

6.

Mike's palms sweated as he and Antonia drove to San Francisco to attend William's birthday party. It was their second date. On their first date, Mike took Antonia to a fancy French restaurant that William had recommended. The restaurant's opulence and formality of made Mike uncomfortable, especially since Mike was wearing a tie for only the third time since moving to Silicon Valley.

Despite Mike's discomfort, talk flowed easily between them. When Mike drove Antonia home, he was relieved that she seemed to have enjoyed herself. He opened her car door, escorted her to the front door of her apartment, and said good night without even attempting to kiss her.

William's birthday party was held at Hamburger Mary's Bar and Grill in San Francisco. Hamburger Mary's made Mike feel even more uncomfortable than the fancy restaurant that they'd gone to on their previous date. Hamburger Mary's was a rest stop for the patrons of the gay and punk clubs on Folsom Street and the surrounding neighborhood. The sight of shaved heads, purple hair, and men French kissing each other filled Mike with simultaneous revulsion and curiosity.

Even being from New York, he'd never seen men kiss. From time to time, his virginity had made him wonder if he was gay, but the sight of men kissing convinced him that he wasn't. He decided not to stare. Recently, there had been violent demonstrations in the wake of the assassination of the pro-Gay rights politicians, George Moscone and Harvey Milk. The last thing he wanted tonight was an incident.

Mike smiled with relief as he spotted William, Tommy, Jennifer, and Brad seated at a large table. After seeing Hamburger Mary's, Mike had understood why the socially cautious and conservative Paul had decided not to come.

"Is this place O.K.?" Mike asked as he sat down with his friends.

William was determined to have a good time tonight, and he was in no mood to let Mike's nervous naiveté get in the way. William felt he'd spent enough of his energy protecting and educating other people. He needed a properly hedonistic night of partying to put his political battle with Hilton, and the rest of his Silicon Valley troubles back into their proper perspective.

"This place is fine. Why do you ask?" William said curtly.

"No reason, I guess," Mike said, sensing the impatience in William's voice. Nobody else seemed to mind or even notice. Mike felt foolish.

"So this is the famous Antonia?" Tommy asked, sensing Mike's embarrassment.

Mike beamed and introduced her to everybody else at the table. She seemed to fit in better than he did.

“Time to get this party in gear,” Jennifer said.

They paid the bill and walked into the dank cold of a downtown San Francisco night.

“I wish I had a warmer coat,” Antonia said.

“I'm sure Mike will buy you a mink coat after we go public,” Brad said with his usual sarcasm.

Mike gave Brad a chilling look, but Brad only responded with a blank stare.

“What are you going to do with your stock if we go public, Brad?” William asked teasingly.

“Save it for my old age,” Brad said. “I have no need to sell it except to pay off my ex-wife's credit cards.”

A shudder went through Mike when Brad talked about his ex-wife.

“How could you marry someone and then hate them so much Brad?” Mike asked. “This is a serious question, so don't take it the wrong way.”

“I hope you'll never have to understand the answer to that question,” Brad answered dismissively, but Brad's tone was contradicted by an unusual expression of compassion on his face.

“Brad, you're being a perfect jerk,” Jennifer said disgustedly. “I know Mike will never be like that.”

“Oh, I don't know,” said William. “You can never tell.”

“Jennifer, what are you going to do with the money from your stock?” Tommy said trying to change the subject.

“I think I'll buy a house,” Jennifer said. “I'm tired of paying rent. Now that Proposition 13 has passed, taxes will go down and the prices will go up.”

“The prices are already so high that I don't see how could they could go up anymore,” Mike said. “You can't get a house in San Jose for less than seventy thousand bucks.”

“I think Jennifer's right about house prices.” Tommy said, “but I wouldn't want to live in the Valley, it's too crowded. I think I'll buy a house in the mountains. I can't afford Woodside or Los Altos Hills. Even if I had the money,

I don't think I'd fit in, but there are some reasonable buys south of Los Gatos if you know where to look.”

“If this place ever goes public,” William said. “I'm going to take my money and retire!”

They stopped walking when they reached an old building, which looked like an abandoned warehouse except for a knot of punk rockers milling around a heavy steel door. Three evil-looking bouncers guarded the entrance.

“This looks like a new place. Let's try it,” William said, pulling them toward the club.

“You members?” one of the bouncers growled as they approached the steel door.

“No,” Mike said. William and Jennifer glowered at him.

“Members only,” the bouncer smiled menacingly.

William ignored the bouncer and craned his head around. A short, thin man of about twenty-five came out of the club, nodded to the bouncers and lit a cigarette.

“Excuse me,” Jennifer said, addressing the man with the cigarette. “I'm reviewing nightclubs in this area for an article I'm writing for a major music publication.”

“Sure you are,” the man with the cigarette said. “Let's see some press I.D.”

Jennifer pulled out a card from her wallet and gave it to the man with the cigarette. He looked at the card and then back at her and back at the card, “Please sign the book on your way in. Just write down 'owner's guest' next to your names.”

The bouncer opened the door and waved them in. Mike was relieved that he didn't have to use his fake I.D. The drinking age was eighteen in New York, but it was twenty-one in California, and he still had a few months to go.

They walked through a warren of small rooms into a large room with a twenty-five foot ceiling, a gallery, a bar, and a huge open dance floor. The patrons of the nightclub were even more outrageously attired than the patrons of Hamburger Mary's. There were women wearing their hair in purple Mohawks and members of both sexes wearing safety pins in their ears and other parts of their anatomy. Mike remembered that when he was a boy he had been shocked by hippie men who wore their hair so long it fell down to the middle of their backs. “Can't tell the boys from the girls,” his father used to say. But now, as Mike compared Tommy's long hair to the hairstyles of the rest of the patrons in the club, hippies looked relatively normal.

William went to the bar in search of a dance partner. Before Mike could get it together to ask Antonia to dance, Tommy did. Although Mike was momentarily jealous, he wasn't thinking about dancing, he was thinking about how Jennifer had gotten them into the club.

“What was on that card?” Mike shouted to Jennifer over the music.

“Senior writer, Rolling Stone Magazine,” Jennifer shouted back. “She's one of our customers. She gave me this card and told me that it would get me in anywhere. I guess she was right.”

Jennifer's bold action reminded Mike of Mary Liz. The association increased his interest in Jennifer. But Mike's attraction to Jennifer was overshadowed by his raw desire for Antonia. He was captivated by the way Antonia gave her body to the music in a sweat drenching ritual.

Mike watched Brad dancing with Jennifer. To Mike's surprise, Brad was an excellent dancer. He envied Brad for being better a dancer as well as a better programmer. William seemed to be celebrating his birthday by flirting with every woman in sight except Jennifer. He ended up going home with a twenty-two year-old woman whose traditionally feminine good looks were offset by a bomber jacket and spiked hair.

“Doesn't anybody worry about diseases?” Mike asked Jennifer.

“There's always penicillin,” she said. “After all it is almost 1980. The dark ages are over. You don't have to get married to have a good time.”

Mike shrugged and ordered another drink. He reasoned if all these people, who were older and more world-wise than I am, aren't worried, why should I?”

He danced the next song with Antonia. The sweat, the backbeat, and the alcohol combined to put him into a blissful, rhythmic trance and he began to genuinely have a good time.

At about one o'clock, he saw Antonia yawn. He decided that since it was over an hour's ride back to San Jose, he probably should take her home soon.

As Mike watched Antonia get into his car, he thought about how lucky he was to have his job, his friends, and the chance to spend an evening dancing with a beautiful woman.

They drove out of San Francisco on 280. As they left the city's southern suburbs, the lights of the Valley spread out below them.

“It's beautiful,” Mike said.

“When I was growing up in the Valley, it was even more beautiful,” Antonia said. “My grandfather had an orchard in San Jose. He used to take my sister and me up to the hills in the springtime. He'd tell us about the farms that used to be here before they built all the factories and houses. With the orchards in bloom, he said the Valley was like a sea of flowers, just like now it's a sea of lights. Before they called it Silicon Valley, they used to call it the Valley of Heart's Delight.”

Mike remembered telling Mary Liz about the Cloisters on their first date. Mary Liz had seemed respectful, interested, but she didn't love the place where she lived. Antonia obviously did. It made him like her even more.

“What happened to your grandfather's orchard?” he asked, sensing that there was more to the story.

She turned her head to look out the side window and her eyes got the far away they look that people get when they see clear glimpses of the past. She traced patterns with her index finger on the window. She was more beautiful and delicate than anything that Mike had ever seen in his life.

“In the nineteen sixties, the county decided to build a road through my grandfather's orchard. He didn't want to sell, but the county had 'eminent domain' and that was that. He only got a fraction of it what it was worth, even back then. Some of his neighbors managed somehow to hold on to their farms and became millionaires. My grandfather had a stroke a couple of years after he sold the farm. Now they've cut down almost all of the orchards and people like you have moved in. my parents say it's good for the economy, but it makes me angry when I think about it.”

Mike felt like he was the unwitting villain of Antonia's story.

“We newcomers don't mean any harm,” he said. “We just want our chance to make it.”

“I know.” she said. “Besides, you computer people will be replaced by some new wave of immigrants. They'll probably do an even more thorough job of raping the Valle- than you guys have.” She realized her remark was a bit more caustic than she intended and she wanted to make up for it. “Your friends seem like nice decent people, even Brad who pretends he isn't.”

“Those people and the company we work for are my whole life,” he said. “I like to think I'm being smart by putting all my energies into work, but sometimes I wonder if I'm just deluding myself.”

“You're not deluding yourself,” she said softly. “You're right about work. Work lasts; you can't always count on people to be there when you need them. People always want what they want first. I wish I could be more like you. I wish I could just pick something and go for it,” she said.

“Why don't you?” he asked softly.

“I don't know. It's just not that easy. Sometimes I think I'd like to be an artist, but I don't whether I'm good enough. Then I think I maybe I should try to move up the ladder at the bank. It's a nice stable job, but on the other hand, what will happen to my career if I take time off to have kids? But then again, I don't even really want to

get married. Anyway, the more I think about my future, the more confused I get," she said.

"Why don't you just write everything down and begin sorting it out that way?" he suggested.

"I've tried that," she said turning her on her side and making a pillow with her hands so she could look at him, "but it doesn't seem to help. I don't think it's the process, it's me. Some people are just born to get somewhere, other people aren't. I guess I'm just one of those people who isn't meant to get anywhere."

"I don't think you're old enough to know that yet," he said, wanting to be supportive. "Getting somewhere takes a little time."

"Thank you for saying that," she said.

They drove the next few miles in silence. The traffic thinned out and the landscape became more desolate as the highway slowly climbed away from the floor of the Valley and into the hills. Mike told himself to keep his eyes on the road, but his passenger was so lovely that he could not resist stealing glimpses of her.

"You're a hazard to my driving, looking so beautiful," he said, surprised by his own boldness.

"Then why don't you pull off at the next exit?" she suggested.

Nervously, Mike pulled off 280 onto a service road, which quickly turned into a deserted country road. He parked the car on the shoulder.

Antonia rolled down her window.

"Listen," she said softly.

He listened to the chirping crickets and the other sounds of the night. The full moon illuminated the fields and the reservoir behind it, but the scene was only a backdrop for her beauty. He put his arm around her shoulder. She seemed to welcome it so he pulled her closer.

"It's beautiful. Thank you for coming with me tonight," he said.

"You're welcome," she said, snuggling up on his chest.

He turned his neck to look at her. Her eyes were half closed. He gently brushed his lips on her forehead. Antonia smiled sleepily. Encouraged by her response, he placed his next kiss on her lips. As their lips met, she parted her lips to admit the tip of his tongue. Kissing her felt wonderful, even better than kissing Mary Liz. He slowly ran his hand down to her breast, but she stopped him.

"I'm too tired, but don't give up on me," she said with half laughing, half pleading eyes.

He smiled and started the car. He drove her home with his arm around her and her head nestled on his chest. When she fell asleep on his shoulder, he knew he had fallen in love with her.

When Mike went to work the following Monday morning, a small pile of memos greeted him on his desk. The first memo announced the rumored reorganization. William's title was changed from Vice President of Engineering to Vice President of Research and Development. Ron Hilton was now Vice President of Engineering. The real change was one of command, not titles. Only Mike, Brad, Tommy, and Paul still reported to William. Everyone else in William's former department, including Jennifer and twelve newly hired people, now reported to Hilton. Mike felt that the reorganization was unjust. He didn't understand how Omar could push William aside when William had worked so hard and had been such a good leader.

The next memo was from Hilton's newly created Quality Assurance department. The memo somberly stated that the planned announcement of ThinkWrite II at an upcoming computer trade show was being delayed because "the bugs in ThinkWrite II were too numerous and too severe."

Mike scoffed at the memo. Most of the bugs were trivial, but the memo made them seem overwhelming. Mike went to look for William. William wasn't in his office so he tried Jennifer's cubicle.

"Mike would you look at this garbage!" Jennifer demanded as she waved one of Hilton's memos in her hand.

The shelves of Jennifer's cubicle were covered with piles of paper and plants with runners growing everywhere. The walls were covered with Aubrey Beardsley posters and pictures of well-built men wearing few clothes.

"Please keep your office decorations tasteful and your person well-groomed," Jennifer said, reading the memo in a sarcastic tone. "I was so embarrassed by the condition of the company that I was unable to give a tour to one of our largest customers. We must all do our part to present Rosetta's best image to the outside world. Signed, Ron Hilton."

"I think he walked by your office and saw your Hunks of Arizona Calendar," Mike chuckled, his sympathy for William temporarily overcome by the humor of the scene.

"It doesn't matter," Jennifer said, still furious. "Who is this jerk? Has he ever made a product? He talks about our image? What about our work? I'm telling you Mike, Omar's up in his ivory office now and he's left all of us 'little people' to perform those trivial duties like actually doing the work," she said with venomous sarcasm.

“I don't know about Omar,” Mike said, “but I'd have to agree with you about Hilton. This Q.A. memo is bogus. These bugs will just take a couple of weeks to fix.”

“They'd better be easy to fix, or it's my ass,” William said as he entered Jennifer's cubicle. William's manner was obviously and unusually tense.

“What's going on?” Mike said.

William exhaled, remembering he was among friends.

“I've been picking up a lot of heat from Omar and the rest of the executive staff for ThinkWrite II being late,” William said. “Hilton's been making lots of 'helpful' suggestions at the staff meeting, like telling me I should have more written project planning materials.”

William inhaled, not wanting to relive the painful part of the story, “At last week's staff meeting, Omar tells me that I have to commit to a ship date for ThinkWrite II. I told him it was ready for Beta now, and it would be ready to ship two months after that. Omar starts nodding approvingly, but then Hilton pipes up. This time Hilton's not acting helpful, he's acting patronizing. He says ThinkWrite II will be lucky to be in Beta in two months. He passes around a version of that Q.A. memo. I can tell by the dirty looks that Omar's giving me that he's buying every word of Hilton's story.”

“The next day at five o'clock, Omar calls me into his office. He puts on his smile and tells me how he appreciates how hard I've been working. Then he says maybe I have too many things on my plate. Omar, being the generous soul he is, offers to unburden me of some of my excessive responsibility, three-quarters of my department to be exact. He says he's doing this to help me focus on ThinkWrite II. He closes the conversation by making some friendly, but not so-subtle hints about what else might happen if there are any more delays or Q.A. problems.”

William's story made Mike feel terrible. He felt his vacation had contributed to William's demotion.

“That really sucks,” Mike said.

“I appreciate your sympathy,” William said, “but what we need to do now is pull together and fix these bugs or there will be a lot more of these memos. Jennifer, I'm really sorry, but you don't work for me anymore so there's not much I can do about that stupid office decoration memo. Mike, you're still on my team, so let's get going. I have a special project for you.”

Mike and William left Jennifer's cube and went to William's office. Mike started to read the bug list, knocking off the easy ones in his mind.



“Forget about the bug list,” William said. “I want you to concentrate all your efforts on one particular bug, and I need it fixed by Friday.”

“O.K.,” Mike nodded, although he was puzzled by William's directive. “Which bug do you want me to work on?”

“You know how ThinkWrite II will run for hours and then will crash for no apparent reason. I want you find out the reason or reasons why. It's an intermittent problem, so there's no repeatable way to make it crash. It's going to be a very tough bug to find, but I've already given Brad, Paul, and Tommy a full load, so it's up to you.”

Mike flushed with pride. His time had come. He'd finally earned sufficient trust to be given the toughest problem. Mike tore into reading the code, eager to prove himself worthy of the honor. He thought he'd fixed the bug many times. But each time he gave his new version of ThinkWrite II to the testers in Q.A., they would eventually make it crash. Even worse, the program would crash in a way that was totally unrelated to the problem Mike thought he'd identified. By Thursday night he was going crazy.

He went to Paul and Tommy for help, but they were too overwhelmed with their own work to provide much assistance. The few suggestions they made had no effect on the problem.

Omar stopped by Mike's cube. Omar greeted Mike with his usual smile, but there was sternness in his questions that Mike had never heard before, especially when they concerned William. Mike, like the rest of the Li River gang, stood behind William without reservation. That night, Mike worked until four in the morning and got nowhere. When he realized he was nodding off, he got up from his desk and forced himself to drink a final cup of coffee so he wouldn't fall asleep on the drive home. He was beginning to hate the taste of coffee. He had been practically living on it for the past three weeks. The next morning he called Antonia.

“I may have to postpone our date for tomorrow night,” he said as evenly as he could.

“No. Why?” she said with alarm.

“I don't want to.” he said, hysteria now creeping into his voice, “but I have to work.”

“Ssshhh. It's O.K.,” she said soothingly, “I just thought you didn't want to see me.”

“Of course I want to see you,” he said emphatically. “You don't know how much I want to see you, but I have to fix this bug. Today's the deadline and I'm not going to make it. A lot of people are counting on me and I can't let them down,” he said with a voice thick with barely restrained hysteria.

“Hey I understand,” she said. “Do you want me and come over and see you? Bring you some food?”

“Do you mean it?” he said excitedly. “That would be great!”

She visited him, talked to him, and kissed him. He felt sure that if he pushed, he could get her to sleep with him, but he didn't want to jeopardize the relationship by pushing her. Friday night came and went, but the bug remained. Mike worked on Saturday, but without success. He dragged himself to work again on Sunday morning. He saw Antonia for a few hours and this time he did push but she refused.

“I don't want our first time to be bad just because you're feeling tired and desperate,” she said. “I want to make love to you. I can fuck anybody.”

He stopped himself. Intellectually, he knew she was right, but his body craved hers with a hunger that obscured reason. He went back to work. For the first time in his life, he felt like the computer was his enemy. He attacked the keyboard, but the changes he made just caused more crashes. He worked until two in the morning. Then he went home and collapsed with all his clothes on. He woke up at ten the next morning feeling horrible. He forced himself to get out of bed and go back to work. He felt defeated. Not only had he let down William, Omar, and the rest of the team, but he also was forced to admit that Brad was a better programmer. By six o'clock Mike was exhausted, desperate, and practically unable to think.

Mike heard a knock on the wall of his cube.

“Working late?” Brad asked in a high cracking nasal voice that was unusually friendly.

Mike said nothing. He suddenly became conscious of a physical desire to punch Brad in the face, but he kept his hands on the keyboard and his eyes on the screen.

“Yeah. I'll bet you're happy to see me like this,” Mike gestured to a cubicle littered with printouts, coffee cups, and empty fast food containers.

“Nope. It's terrible,” Brad said, his tone still friendly. “I know you don't like me very much, but I came to help. As you point out, you obviously need it.”

“Help?” Mike said warily.

“Yes, help,” Brad said. “You're not a stickler for detail. The grand stroke, that's your style, so you're patching the code, but the patches aren't working. You're so confused that you're breaking more than you're fixing.”

“How can you tell?” Mike challenged.

“I can tell from reading your code,” Brad said. “For one thing, there are no comments in your code.”

“The computer doesn't read comments,” Mike said with irritation in his voice. “The comments are only there to make the code easier to read for people who don't understand what's going on.”

“Precisely,” Brad said. “One of those people who doesn't understand what's going on is you.”

“I understand what I did,” Mike said in an exhausted voice. “Look why don't you go away? You got your revenge.”

He felt humiliated. He hated Brad more than ever.

“I am here to help you,” Brad said. “The bug is very subtle, that's why you can't find it. Once we have a good autopsy, we'll find the bug. I started out my programming career writing diagnostics, so I've got a good idea where it is just by looking at what's been patched recently. Hand me that keyboard.”

With a mixture of disbelief, envy, and hope, Mike handed Brad the keyboard. Brad taught Mike things about the art of programming that Mike never knew existed. By Tuesday, they had found the bug, which was in a piece of the program that apparently looked correct. It was like a “locked room” crime in a mystery story where a murder occurs in a room locked from the outside. Since the room is locked, someone in the room must have committed the murder, but all the people in the room have an airtight alibi. The detective must solve the crime by determining which of these apparently perfect alibis is false.

The solution to the case of the intermittent bug in ThinkWrite II was that a small piece of the program had a key to the “locked room.” This piece of the program occasionally wandered into areas of the computer's memory where it was never supposed to go. The program's wanderings were usually harmless, but every once in a while its wanderings triggered an extremely complex chain reaction that ended in a crash.

Once Mike and Brad found the bug, it took only five minutes to fix it. They gave the new version of ThinkWrite II to Q.A. on Wednesday morning. Two days later, the Q.A. people still hadn't been able to make it crash. Mike came in at noon on Friday and left at six. He had a date with Antonia.