

Part II

3.

Mike pulled into the parking lot of Rosetta Software at exactly five to eight on his digital watch. He wasn't going to be late on his first day. He'd gotten up early to iron his best pants and shirt and tie his tie in a perfect Windsor knot. But from the moment he got out of the car, he realized that working at Rosetta was going to be very different from working at the Five Boroughs Bank. Instead of being located in a dirty New York office building, Rosetta was set in a breezy office park, which was landscaped with fountains and brightly colored flowers. He smiled at the thought of flowers blooming outside in October, a sight that was unthinkable in New York.

Rosetta's quarters were small. Three tiny offices adjoined a large central room containing several old desks. Every desk was covered with computer printouts and crowned by a different brand of computer terminal or personal computer. The surprising thing about Rosetta's offices was that Omar was the only other person there. By eight o'clock, the bank's offices were bustling with people socializing over their morning coffee.

"Mike, welcome to Silicon Valley," Omar said warmly.

"It's a pleasure to be here, Mr. Gherazzi," Mike responded stiffly.

"Call me Omar. Everyone will think you're strange if you don't," he said with mock seriousness. Omar showed Mike to an old gray metal desk in a dark corner of the main room. Mike wasn't discouraged by the quality or position of his desk. He was turned on by what was on the desk, a new personal computer.

Omar smiled, "You'll be working for William Shoemith. He usually shows up about ten. Why don't you look around and get familiar with the place while you're waiting? I have some things to take care of but if there's anything William can't cover, just come and find me. My door is always open."

Omar walked away leaving Mike alone with a computer that he'd never used before. Mike felt conflicting emotions. He was glad to have the chance to actually use one of the personal computers he'd read about, but he was intimidated by the thought of being surrounded by a group of programmers who knew more than he did. He searched for a manual in a desperate attempt to learn as much as possible before the other programmers arrived. When people started trickling in around nine, Mike didn't talk to them. He stayed glued to his chair and his computer.

Mike was writing a small program when a man in his late twenties with a strong chin and large brown eyes approached Mike's desk. "I see you've used one of these before" the man said.

Since the man was only wearing jeans and a T-shirt, Mike figured the man was another programmer. “No, I'm trying to learn as much as I can before my boss shows up.”

“I think that sad event has already come to pass,” the man said with an easy smile. “I'm William. You must be Mike. Omar told me a lot about you, after he hired you, of course. I'm glad you're getting accustomed to our little computers. They're primitive compared to those big mainframes you were using on your last job.”

Mike was impressed that William knew something about his background. Mike had a feeling he was going to like working for William.

“I don't mind. I'm really psyched,” Mike said. He realized that his words might have sounded obnoxiously eager. He cleared his throat and said, “I mean I'm really looking forward to working here.”

“I like psyched better,” William smiled.

Mike smiled back, but he didn't know quite what to say.

William seemed to understand Mike's shyness, “C'mon I'll take you on the grand tour of Rosetta's world corporate headquarters, all four rooms of it.”

William led Mike to a desk in the opposite corner of the main room, where a man huddled over a computer terminal. A faded, stained, button-down shirt clung to the man's thin chest. His red hair and wire-rimmed glasses accentuated the man's large nose and wild eyes.

William introduced him. “Brad, this is Mike Danzig. He's here to help us.”

“Hi,” Brad said without looking up from his screen. “I hope he knows what he's doing, and if he doesn't, I hope he knows how to R.T.F.M.”

William glared at Brad and walked away.

“What does R.T.F.M. mean?” Mike asked William.

“It means Read The Fucking Manual,” William said, still glaring at Brad, but Brad had gone back to his work and was apparently oblivious to William's displeasure. Brad looked up from his screen and gave Mike a scowl that made him wince. Mike's insecurities and self-doubts returned with a vengeance.

William saw the effect of Brad's comment written on Mike's face. William quickly walked Mike over to another desk that was occupied by a young blond woman in a black sweater. The woman was frantically absorbed in her work, but she looked up when William approached, revealing large green eyes, a small freckled nose, and a friendly smile.

“Mike, this is Jennifer Muller. Jennifer isn't nearly as unpleasant as Brad.”

Jennifer shook Mike's hand energetically. “Hi!” she said with a trace of a Texas twang. “Don't be put off by the craziness around here. You'll get used to it.”

“Jennifer adds to the craziness around here as much as any of us,” William said. William's smile indicated that the comment was a friendly tease, not an insult.

By the time William introduced Mike to the other eleven people who made up Rosetta's software staff, Mike was smiling and beginning to relax.

“Why don't you take the rest of the day off and find a place to live?” William suggested.

Mike knew he didn't have enough money for a deposit on an apartment. He planned to live at the motel until he could save enough money, but he wasn't going to admit this to William.

“I'll get around to finding a place,” Mike shrugged. “There's no big hurry.”

“If you don't have the money for the deposit on an apartment, I'll be happy to get Omar to give you an advance against your first couple of paychecks,” William said.

“It's O.K. I'll manage,” Mike said.

“Don't be a martyr,” William said. “We want you to be comfortable so you can do your work. We'll just take out fifty dollars a paycheck until you've paid it back. O.K.?”

“O.K., and thanks,” Mike said. He wasn't used to people being nice to him, especially strangers. He knew he'd made the right choice by coming to California.

In his search for a place to live, Mike explored Silicon Valley. Sunnyvale, where was Rosetta located, seemed to be an indistinguishable part of the vast suburban sprawl that consumed the neighboring cities of Cupertino, Mountain View, Palo Alto, Santa Clara, and San Jose.

To Mike, New York was exciting on the outside and boring on the inside. Silicon Valley was just the opposite. Everybody in Silicon Valley seemed to have a car, but the sidewalks were empty. Instead of being packed on subways and busses, commuters were packed on the Valley's crowded freeways. But Mike avoided most of these traffic jams because of Rosetta's “flex-time” policy. Flex-time allowed each programmer to set their own hours, as long as they got their work done. Mike rarely came in before ten o'clock in the morning and almost never left before eight o'clock at night.

Silicon Valley's architecture differed from New York's as much as the freeways differed from the subways. In New York the buildings were impressive, but old. In Silicon Valley they were small, but modern. In New York, computers were large machines buried in the bowels of office buildings. In Silicon Valley, computers were so basic to the culture that computer parts were sold next to candy bars in the supermarkets.

The supermarkets seemed to embody the difference between New York and Silicon Valley. Not only were Silicon Valley supermarkets spotless compared to their New York counterparts, the people who shopped in the supermarkets seemed fresher too. The young women were slimmer, better dressed, and seemed to smile more. The emphasis on looking good and being friendly was not only the province of young women; it seemed to be a priority for everybody. Yet for all their good looks and good manners, the people of Silicon Valley seemed to be characterized by an inner reserve bordering on coldness. In New York, despite the danger of its streets, there was an underlying sense of neighborhood that united people. Silicon Valley had little sense of neighborhood. Living on the same block did not unite the people of the Valley; they were bound together by a spirit of unqualified optimism about the future. Mike liked the spirit of the Valley, but he felt lonely, especially when he saw couples holding hands in a restaurant or kissing in cars stopped at red lights.

As Mike searched the Valley for a place to live, he found that his fourteen thousand dollar salary didn't command the buying power he'd thought it would. The rapid inflation of the 1970s combined with Silicon Valley's boom pushed rents up dramatically. Mike found that what he had initially regarded as uniform suburban sprawl was sharply differentiated by price if not by appearance.

Two freeways bordered the core of Silicon Valley, Interstate 280 on the west and US-101 on the east. Both highways connected San Jose and San Francisco, but ran through vastly different landscapes. Interstate 280 ran through the beautiful foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. A sign in Cupertino proclaimed 280 as "The World's Most Beautiful Freeway." It was an exaggeration, but not a large one.

The further west a house was located, the more it cost. In the foothills west of 280, lay the towns Woodside, Atherton, Portola Valley, Los Altos Hills, and Saratoga. Woodside had the highest per capita income of any community in California, even exceeding the more famous Beverly Hills in Southern California. Laws against development left the rolling hills and forests in much the same condition as before the Europeans had descended on California, with the minor addition of a few discreetly placed mansions.

Most of Silicon Valley's residents lived in the towns between the 280 and 101. Most of this area was occupied by a maze of small streets bordered by one-story houses that were packed together like teeth in a cheerleader's smile. Two-story apartment complexes, shopping malls, industrial parks, and an occasional orchard or vacant lot dominated the major streets in these towns.

Between the eastern border of 101 and the sloughs and marshes of San Francisco Bay lay the poorest areas of the Valley. The most prominent feature of this area was Moffett Naval Air Station, with its giant airplane hangars and its NASA research center. The “unincorporated” areas of East Palo Alto on the north and Alviso on the south bordered Moffett Field, but even these poorer neighborhoods had their charm. Palm trees and fruit trees grew in the front yards of their tiny houses. Mike marveled that unlike the Bronx he’d left, the cars were old, but not rusted, the streets were clean, and the buildings were almost completely free from graffiti.

Mike found an apartment in the tiny part of East Palo Alto that just spilled over the western border of US-101. Mike didn't mind East Palo Alto's poverty, but his proximity to Stanford University in neighboring Palo Alto made him uncomfortable. When Mike watched the college students socializing in the trendy cafes and restaurants, he wondered if he might have made the wrong choice by not going to college.

Mike's apartment consisted of a medium sized room, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. Although the size of the apartment was unremarkable, the modern appliances and the bright blue shag carpet made the apartment cheerful. He furnished the apartment with a double mattress, a used table, and an old red overstuffed chair. It was all the furniture he needed. The only things he did in his apartment were listen to music, eat take out food, watch TV, and sleep.

His real home was Rosetta Software, fifteen minutes away by car. He fell in love with the little Apple II personal computer on his desk. At the bank, programming meant writing software to calculate numbers and generate boring reports. The Apple II was designed for playing games and having fun. People freely copied programs from electronic bulletin boards and brought in games on floppy disks. Mike worked hard, learning everything he could. But unlike the bank's computer manuals, the personal computer manuals were thin and contained almost no useful information. Mike had to rely on learning things by word of mouth from William, Brad, and the other programmers.

The division of labor at Rosetta was as informal as its dress code. William simply came over to Mike every few days and verbally assigned him a few bugs to fix. Mike spent much of his days studying printouts of ThinkWrite's code in search of these bugs. When he'd found what caused a particular bug, he would pull up the keyboard and rapidly type in the changes to the code. He would then run the modified version of ThinkWrite, anxious to discover if he'd actually fixed the bug. He would repeat this process until he was sure he'd fixed the bug without inadvertently creating any new ones. He hated to go home unless he was sure that he'd fixed the bug he was working on.

Although Mike usually worked late, one afternoon he went home at four-thirty, ordered a pizza, and spent the evening watching television. That night he dreamed that his father was yelling at him for not making the football team, but when he looked at his father's face it was Omar's. The next day, Mike stayed at work until after the midnight.

Despite the long hours, working at Rosetta was fun. Every Friday, there was a weekly “beer bust,” a party with free beer, food, and wine. At the beer bust, Omar, William, and the other executives gave a summary of what went on during the week. The speeches were frequently interrupted by spontaneous heckling, which was taken in good humor. Arnie McManus, the jovial Vice President of Sales, reported the most eagerly awaited piece of news, the weekly sales figures. Both good and bad items were reported, but the news was usually good.

Although the work environment at Rosetta was extremely informal, there was a definite pecking order. The people who asked technical questions were at the bottom, and the people who always seemed to know the answers, like William and Brad, were at the top. Mike wondered if he would ever be one of the people who answered technical questions instead of one of the people who asked them. Mike knew he’d achieved some acceptance from his peers when the people who regularly worked late invited him to dinner.

Eating dinner with other people was an especially welcome development because dinner was usually the gloomiest part of his day. He usually stopped for a quick dinner at a fast food restaurant. He’d bought pots, pans, and utensils, but he had little talent or interest in cooking for himself. Thanksgiving dinner was the worst. Mike had gotten invitations from people at work, but he didn't feel he knew them well enough to comfortably eat Thanksgiving dinner with them.

Instead he ate a frozen turkey dinner by himself, which made him feel lonely and homesick. He called his parents, but they provided little comfort. Calling Roger made Mike feel better, but it also made him more conscious that he had no friends in California.

The most popular restaurant for Rosetta's informal after-work dinners was the Li River Restaurant on Castro Street in Mountain View. The construction boom that had run through the rest of the Valley had skipped Castro Street and downtown Mountain View. Instead of being a high tech highway, Castro Street looked like a paved version of a frontier town main street from an old western movie.

The Li River Restaurant's main attraction was not the sophistication of its decor. Stained white tablecloths covered Formica tables. Tacky calendars from Chinese insurance agents decorated the walls. But the food was extremely hot, spicy, and good.

William, Mike, and the other people from Rosetta found seats at a large round table in the back. A built-in rotating platform, which allowed food to be easily shared among the table's diners, made it the best table in the restaurant.

“So how do you like Silicon Valley, Mike?” Jennifer said, snapping her menu shut.

"I like it, but the cost of housing is so expensive," Mike said. "I don't know how people can ever afford to live in Sunnyvale, much less in the hills."

"It's nerd Hollywood," William said. "People come from all over the world to work here in hopes of making it. The ones who start successful companies are like stars. They're extremely wealthy, and believe me, they can afford those mansions in the hills."

"Unlike Silicon Valley, Hollywood allows stars to be female as well as male," Jennifer said.

"Silicon Valley isn't nerd Hollywood, it's nerd Detroit," Brad said. "Computers are the new cars, not the new movies. Hollywood's exciting. Silicon Valley is profitable, but it's boring, that's why I live in San Francisco."

"I didn't have much choice about where to live," Mike said. "The rents are so high around here that the only place I can afford is East Palo Alto."

"Aren't you afraid to live there?" Jennifer asked.

He felt ashamed that he lived in a place that Jennifer was afraid of. Although she was not his type, he found himself developing a mild crush on her. He tried to avoid making her uncomfortable by hiding his feelings.

"There's nothing wrong with being poor," Paul Chou said before Mike could answer.

Paul was a slim, well-groomed, carefully dressed, Chinese man of medium height with a curtain of black hair that tended to get in his eyes.

"You just work your way out of it," Paul continued. "You save your money, get married, buy a house, and your children will have a better life. You Americans like to spend it all and have everything right away."

"I know you think we're all lazy Paul," Jennifer said in her thickest Texas accent, "but since Mike is new, I'd like to know what he thinks."

"You don't have to say anything," William said to Mike.

"It's O.K.," Mike said. He turned to Jennifer, "I like living in Silicon Valley and I like working for Rosetta. I think the company is working on neat stuff."

"Neat stuff," Brad said mockingly, rolling his eyes.

"What's wrong with neat stuff?" Mike demanded.

Brad was silent.

“Don't take it personally Mike,” Jennifer said, “Brad never answers people.”

“He gives me answers sometimes,” William said, raising a corner of his mouth in a half smile.

“That's because you're not as much of a scumbag as Omar,” Brad said.

Mike was shocked. He waited for William to explode, but William only said, “Omar isn't a scumbag. He's just hustling to build this company. He was like that when we were at Fairchild.”

“Fairchild, it figures,” Paul said. “Some people get all the breaks.”

“I keep hearing that name. What's Fairchild?” Mike asked.

“Fairchild is the company that gave Silicon Valley its name,” William said. “In 1948, William Shockley and two of his colleagues at Bell Labs invented the transistor. Shockley moved here and formed a company to make transistors. Shockley's top engineers wanted to combine multiple transistors into one piece called an integrated circuit. Shockley, who was a Nobel Prize winner, told his engineers to go back to work and leave the thinking to him. The engineers quit and formed a company called Fairchild, which made integrated circuits from silicon. Silicon, which is the primary ingredient in sand, is cheap. Integrated circuits were worth their weight in gold.”

“Fairchild had found a way of turning sand into gold. Before Fairchild, the major industry around here was growing fruit. The orchards, not the individual towns, were what provided a sense of community so people referred to the whole area as the Santa Clara Valley. When Fairchild and the rest of the silicon chip companies started making more money than the fruit orchards, people unofficially changed the area's name from Santa Clara Valley to Silicon Valley.”

William took a sip of water and continued, “Fairchild was the archetypical start-up, freewheeling, but ruled by its founders like a private kingdom. Nine years after Fairchild got started, some of Fairchild's best engineers left to start a company of their own, which they named Intel.”

“One of Intel's first projects was putting the guts of an entire computer on a chip. The chip was called a microprocessor. It was a massive technical achievement, but the microprocessor-based computer was so low-powered the conventional computer companies didn't want it. Intel sold most of their microprocessors to companies that made calculators and traffic lights. But microprocessors were cheap enough so that weekend engineers and computer hackers could afford them. They took these microprocessors and built primitive computers around them. Without the microprocessor, the personal computer wouldn't have been possible. You might say that the microprocessor was the steam engine of the personal computer revolution.”

Mike was totally entranced by William's story, but William turned away from Mike and directed his next statement to Paul.

"You've got no reason to be jealous of me for working at Fairchild, Paul. By the time I came out here four years ago with my brand new degree, Fairchild wasn't the powerhouse it once was."

"That's because they didn't do things right," Paul said with the certainty of a zealous preacher. "I'm here to see that something gets done right. If we don't do things right, none of the other good things will happen."

"What do you mean by doing it right?" Mike asked Paul.

"You know when a product is really solid?" Paul asked rhetorically. "When you can tell from the first time you use it, that it's been designed, built, and tested to the highest standards. That's a product that done right."

"Why would anybody not do it right?" Mike said, not sure if he was able to "do it right."

"Because they always make you ship the product early," Brad said, as though he were talking to a child, and a retarded one at that.

"Shouldn't it be possible to do it right and ship on time if you're smart enough and work hard enough?" Mike said, no longer willing to be intimidated by Brad's attitude.

"I hate virgins!" Brad said.

Mike blushed, but Jennifer saved him.

"Brad, I've always figured that self-hate was part of your problem," she quipped.

Everybody laughed except Brad.

"Mike's right," William said after the laughter died down. "Most companies either ship late products or bad ones. Most companies don't go public."

Mike looked at William in mute incomprehension.

"Going public is what most of us are here for," William said, answering Mike's unstated question. "If Rosetta becomes really successful, it will be allowed to sell its stock on the stock market. Since the stock market is open to the public, the process of being approved to sell stock on the open market is called going public. Each of the shares we're vesting could be worth five, ten, or even a hundred dollars. But very few start-ups go public, so don't get your hopes up any higher than Omar already has. What Paul says is true. To go public, we have to do it right."

“Doing it right is only a part of it,” Brad said. “Most start-up stock is as worthless as wallpaper no matter what happens. Every engineer with an I.Q. over fifty thinks that he's got an idea that's worth a million bucks. But most people who actually start companies wind up bankrupt and with a long list of enemies, many of who used to be their best friends. Being in the right place in the right time is the real key to success. More accurately, it's kissing the right butt at the right time. You have to be very lucky and very slimy to make it.”

“You make your own luck, and there are lots of successful people who aren't slime,” Jennifer said. “It depends who you really are to begin with.”

“I agree with Jennifer,” Mike said firmly. “I think this company's going to make it.”

“We'll see,” said William. “We'll see.”

Everybody was quiet for a moment and then started talking about something else.