

5.

Mike got to San Francisco International Airport exactly one hour before his flight, exactly as the airline reservation agent had instructed him to do. He did not want to miss the first airplane flight of his life. He watched the jets taxiing from the window of the departure lounge. Most of the other travelers in the lounge looked weary and bored. But Mike's face was as filled with wonder as the five year-old boy who stood next to him at the lounge's window.

As the plane took off, Mike thought about how much his life had changed in the two years since he'd come to California. Then, he had to nurse his car and his fears across the frightening gauntlet of a transcontinental trip. Now, all he had to do was lean back in his chair and watch the in-flight movie.

Mike mused about his stock. If ThinkWrite II sold well and Rosetta were able to go public, his stock would provide a solid first step on the road to wealth. Mike shook his head in disbelief when he remembered that he was still not twenty-one years old. He reminded himself that Rosetta Software stock was still only paper and buckled his safety belt.

Mike arrived in New York two days before his brother's wedding. Mike noticed that the neighborhood had gotten worse since he'd left. More tenements were burnt out. Parts of the neighborhood looked like they'd been bombed. The groups of young men and boys hanging out on the stoops and street corners eyed him menacingly. Mike realized that part of the reason the neighborhood toughs were looking at him like a target was that he was walking with the casual gait and open smile of a Californian. Once he locked his jaw in robot grimness and put firm determination back in his stride, most of threatening looks disappeared. He walked to the Windsor Castle stationery store, where he'd first met Mary Liz. He was saddened to find the building had burned down. It made him angry that some drug addict or greedy landlord had destroyed part of his youth.

Mike's family was exceptionally nice to him. He found their warm reception unnatural, but pleasant. It seemed like a lifetime ago since he'd left for California. Mike's mother made his favorite dish, chicken fricassee, for dinner, but by the time it was served, his parents, unusual kindness had begun to diminish.

"You know we have a Polish Pope now," his mother said. "Do you go to church out there?"

"No, mom," he said.

"You have to take care of the important things Mike," she said. "The church is forever. Computers are just a passing fad."

"How do you know ma?" Mike said.

"I've lived a little bit longer than you," his mother said.

"Margaret, why don't you leave the boy alone?" his father demanded. "This is the best time of his life. When I was Mike's age, I was in Korea. I saw some pretty awful things in the war, but I was free to have a good time when I could find it and I made friends who would lay down their lives for me. I think Mike is doing good in California."

When his father finished reprimanding his wife, he turned to his younger son. "You know Mike, we just got a computer at work."

"Oh, what kind?" Mike asked.

"I don't know exactly, but they're real good," his father said.

Carl looked at Mike sympathetically and said, "Mom, Dad, we've got to go. My friends are waiting for us."

Grateful for an excuse, Mike got up from the table and accompanied Carl to his stag party.

"Why are you getting married?" Mike asked Carl on the way to the party. "You always used to talk about the things you wanted to do before you got married. Did you get to do them?"

The remark got Carl's dander up, but he saw that his little brother wasn't trying to taunt him. He was just curious.

"I've had my fun, and now it's time to settle down," Carl said, not looking Mike in the eye. "Sooner or later you stop struggling. I've stopped trying to be different. Suzanne had been after me to get married, so I finally said yes and made her happy. It's not so bad. Suzanne's a good-looking girl and she's got a good job. We've known each other a long time and we understand each other, so we should be able to have a good life together. If the marriage doesn't work out, I'll get divorced. Either way, I'm not going to end up like Mom and Dad."

Mike didn't believe Carl. He thought to himself how fast the bad boys of the Bronx changed into their fathers. They were so full of rebellion and desire when they were young, but within ten years they wound up more passionate about football than women. He wanted to tell Carl that he should live his life passionately, and do the things he believed in, but Mike knew his brother would never listen to him. The distance that separated him from his brother made Mike sad. It seemed that direct contact with his family actually increased his isolation from them. He missed William, Jennifer, and Omar. He thought ruefully that they were closer to him than his own family, but Carl was his real brother and he wanted to be close. He had to try.

"Aren't you looking forward to the wedding at all?" Mike asked his brother.

“Hey, marriage is a woman's thing,” Carl said testily. “I'll just be happy when the wedding's over.”

Mike felt sorry for his brother because he wasn't even looking forward to his own wedding, but he also knew there was no point in continuing the discussion. Still, he wanted to be nice to Carl.

“This is for you,” Mike said as he handed Carl an envelope with a thousand dollar check in it.

“Thanks,” Carl said when he opened the envelope. Carl cracked a smile and tousled Mike's hair. At twenty, Mike hadn't had his hair tousled in a long time.

“When are you gonna find yourself another girl, move in, get married?” Carl asked. “It'll make you stop thinking so much.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Mike said. “I may be a stupid virgin, but I know I want more from life than compromise, and I'm not going to settle for less.”

Carl laughed. “You'll settle. You're pretty smart Mike, maybe even a genius, but life is more than playing with machines. If you don't settle, you'll end up alone, and there's nothing worse than ending up alone.”

Carl's stag party was a classic. Most of the other guests were people that Carl had played football with in high school. There was plenty of liquor and grainy, old, eight-millimeter porno films. The featured attraction was a stripper who stayed around to double as a hooker in the spare bedroom. Carl offered Mike a turn, but Mike said no. He'd saved himself too long to give in now. Still, his resolve was not as firm as it had been in Reno. The frustration of his virginity was turning to despair. Pleading jet lag, Mike left the party early. He preferred to handle his blues alone.

Both Carl and Suzanne were pious at the wedding ceremony. Mike could not resolve the contradiction between Carl's cynical attitude the night before, which Mike thought represented Carl's true feelings, and the solemnity with which Carl pronounced his wedding vows. Mike wondered if Suzanne were being just as hypocritical. He wondered how two people could make such solemn vows if they weren't passionately in love with each other.

The wedding reception was he'd in a local Italian restaurant whose interior had seen better days, but the reception itself had a festive atmosphere. Carl knew how to throw a party. The band was good, the food was tasty, the liquor flowed easily, and the guests seemed to be genuinely having a good time. Mike and his father sat alone at the head table watching Carl dance with his mother and Suzanne dance with her father.

“Why did you get married Dad?” Mike asked his father.

His father looked into the distance and smiled. “One night, a couple of years after I'd gotten out of the Navy, I went out with some of my friends and we got really shitfaced drunk. You know the kind where you can't remember what you did. Anyway, when I woke up the next morning, I figured I'd go to church to take care of whatever bad things I might have done. That was the first time I saw your mother. She was tall, thin, blonde, and had a look of total innocence. She looked like a living saint. I knew that she was my redemption. Needless to tell you, over the last twenty-five years I've felt a little overly redeemed. A woman settles a man, perhaps a little too much. Enjoy being single while you can.”

Mike nodded, but said nothing. Suzanne came to the table and asked Mike to dance.

“Where are you going on your honeymoon?” Mike said as they danced.

“We're not going on a honeymoon,” she said. “It's too expensive.”

“What about the money from the wedding presents?” Mike asked.

“We're saving it for a down payment on a house. I don't want to raise kids in an apartment,” Suzanne said.

“You can get a house later, you'll only be newlyweds now,” Mike said.

“I think our generation has the wrong idea about marriage. Our grandparents knew what was important, not romantic love, but kids and a good home.”

“Can't you have both?” Mike asked. He hoped that this beautiful woman would give him a different answer from the one that everyone else had given on this supposedly most romantic of all days.

“Maybe I can have both,” she said, “but if I have to choose, I know which one's more important. Carl will be a good husband and a good provider. That's what counts.”

“I hope you're happy Suzanne. I really do,” Mike said. He didn't not want to discourage anyone else from following their dreams, even if he couldn't really understand them.

On the plane to Boston the next day, Mike worried that he would feel as isolated from Roger as he had from his family, but from the moment Mike arrived at Roger's apartment, conversation flowed naturally freely. Roger gave Mike a tour of M.I.T., highlighting the various computer labs.

“This stuff is pretty neat,” Mike said as he inspected the equipment in the Artificial Intelligence Lab.

“I don't have much time to enjoy it,” Roger said.

“C'mon, don't tell me you spend all your time studying,” Mike said confidentially.

Roger shook his head with a wry smile.

“M.I.T. isn't St. Luke's,” Roger said. “You can't take graduation for granted. I spend most of my Saturday nights in the library, and that still doesn't guarantee good grades. My father's on my ass about why I don't have a straight-A average like I did in high school. He just doesn't understand how hard it is just to pass. I've seen some really smart people fail out. Computer hackers are especially vulnerable. It's scary. I'll never forget seeing one the guys in my Physics class kill himself by jumping off a building because he failed the final. I still have nightmares about it. Seeing that guy jump was the greatest incentive to study I've ever had in my life.”

“Well you just study as much as you need to when I'm here,” Mike said. “I understand about needing to work hard. I don't want you to screw up your life just because I came to visit. Don't worry about me. With all these computers, I'll find something to do.”

When Roger was studying or in class, Mike sat in front of a computer terminal in Roger's off-campus apartment. At first, Roger's roommates shunned Mike because he did not go to M.I.T. Their snottiness reminded him of Brad. Thinking about Brad made Mike decide to be nice to Roger's roommates instead of returning their arrogance. After a few days, Mike's knowledge of personal computers and his participation in the “real world” of Silicon Valley impressed them enough to earn their avid acceptance.

The first night of Mike's visit, he and Roger had a few beers. Roger admitted that he didn't spend all his time studying or with his girlfriend, and that he did spend some of his time playing with the computer. Roger introduced Mike to the smorgasbord of software available on M.I.T.'s computers. The first was the ARPAnet, an electronic mail system that connected most of the major universities in the United States. The topics were mostly technical and anybody who was “on the net” could participate in the discussion.

Mike found a group talking about text editors and word processors and jumped in.

Mike enjoyed the ARPAnet, but he became addicted to a computer game called Adventure. The object of Adventure was to prosper and survive in an imaginary underground world ruled by monsters and magic spells. Each new chamber in this underground world presented a new challenge, usually in the form of an interesting riddle. Mike spent endless hours exploring Adventure's world and he still couldn't get enough.

Mike loved playing Adventure because it allowed him to explore and conquer an alien world with a keyboard. Adventure's world was like the real world only better because in Adventure's world, all you had to become a hero was figure out the rules. Even if you got killed, you could just start the game over and get another life.

His mind was not so overcome by computers that he was unable to realize that he really had only one life, and that it was up to him to make proper use of it. The realization started a chain reaction of anxiety in Mike's mind. He added up everything he'd gambled by working for Rosetta instead of going to M.I.T, his social life, his education, and his youth. If Rosetta succeeded it would be a smart bet. If it didn't, it would be a grave error. He hoped the development of ThinkWrite II was going well. He turned off the game and went for a walk.

On the last night of his vacation, Mike went with Roger to a party given by Roger's girlfriend, Evelyn, who attended Wellesley College, about fifteen miles from M.I.T. The party was held in Evelyn's dorm.

Roger introduced Mike to Evelyn, an ordinary looking girl with intelligent eyes, a large nose, and a small mouth. She and Roger seemed to genuinely like each other. Watching them together, Mike thought they looked more like a suburban couple than young lovers.

Mike left them and attempted to mingle. The room was crowded and forced contact between bodies, a sensation that Mike was not accustomed to. One of the things that Mike liked about living in California was being alone in his car and not being required to physically interact with strangers.

The people at the party seemed to fall in two classes, couples having fun, and single people thinking they had made a mistake by coming. Mike was definitely a member of the second group. He would have preferred to stay home with Roger, drunk beer, and watched Star Trek reruns or a science fiction movie on TV.

Milling aimlessly around the room made Mike feel awkward. His mind drifted to thinking about computer games when he was startled by a "Hello" from an attractive dark-haired young woman in a loose-fitting dress. Mike introduced himself and talked about California. She talked about politics. They danced briefly and badly, and Mike soon ran out of things to say. When he offered to walk her to her dorm room, she refused. He felt frustrated and thoroughly unattractive.

"I think I'll go back to the apartment," Mike said to Roger. "If you want to spend the night with Evelyn, don't worry about me. I'll just make my own way home."

"Don't be ridiculous," Roger said, a little drunkenly. "You came all the way from California and this is the only time we have together. I'll talk to Evelyn. It'll be fine."

Roger whispered something in Evelyn's ear, and she whispered something back. Roger kissed Evelyn and wandered back to Mike.

"I'm just a total loss with women," Mike said on the ride home. "Carl was ragging on me about not having a girlfriend. He makes me feel like I'm stupid about women. I used to say I was waiting for the right one, but maybe I shouldn't be so fussy," Mike's voice trailed off as he finished the sentence.

"Maybe your standards are too high. Maybe they're not," Roger said. "That's up to you. I've made my choice. I know Evelyn isn't perfect, but I like her and she likes me, and that's O.K. A lot of other guys laugh and pretend they're Casanovas, and maybe some of them even are, but there's nothing wrong with going out with a nice girl instead of chasing after every woman that walks by. As far as Carl goes, what's he got to show for all the women he's had? A nice wife he doesn't appreciate. I think Carl's just jealous of your success and he's just hitting you where you're soft."

"I guess you're right, but I just get really lonely sometimes," Mike said. "Sometimes I think I should have married Mary Liz."

Roger laughed. "Maybe you should have gone to M.I.T., but you definitely shouldn't have married Mary Liz. She would have only chained you to a regular job with a couple of screaming babies, which you would have had to work two dead-end jobs to support. How do you think your father, or mine for that matter, got to be the way they are?"

Mike wasn't sure if he completely agreed with Roger, but Mike didn't want to talk about romance anymore. He nodded and turned the conversation to computers and sports cars.

Mike returned to California feeling rested. When he got off the plane and breathed the balmy air, he knew that California was his real home.

Mike enjoyed the Friday beer bust more than any of the parties he'd been to back east. He drank beer, joked, and swapped rumors with Jennifer, Paul, and Tommy. The conversation stopped when Omar got up on the stage to start the announcements.

"I'd like to introduce Rosetta's newest employee, Ron Hilton," Omar said, pointing to a handsome man with chiseled features and graying sideburns. "Ron's got quite an impressive resume. At his last job, he was managing the Data Processing Division at Central Atlantic Life. Before that, he ran a boatload of big projects at Fortune Fifty companies. Ron, why don't you come up here and say hello?"

"I'm honored to be here," Ron said in a voice that managed to be commanding and modest at the same time. "Rosetta's been one of the most successful start-ups in history. I would like to join with Omar and the rest of the team to make Rosetta of the most successful public companies in history."

Rosetta's employees responded to Ron's words with loud applause, cries of "Yeah!" and raised fists in the air.

"To accomplish this goal, we must maintain quality," Ron continued after the applause had died away. "Quality requires discipline and planning. I hope to be able to contribute to this effort by making sure that Rosetta uses the latest techniques of software engineering. I don't know as much about ThinkWrite as you do, but I know something about computers. I've been working with computers for twenty years, and I've always worked with the best people. From what Omar tells me, when it comes to word processors you're the best in the world."

Everybody clapped again.

"Who is that guy?" Mike asked after the speech.

"That guy is a disease," Jennifer said. "The rumor mill says Omar is reorganizing William's department, and giving most of William's people to Hilton."

Mike was shocked. He thought William was the ideal boss.

"Why did this happen?" Mike asked Jennifer.

"Omar and William had a fight while you were back East," she said. "I don't know exactly what it was about, but I'll bet William made the mistake of standing up for us."

"Hiring this guy is just one of the necessary evils of success," Paul said. "I like William as much as you do, but this kind of politics goes on above us. As long as it takes us public, I'll live with it. Considering the size of William's stock options, I think he'll find a way to live with it too."

"I guess part of going public is selling out," Tommy said. "Still, it's depressing to be invaded by this bureaucratic boll weevil."

"I like him," Brad said. "I think this company needs more discipline."

"That joke is in exceptionally poor taste even by your standards Brad," Jennifer said.

"I'm serious," Brad said. "Companies grow up. At different times they have different needs. Now we need to be a big company. We need to pay more attention to quality. I don't think you're being fair, Jennifer. Sure, Hilton is political, but William is political too. You're just mad because Hilton's threatening William's job, and you take a slightly more than professional interest in William."

"You're wrong, Brad," Jennifer said, her eyes narrowing. "For your information, I have a boyfriend that I'm very happy with. I went into this business to be a part of the



computer revolution, not to find a man, but at every turn I have found a man, usually one with a sexist attitude like yours. The thing that separates you from most men is that you wear your attitude up front. People like Hilton hide their prejudices, so you get screwed and you don't even know it.

After taking in this exchange, Mike didn't know what to think. He valued Jennifer's opinion more than Brad's. But it was Omar's implicit verdict that inclined Mike to give Hilton the benefit of the doubt. Mike reasoned, "If Omar hired me with my resume and Hilton's resume is ten times better than mine, Hilton must be competent." Mike didn't want to argue with his friends, so he kept his mouth shut and hoped nobody would ask him for his opinion. He excused himself from the beer bust and went back to his cube to do some work.

William tapped on the side of his cube about an hour later.

"How was the wedding?" William asked.

"It was okay," Mike said. "I've been trying to make up for lost time since I got back. It looks like ThinkWrite II is going to be really late. Is that why there are all those rumors about a reorganization?"

"Don't worry about it," William smiled. "Omar started looking for a new vice president three months ago. Having some big company executives make it easier to go public. Wall Street trusts them more. In a way a reorg would be a good thing. I'm getting tired of all the responsibility. I've done my bit for the war. I need to go out and have some fun. In fact, that's why I dropped by. I'm going barhopping in San Francisco and I thought you might want to come along."

"No thanks," Mike said.

"C'mon, you look like you could use a good time," William said encouragingly.

Although Mike was aroused by the prospect of picking up a woman, it didn't feel like something he would feel comfortable doing. He shook his head resolutely no.

"All the solutions to the world's problems aren't inside the computer," William said. "There was a famous mathematician named Godel who came up with a mathematical proof that showed that even if you could come up with all the possible computer programs in the universe, the programs couldn't possibly describe the universe. They would either leave something out or be wrong."

Mike didn't quite understand what William was saying, but it didn't matter.

"I'm sure you're right," Mike said, "but I have work to do."

William shook his head and sighed, "You don't know what you're missing."

Many little bugs remained to be cleaned up in ThinkWrite II, but even with his devotion to the cause, Mike found it hard to muster his previous enthusiasm about work. William's invitation had made Mike think about sex again. His trip back east had made him painfully aware of his virginity. He'd hoped that when he came back to Rosetta, he could bury himself in his job and the pain would subside, but it wasn't working. He had dinner out of the vending machine and went back to work, but he still couldn't concentrate. His body felt tense and stiff. When he got up to stretch, he noticed that he was the last one left in the office. "I guess I've done as much as I can for tonight," he said to himself.

As he walked out to his car, he thought about William's invitation and wondered if he should have accepted it. He sighed as he looked at his car. The old Pontiac with its rusted fenders was the butt of many office jokes. Mike didn't care who laughed at him. In his eyes the car was like an old favorite horse that had been his faithful companion through many tough battles and hard marches. But tonight, the car just looked lonely and sad sitting alone in the parking lot. He decided to go for a drive. Maybe the beauty of the hills would cheer him up.

As he drove north on 280, he looked at the outlines of the rolling hills, dotted with the lights of their mansions. It was a beautifully peaceful tableau, but the view didn't make him feel any better. He tuned the radio impatiently, looking for a song to soothe his restlessness, but even the songs he normally liked seemed to irritate him. He was about to give up on the radio when he finally found a song that hit the right nerves.

After the song ended, the DJ announced that the Foothill College telescope was open to the public that night. Foothill College was just off the next exit. He knew he didn't want to go home. Perhaps looking at the stars would make him feel better.

Foothill College was located in Los Altos Hills, a small town made up of huge mansions tucked away in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. The college itself was a collection of modern, elegant, redwood buildings set on top of a small hill. Mike parked by the dome that housed the telescope. As he walked up the dome's curving staircase, he was fascinated by the interior of the observatory. In his scholarly daze, he accidentally bumped into one of the other visitors.

He turned his head to apologize directly to the person. He saw a woman's face framed by rich light brown hair. She had large green eyes and a wide full mouth. A large sketchpad that she hugged to her chest concealed her body.

"It's all right," the woman said in answer to his apology. Their eyes met for a moment and then she moved away.

Instead of actually looking through the telescope, Mike and the visitors to the observatory spent most of their time waiting for the operator to reposition the telescope to locate a particular star or planet. All this waiting gave Mike plenty of time to study the woman out of the corner of his eyes. Since she had her sketchpad

open now, he was able to see her body. Her simple shirt and blue jeans accented her high, well-formed breasts and shapely hips. He wanted to approach her, but he was scared. He was sorry he hadn't accepted William's invitation because then he wouldn't have to face the anxiety of trying to talk to this woman. He remembered how hard it had been to get up the nerve to approach Mary Liz in the candy store. If he hadn't done that, he never would have gone out with her. But then again, if he hadn't talked to her, she never would have broken his heart. He tried to think of the stars, but it was no use because now the woman was practically staring at him. He felt like it was his fate to talk to her.

"Are you sketching the stars?" he whispered, not wanting to disturb the other viewers.

"No," she said. "I'm sketching the people waiting to look through the telescope. They're much more interesting. The stars in the telescope are sort of boring. They just look like big spots of light. People are much more interesting than big spots of light."

Mike liked the telescope and felt compelled to defend the universe. "The last spot we saw is a whole galaxy. A galaxy can contain over a trillion stars, and probably even more planets. If even just a small percentage of those planets are inhabited, you might have been looking at hundreds of civilizations. I'm sure that some of the people, or whatever they are, who make up those civilization are much more interesting than the people on this planet."

"Maybe so," she said continuing to sketch, "but I'm on this planet."

He was silent. He felt like wasn't getting anywhere, but he didn't want to give up, so he just stood there, feeling stupid. She ignored him and continued to sketch.

"Here," she said and handed him the sketchpad.

Mike recognized his own image. "That's pretty good," he said.

"Thank you," she said and got up to leave. Mike had to choose between seeing the rings of Saturn and following the woman. He decided that as the woman had said he was living on this planet. He left the observatory.

When he caught up with her in the parking lot, he said, "Can I have that picture? I'll buy it from you."

"It's not for sale," she said firmly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I'm a computer programmer. I spend more time with machines than people. Lots of times I end up with my foot in my mouth."

She looked at him steadily, considering whether to forgive him or not. After a moment she said, "It's O.K. You didn't offend me."

She paused again as if to complete her appraisal.

“My name's Antonia Calabria,” she said, extending her hand.

He shook her extended hand, “Mike Danzig. Are you an artist?”

“No,” she laughed. “I'm not good enough. I guess I should have listened to my parents and gotten a degree in something beside Art History. When I told my parents what I was going to get my degree in, my father yelled at me and my mother prayed for me.”

“Sounds like my family,” Mike said. “My parents weren't too pleased about my college plans either. I had a scholarship to M.I.T., but I came out here instead. Sometimes I feel bad because I didn't go. My best friend Roger is there now. Roger doesn't say so, but I know he thinks I made a mistake. Sometimes I think he's right. I'm the only programmer at work without a degree. I guess it gives me a little bit of a complex about not having a degree of my own,” he said looking at his feet in embarrassment.

Antonia thought he looked cute when he did that. He reminded her of a penitent little boy admitting to his parents that he'd broken a plate.

“Don't worry about it,” she said. “I don't care if you didn't go to college. The only thing you missed was a good time and even that was overrated. About the only thing my degree from Berkeley got me was a job at a bank. I didn't really want the job, but I figured it was a way of making money until I'd figured out what I wanted to do. Anyway, I spend eight hours a day following bank policy and making loans to people who can't really afford to pay them back.”

“I know what you mean about working in a bank. I worked at a bank during my last summer in New York,” Mike said.

“I've always wanted to see New York,” she said with genuine interest.

“It's nice to hear something good about New York,” he said. “Most people out here seem to think I'm some sort of criminal just because I was born and raised there.”

“I always associated New York with artists, not criminals,” she said. “I used to wish I'd grown up in New York, where there were other artists, instead of San Jose, which was afraid of 'the effects of growth.' But I've always been a little strange, which certainly made me lonely in high school.”

Mike was surprised that such a beautiful woman could have ever felt lonely in high school.

“Believe me it's isn't any easier growing up as a nerd in New York. I came out here hoping to find a community where I fit in better,” he said.

“Did Silicon Valley provide that community?” she asked.

“Pretty much,” he said. “I love where I work, but I don't do much else so I guess I really don't know.”

“You should do something else besides work,” she said, rubbing her hands over her arms to warm herself against the evening chill.

“I guess you're right, but I don't really know anybody else. I've been here for two years and you're one of the first Silicon Valley natives I've met. Most of the people I work with are immigrants like me,” he said. He sensed he might be starting to talk too much. “Hey, I can see you're getting cold. Maybe we could have dinner sometime? Lunch if you'd be more comfortable,” his voice faded along with his confidence.

She looked at him and watched his heart sink. She was used to getting rid of obnoxious guys who tried to pick her up. Still, he was definitely handsome. His striking blue eyes showed desire, but not the obnoxious whining lust or the menacing air of the rapist. But it was not any aspect of his looks that made her decide to consider his offer. It was the awkward earnestness of his manner.

She was tired of good-looking sexually proficient men, like her most recent boyfriend, who invariably turned out to be bastards. Yes, she was definitely in the mood for a change and Mike looked like something different. He was so different that she did something she'd never done with a guy she'd only met once. She gave him her phone number.

When Mike got back on 280, he screamed “Yeah” at the top of his lungs. He floored the Pontiac and watched the speedometer climb, but he was forced to slow down when the engine started making its familiar and ominous clacking noise.