he would burn with inferiority when Carl spent the night with Suzanne or one of his other girlfriends. Mike's lack of sexual experience made him doubt the value of his own intelligence. "What is good is being so smart if I can't even get a woman to go to bed with me?" he asked himself.

He had heard stories about legalized prostitution in Nevada. He didn't really have the money, but that wasn't what stopped him. He felt that if his first time weren't "real" it would poison his sex life forever.

He decided that the casino was a waste of time. The casinos of Nevada were governed by simple chance. He preferred to spend his time in the casino of life, where he felt his abilities would give him an advantage. In Mike's mind, losers blamed their luck. Winners made their luck. He was determined to be a winner. He left the casino.

Mike crossed the California border at ten o'clock the next morning. He stopped at the agricultural inspection station. He'd never heard of an American state that had its own border guards and customs regulations like a foreign country. The officer looked suspiciously at his car while asking routine questions about fruits and vegetables before waving him through.

He was finally in California. The late fall air was clean and crisp. He inhaled deeply and felt happy. The snow-capped mountains gleamed blue in the bright sunlight. The road wound out of the mountains using the same trail that the original gold rush miners had used. "Some of them struck gold. Why shouldn't I?" he asked himself.

The air got warmer as the mountains gave way to grassy hills. He thought about all the open spaces that he'd seen on his trip. Here in California, there seemed to be few fences and lots of fertile land. But the brightness of his mood vanished when he

remembered how depressed he'd felt the day that he had decided to go to California instead of M.I.T.

Mike and Roger had begun the day by driving down to the Personal Computer Festival in Atlantic City. It was the last weekend before they left for college and it seemed like an entertaining way to escape their parents.

In 1976, gambling wasn't legal yet and Atlantic City was rotting. The Festival was held in a dank exhibit hall that was seedy even by the standards of the Bronx. Around the sides of the hall were small booths where different companies displayed their products.

Mike recognized the names of some of the companies from the computer magazines, but most of them were new to him. One of the companies, Apple, was run by people who didn't seem to be much older than he was. Mike said hello to an Apple employee who introduced himself as Steve, but there were so many people in the Apple booth that Mike wandered on.

The other companies were selling products similar to Apple's and as Mike went from booth to booth, his interest began to fade. He was tired of looking at computer hardware. In Mike's mind, hardware was like a radio, software was the music that made buying the radio worthwhile. Mike was getting ready to leave the show when he walked by a booth occupied by a company called Rosetta Software. The mention of software in the company's name peaked Mike's interest enough to make him stop and take a closer look.

A slim, well-dressed man of about thirty-five was working the booth. The man asked, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "How come you're selling software? Isn't the homebrew philosophy that software is free?"

"Yes that's the philosophy," the man said, "but that's not how things are going to work out. Personal computers are going to be a big success but not in the home. The place they're really going to be a big success in business. That's why we sell into the minicomputer market as well as the personal computer market. Right now, there's no market for personal computer software. People aren't willing to pay for software because everybody thinks they can just program their own computers, but people really don't want to program computers, it's too hard."

"Programming is easy." Mike said.

The man laughed, "If you think so, you must be talented. Do you program for a living?"

"I work at the Five Boroughs Bank," Mike said, "but it's only a summer job. I'm starting my freshman year at M.I.T. in a couple of days."

"M.I.T.," the man nodded respectfully. "You must be really good."

Mike shrugged. The compliment made him feel like he was being manipulated. There was an uncomfortable silence.

The man broke the silence by smiling and extending his hand.

"Omar Gherazzi," the man said. "Let me show you our product. It's called ThinkWrite. It's a word processor. Feel free to try it out."

Mike sat in front of the keyboard and started to use ThinkWrite. He liked it. He wished that he'd had something like ThinkWrite when he was preparing his M.I.T. application. He realized that if word processors ever became popular, they would make typewriters, as well as typists, jobs like his mother's, obsolete. Knowing how much his mother hated her job, Mike thought she probably wouldn't mind. As he continued playing with ThinkWrite, Mike stopped thinking about its economic impact, and began thinking how he would improve it technically.

"What do you think?" Omar asked.

"It's pretty good, but there are a few things I would do differently," Mike said.

Mike soon became lost in conversation with Omar as they talked about ThinkWrite. After they'd been talking for about twenty minutes, Omar said, "How would you like a job with Rosetta? We're not a big company. We're just a start-up. We're not big on titles, rules, or useless comforts like executive secretaries, but we're big on innovative products."

"You don't even know me," Mike laughed, not sure if Omar was being serious.

"I can tell you're a true hacker," Omar said, "a talented programmer who figures out the way to get something done when the academic types say it's impossible. That's all I need to know."

"I'm flattered, but going to M.I.T. is my once in a lifetime opportunity and I'm not going to blow it," Mike said firmly.

"The once in a lifetime opportunities are the companies in this room, not school," Omar said. "When you graduate in four years, the personal computer industry will be grown up. Most of the large and easy fortunes will already have been made. Look around. The people in this room are the next Henry Fords and Thomas Edisons."

Mike wanted to call Omar a liar, but something inside told Mike that Omar was right.

"Even if that's true, Henry Ford got rich, not the assembly line workers," Mike said. "I'm not Henry Ford. I think I'll do better in school."

"I know you probably won't believe what I'm saying, but it's true. I can tell that you're different, not just because of your programming talent, but you're not comfortable being part of the system. Most people don't see the waste and the stupidity of the system, but you do. As long as you're a part of a big organization, whether it's a big company or an established school, you'll be unhappy. The homebrewing people say it's the personal computer that will let you be free, but they're wrong. It's money, not computers, that will let you live the way you want. When you're rich, you write the rules, but if you're not, you play by the system's rules."

"Those words are all very nice," Mike said, "but like I said before. Rosetta's success will make you rich, not me. I'll just get a paycheck." His own boldness surprised him, but as far as he was concerned he was only having a theoretical discussion with Omar so he felt free to speak his mind. Still, he wondered if he might have gone too far.

But Omar's smile only broadened, "That's what make start-ups different. We make it easy for you to own stock in the company. If the company is successful, your stock will make you rich."

"Exactly how do you make it easy?" Mike asked.

"By offering our employees stock options. How does fourteen thousand a year and a stock option for ten thousand shares sound?" Omar said.

"What's a stock option?" he asked, trying to find the tricks in Omar's offer.

"A stock option is the right to buy shares of stock in the company at a very low price, in your case five cents per share. Once you've worked at the company for a certain amount of time, they're vested, which means those shares are yours for five cents, no matter what. If those shares end up being worth a thousand bucks each, if you quit, even if you get fired, those shares are yours for five cents apiece. The ten thousand shares I offered you would be vested over four years. So you'd vest twenty-five hundred shares a year. If those shares are worth ten dollars each, that would be an extra twenty-five thousand dollars a year. Even better, with a little tax planning, you don't have to pay any taxes on your options until you actually sell the stock."

Mike's mind was racing. It was like something out of fairy tale. The salary alone was almost as much as the combined salaries of his parents. If the stock turned out to be worth even half of what Omar said, it was still a small fortune. Mike said nothing, but Omar could see that Mike was interested.

"Did I tell you Rosetta is located in Silicon Valley?" Omar said. "Do you know where that is?"

"Not really," Mike said. "Isn't somewhere in California?"

"Yes, it's just south of San Francisco," Omar said. "It's a very beautiful place. Are you sure you won't accept our offer?" Omar's smile practically beamed California sunshine.

Mike looked at Omar's smile and he heard his mother's voice telling him no.

"I'm afraid I can't. Thanks anyway," Mike said to Omar.

"At least take my card," Omar said.

"O.K., but the answer is still no."

On the drive back from Atlantic City, Omar's offer stayed on Mike's mind.

"I'm kind of sorry we're going back to school next week," Mike said to Roger. "I liked working at the bank better than going to school. At least they paid me for my time."

"But when we go back to work after graduating, a degree from M.I.T. will save us from going through all the hassle of working our way up," Roger said. "We'll get the best jobs at the best companies."

"I guess that's true," Mike said, "but lots of programmers at the bank are college graduates and they come to me to fix their bugs. The bank makes even the good ones wait years to move up. When they finally do get a good position, they still work on boring stuff."

"We don't have to work at a bank," Roger said. "We can work at Bell Labs, NASA, or anywhere we like!"

Mike had always fantasized about designing space ships at NASA, but he wondered if the designers of space ships were as lonely and out of touch as most of the other computer nerds he'd met. Mike kept coming back to Omar's observation that money, not computers, was the key to freedom.

"What's the most important thing in life to you?" Mike asked.

"Getting laid," Roger said without hesitation.

Mike laughed and nodded in agreement, "It seems that being smart doesn't help in that department. Women seem to like guys like Dominic Martelli, who don't follow the rules, even if they are in the Mafia," Mike said.

"I guess," Roger said with an artificial nonchalance, but Mike knew Roger's mannerisms well enough to know that his friend was hiding something.

"Roger, what aren't you telling me?" Mike said, his voice rising.

"Nothing," Roger said, knitting his face in a gesture of indignant honesty. "I'll bet Dominic gets more than a toilet seat, that's all."

"Roger! Tell me," Mike said.

"You don't want to know Mike, believe me," Roger's tone was plaintive now. "I'm not even sure if it's true."

Suddenly Mike knew what Roger was trying not to tell him. Worse, Mike knew it was true.

"Dominic's sleeping with Mary Liz, isn't he?" Mike asked softly.

"She's not worth getting upset about," Roger said.

Mike said nothing. He looked out the window and his imagination filled with scenes of Dominic and Mary Liz making love. He felt empty and lonely in his guts. Yet, part of him was sincerely glad that his future was no longer tied to hers. But the feeling of freedom only lasted for a few seconds before it was overwhelmed by pain. He thought, "I had my chance with Mary Liz and I blew it. Why? Because I wanted to be 'free' at college. Free to do what? Drink beer with a bunch of nerdy guys." He felt miserable. He clung to the faint hope that Roger might be wrong.

He called Mary Liz as soon as he got home. She tearfully verified what Roger had told him.

"How could you do that to me?" Mike screamed into the phone with righteous outrage.

"Do that to me? You wouldn't make me any promises," she responded accusingly.

"I suppose you believe the promises of a criminal?" Mike said.

"At least he knows how to make love to me," she said meanly. Right after she'd said it, she felt awful and started to cry, "Mike I'm sorry."

The apology did nothing for Mike. He felt himself go cold inside, like there was ice and not blood in veins. Roger was right. She wasn't worth it.

"Goodbye Mary Liz," he said. He reached for his dignity and added, "and good luck." He successfully resisted the impulse to inject sarcasm into his final words.

"Goodbye," she said quietly and hung up.

He felt awful. He wanted to die. He thought about what people would say about him when he was dead. He smiled sardonically as he thought, "They'll say he was just

another nerd. I want to be more. Now is my chance to be a part of the computer revolution. It may not wait for me to finish college. If I miss it, I'll probably I'll end up like my father, only I'll use a keyboard instead of a welding torch."

His thoughts continued, "M.I.T. has been there for a hundred years and it'll probably be there for another hundred years. If things don't work out then I can always go back to school. Besides, there are a lot more women in California than at M.I.T."

He went into the kitchen. His mother was cleaning up the dinner dishes. His father and brother were sitting at the kitchen table. They were gossiping about the people in the neighborhood. When he looked at the dingy kitchen that no amount of detergent could make really clean, he knew his mind was made up.

He sat down and told them that he was going to California instead of M.I.T. All conversation came to a dead stop.

His mother's face flooded with panic. "Mike, don't give up a college education. I know it looks easy now, but later on, believe me, it's not so easy to go back."

"Mom, I'm sorry, but I've made up my mind," he said. "I know you don't understand, but this is the right thing for me to do. Things are changing. This was once a nice neighborhood. Now, it's becoming a slum. You're always saying you want to live in a house instead of an apartment, have a nicer car, and get the American Dream. Well, the American Dream is for people who have the guts to go for it, not for people who stand in line waiting for it to be handed to them," Mike said.

"Pride goeth before a fall," his mother said solemnly.

"Mom, you'll never understand," Mike said.

Mother and son stared at each other in mutual exasperation.

Carl broke the silence by saying, "Going to California sounds like a dumb idea to me."

Mike hadn't expected his mother to understand, but Carl's off-hand reproach hit him like a punch in the stomach.

"Carl? You talking to me about school? Spare me," Mike said.

"Maybe all those tests that said you were so smart were wrong," Carl said. "You just got your head so far up your ass, it's coming out your mouth."

Mike was becoming angry, but before he had time to say anything, his father added, "Carl's right. You think you're so smart. It's not so easy out there in the real world, but you'll find that out whether you go to school or not. It might as well be sooner than later."

Margaret turned to her husband, "That's great. Do what you always do, encourage him to throw away his life."

"Stop it, all of you," Mike said, with strength in his voice he'd never known he had. "It's my life and I'm going. I don't care what you think."

They all looked at him in disbelief. The discussion was over.

The next morning he called Omar and accepted the job. Omar sounded delighted. Mike said he would be leaving in three weeks. He persuaded his boss at the bank to postpone his resignation so he could add one more paycheck to his savings.

He took the money he'd saved for school and bought a car. One of his father's co-workers was selling an old Pontiac for four hundred dollars. Mike spent another two hundred dollars on registration, insurance, and minor repairs. After spending money on the car, he had six hundred dollars left to get to California.

On his last night, Roger took the bus down from M.I.T. to say goodbye to Mike. They went up to the rooftop of Roger's apartment building to drink and watch the sun go down. Roger had obtained a pint of Dewars White Label Scotch. Drinking scotch made them feel mature, like the suave men and the elegantly dressed women who had smiled at them from the billboards that had been posted throughout the Bronx ever since they could remember.

"Don't get mad at what I'm going to say because I'm saying it as a friend," Roger said. He paused and took a swig for courage. "I think you're making a mistake going to California instead of college. Your father didn't go to college. Your brother didn't, but look at all those bankers and lawyers downtown, they did. No matter how hard you try or how good you are, you'll never be able to make up for the lack of a college degree. Even if you go to California, go to college. Please."

"I'll think about it," Mike said, "but let me ask you this. You're in college. Do you like it?"

"Nah," Roger said. "The classes are more interesting, that part's really good, but in many ways it's just like St. Luke's. During freshmen orientation, they took us into this big auditorium and said, look at the person to your left. Look at the person on your right. One of you three will not graduate from the Institute. It reminded me of St. Luke's, education through intimidation."

"Then why does everybody want me to go to college?" Mike asked emphatically.

"Because it's your best shot," Roger answered. "Sure the educational system sucks, but it's the best the world has to offer. Stop fighting it. You think things will be different out there, but it always ends up being the same."

"That's what my father says. He's always been the same," Mike said. "But I think things will be different in California. You know when you take a test and your get a different answer from everybody else, but you know your answer is right?"

Roger nodded.

"That's the way I feel about going to California. Computers are my turf and I know I can win," Mike said. He took another drink, paused, looked dejectedly into the distance, and then added, "but maybe everybody's right and I'm just fooling myself."

Roger looked at Mike, raised the bottle and said, "I hope you do well out there. I really do."

They sat in silence for a while, then Roger said, "I wonder if I'll stay a sweaty fat virgin all my life. I probably Will."

"You won't," Mike said reassuringly, "but I know how you feel. Sometimes I wish I'd proposed to Mary Liz. I wonder if I'll ever find anyone again. I don't just mean somebody to sleep with, but somebody I really love. Somebody I want to have kids with," Mike said.

"You want too much," Roger said. "All I want is a nice high paying job when I graduate and a girlfriend who likes to screw and doesn't want kids. If I can get that I'll be happy-"

Mike shrugged. They sat in silence again and passed the bottle. They told dirty jokes, talked about the past, and stumbled home.

The next morning Mike said goodbye to his family. His father murmured an insincere "Good luck." Carl hugged him and slipped him a hundred dollar bill. His mother cried and gave him a St. Anthony medal for protection.

Mike stopped for gas near Sacramento, California. It was a beautiful cloudless seventy-degree day. The bountiful fields of the Central Valley stretched out in every direction. He felt good. He'd made it to California where he was free to escape the limiting definitions of his childhood and become the person he'd always wanted to be. He knew there were harder battles yet to fight, but he felt inspired knowing he'd won the first one.

The highway wound through the Altamont pass. The land was beautiful but spare. It looked like the prairie had been draped on the rolling hills. When he got through the pass, the grassy hills gradually gave way to suburban houses, and then to factories and industrial parks of the East Bay.

As he drove across the Dumbarton Bridge, Mike caught his first glimpse of Silicon Valley. He saw an uninviting salt marsh punctuated by power lines and industrial buildings, but behind the marsh he saw the beautiful tree covered hills of the Santa

Cruz Mountains. The sun had just set behind the mountains and it painted the underside of the clouds red, orange, and gold.