

7.

Antonia lived in an apartment on Camden Avenue in northwest San Jose. The apartment building was a two story building built around a small courtyard with a tiny kidney shaped pool. Antonia's one bedroom apartment was not much larger than Mike's, but it was decorated with new furniture, tastefully framed prints of modern paintings, and fresh flowers.

Antonia met Mike at the door of her apartment wearing an elegant black evening dress.

"I thought we'd just have dinner here. Is that O.K.?" she said, smiling at him and offering him a glass of wine.

"Sure," he said, lifting his wine glass without taking his eyes off her.

Mike began to smile as the first effects of the wine started to dissolve the tension of the past two weeks.

Antonia made lasagna. Mike hadn't realized how hungry he was until he started to eat.

"It's good to eat something that's doesn't come from a box," he said. "I don't think I've cooked anything except steak and French fries since I moved here."

He realized that he hadn't taken his jacket off. He got up from the table to hang it up. Suddenly, Antonia burst out laughing, pointing her index finger at his pants.

"What? I bought new pants. Don't you like them?" he asked, feeling embarrassed and humiliated.

"No, they're fine," she said. "It's just that you left the price tag on them."

He felt his face redden. He'd bought the pants so he'd feel suave, and he ended up looking nerdier than ever. He decided his best choice was to accept his mistake and turn into a joke.

"Well I guess I'm just a nerd," he said, thrusting his front teeth out over his bottom lip and squinting his eyes in an exaggerated imitation of a stereotypical nerd. Then he began to hum "The Stripper" and began to slowly pull off the price tag like he was an exotic dancer pulling off his G-string.

As he went through his act, she laughed harder and harder until she could no longer control herself.

"Please stop," she said, between bursts of laughter. Every time she tried to compose herself, she would look at his contorted face and she would start laughing all over

again. When she'd finally exhausted herself from laughing, an imposing silence fell over the room. Their lips found each other. They kissed tentatively at first, but they soon embraced each other with the desperate inelegance of passion.

As he pulled her close, his fingers touched the softness of her skin above her strapless dress. The heat radiating from her breasts and groin warmed and excited him. The blood rushed into his penis and made it push insistently against the confines of his pants.

He felt she would let him go farther if he only knew how. He kissed her neck and quickly moved his lips to her bare shoulder. His kisses were hungry and deep, but ungraceful.

She giggled and moved away from him.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked.

“No, don't worry. It's O.K.”

He started kissing her again, but he sensed that there was still something wrong. He'd been waiting for this moment for over twenty years and he didn't want to blow it by being defensive about his ignorance.

“There's something I've got to tell you,” he said.

“Do you have some horrible disease? Are you going out with somebody else?” she asked. She moved away. Apprehension replaced laughter on her face.

“No, nothing like that,” he laughed shyly. “This is my first time.”

“Oh, Mike! I'm sorry,” she said as warmth replaced fear in her eyes. “I didn't know. It must have taken a lot of courage to tell me.”

“It did,” he said exhaling deeply. He was relieved to see that she was not turned off by his confession.

She took his hand and led him to the bedroom. She reached behind her and unzipped the back of her dress. When it was half open she turned around. He came up behind her and parted the unzipped halves of the dress until the garment fell gently from her body. He looked at the brown nipples of her large, firm breasts. He reached around and cupped them with his hands. The nipples became erect in his gently kneading fingers. He heard her sigh softly.

“Get undressed,” she whispered.

He got undressed, never taking his eyes off her for a moment. As she bent down to pick up the fallen dress, he marveled at the beauty of her back and her thighs. When

she slid her white cotton panties down her legs to reveal a dark swath of her pubic hair, he couldn't believe that he had really lived to see this day.

Although he had dreamed of this moment for years, the reality of Antonia's nakedness made him freeze in wonder.

Her body was both stranger and more exciting than either imagination or pornography had prepared him for. He wanted to ask someone, "Are they all like this?"

Embarrassed by the stare of his piercing blue eyes, she got into bed and pulled the sheet up to cover herself. She patted the other side of the bed invitingly. Shyly, he got into bed with her.

His erection seemed so large and strange. "Am I," he paused, "O.K.?" he said looking down at himself.

"You're fine," she said seductively.

He took her in arms and pressed her against him. She kissed him passionately. He answered her kiss and withdrew from her lips, and softly started kissing her face. She slowly guided his head down her neck and toward the rise of her breasts. At first he felt she was merely tolerating him, but when he took her nipple in his mouth, she let out a small groan and he felt her begin to yield to him.

When her hips started to move back and forth, he slid his hand to the tangle of her pubic hair. As he parted her warm wet folds, he felt like he'd arrived at the end of a long journey. He moved his fingers inside her, reveling in her wetness. He thrust his fingers deep inside her and started to move them in and out in what he guessed was the female equivalent of his own technique for self-arousal. Instead, he felt her excitement decrease. He tried different variations, but he felt her body start to get impatient with him. He started to panic. He looked questioningly at her, too embarrassed to speak. She silently removed his fingers and placed them on the surface of her opening and guided them in a circular motion.

He felt she was rejecting him.

"I'm not throwing you out, just showing you how," she whispered. "Sometimes outside is better than inside."

He was confused, but he complied. As he stroked her, she started to go wild in his arms. She closed her fingers around his organ and guided it into her. The rush of pleasure and satisfaction was one that had no parallel in his experience. He closed his eyes and forced himself not to come.

"What if you get pregnant? Shouldn't I wear something? I don't have anything, but I'd be happy to go to the drug store," he said.

“I'm on the pill, silly.”

They moved together. At first slowly, then faster. He watched her scream his name. When he could no longer control himself, he exploded.

They sat propped up on the headboard of Antonia's bed, peacefully aglow with satisfaction.

“You could have anybody you wanted, why would you want to be with a guy like me?” Mike asked as he stroked her hair.

“You probably think it's cool to be pretty and have guys call you up all the time. Well, it's not as much fun as it looks. Most of them are jerks, but you're different. You're good looking, but you're not vain. You're smart, but when you don't know something, you don't get all macho and stupid. Most of all, I feel safe with you.”

Mike's eyes began to fill with tears, “Thank you. Protecting you and making you feel safe means a lot to me. You mean a lot to me. Actually, you mean more than a lot to me. I love you.”

Mike spoke the words, not thinking of the implications, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he knew he meant them.

She was taken aback by his words. It was not the first time a man had declared his love for her and the memories filled her with pity and fear. Love seemed to turn men into something that was a cross between an obnoxious salesman and a lost puppy. The only time she'd wanted a man to say “I love you” it had turned out badly. She'd lived with a boyfriend in college, and when he'd finally said it, the words seemed fake, and he broke up with her three weeks later. But Mike's words didn't sound like a demand or a bribe; they seemed to be a simple declaration of fact.

She thought, “Do I love him?” His lovemaking had been somewhat clumsy, but surprisingly satisfying. Sex was typical of her experiences with him, a little bit different, but, on the whole, much better than she had expected. She snuggled against him and looked up at him from her place on his shoulder. There was kindness, warmth, and strength in his blue eyes. She wanted him to stay.

“I love you too,” she said.

They talked for another hour, happily snuggling and caressing each other. Their caresses slowly became more passionate and they began to make love again. With his impatience satisfied by the knowledge that he was no longer a virgin, Mike took more time probing, exploring, and exciting. Through his experimentation, he found that he could produce wave after wave of pleasure. When they finished, she knew that whatever ambivalence she'd had about saying “I love you” was gone. Mike fell

asleep knowing that this evening would be burned into his memory like the image of the sun on unexposed film.

That night marked the beginning of Mike's golden age. ThinkWrite II was solid and Mike felt free to come in at ten and leave at six thirty. After ThinkWrite II passed Q.A., it went into Beta test. In Beta, real users get free use of a product in exchange for testing it in their environment. Beta test is the last hurdle that a product has to clear before it can be sold to paying customers. ThinkWrite II's Beta test went smoothly.

Six weeks later, Mike accompanied William and the rest of the team in a car caravan to the Federal Express office. With great ceremony, they shipped the first copy of ThinkWrite II ever sold to a paying customer. When they got back to Rosetta, there was a party with catered hors d'oeuvres, champagne, and customized T-shirts for each member of the ThinkWrite II team. Mike was relieved that ThinkWrite II had finally been shipped. As he sipped his champagne, Paul told him about a rumor that Rosetta Software was going public within the next nine months.

Everyone at Rosetta was excited about the prospect of going public. In anticipation of the public offering, Rosetta's parking lot sparkled with brand new foreign luxury cars, including William's new Porsche.

Mike kept his car. Although Mike had more stock than most of employees, he did not have nearly as much as William or Omar, and other executives and he did not want to pretend to be richer than he was. Even more, he knew that the stock was still only paper. Mike vowed not to let going public change him. Still, he couldn't help himself from fantasizing about buying gifts for Antonia, Roger, and his family.

No one made more than a pretense of working on May twenty-second, 1980, the day Rosetta Software went public. The minute-by-minute variations in the stock's price were posted on walls and cubicle partitions throughout the company. Although the employees were forbidden from selling their shares until the company had been public for ninety days, they still watched every fluctuation in the stock price with the interest of first time parents watching their newborn baby. The stock closed the day up seventy-five cents from its opening price of twelve dollars a share.

Omar had sent out a long memo "thanking everybody for his or her individual contribution." An even billowier memo from Hilton followed Omar's. The only factual point in Hilton's memo was an invitation to a free lunch at The Mandarin Chef, the most expensive Chinese restaurant in Palo Alto. The lunch was a "reward for the outstanding contributions made by the software engineering staff."

The Mandarin Chef's opulent interior and formally dressed waiters made it a far cry from the Li River. Until he saw everybody gathered in one room, Mike hadn't realized how many people he knew at Rosetta. Since he was a respected old-timer, people made a special effort to come up and shake his hand. When Hilton made a toast to the engineering team, he made a special mention of "the dedication of Mike Danzig." When Hilton mentioned his name, Mike felt special and honored. Mike smiled as he

looked around the table at his friends and co-workers. His heart overflowed with emotion as he recalled how they had overcome the doubts, frustrations, and obstacles of the last three and a half years. But Mike's happiness diminished when he realized that William had barely been mentioned in either Omar's or Hilton's speeches. Mike saw how much this omission had hurt the man who was his friend as well as his boss.

"I don't care what anybody says or doesn't say," Mike said, raising his glass. "In my opinion, nobody's contributed more to the success of this company than William Shoemith."

William smiled and Mike saw the faint gleam of a tear in his eye.

"In my opinion too," Jennifer said. "You've been the best thing about this company. Who cares what Hilton and the rest of those slimy suits say?"

"It's the same all over the world. There are the people who do the work, and the people who take the credit," Paul said.

"Fuck 'em all. Let's party," Tommy said.

And party they did. They spent the rest of the afternoon drinking beers and riding roller coasters at the Great America Amusement Park in Santa Clara. As they left the amusement park, Mike stopped to look at the sunset over the Santa Cruz Mountains.

He suddenly realized that he was already a half hour late for his date with Antonia. He called her immediately. She was furious, telling him that she didn't want to see him, but when he apologized profusely, she forgave him. They were in love.

Over the next three months, gas prices went up, the Ayatollah Khomeini held on to the American hostages in Iran, and Rosetta's stock climbed from twelve to seventeen and a half dollars per share. On the first day that Rosetta Software's employees were allowed to sell their stock, the stock dropped to sixteen. But within two months, the stock was selling for twenty-one dollars a share. The stock had almost doubled in less than six months. People who had sold their stock early were reviling themselves for lack of faith as the stock continued its climb.

Rosetta's stock price received another boost when Apple Computer went public in December. Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, had become a Silicon Valley hero when, at twenty-five, he became the youngest person in American history to make the list of the four hundred richest Americans without inheriting his wealth.

Since going public, people's priorities had shifted. Rosetta had changed from a software company to a financial services institution. Mutual funds, real estate, and tax-free municipal bonds had replaced programming and advances in computer technology as the primary topics of conversation. Although the company was operating largely on autopilot, Rosetta's sales, profit, and stock continued to go up.

Rosetta's continued success was spurred by the explosion in personal computer sales and good publicity about the company, including an article in Time magazine. There was even a sentence about Mike in the article, but there was no mention of William. Since Leon Pardis, the new Vice President of Marketing, was a friend of Hilton's, Hilton got almost as much ink as Omar. Mike thought about writing a letter to the editor, but the article was good publicity for the company so he restrained himself.

When Rosetta's stock hit twenty-five dollars a share, Mike sold five thousand shares for a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. Mike's hands shook as he held the check. He remembered what Omar had said about once in a lifetime opportunities in that dingy exhibit hall in Atlantic City. Then, Mike had thought Omar was grossly exaggerating, but looking at the check, Mike had to admit that Omar had been right.

He sent his parents thirty thousand dollars for a down payment on a house in Hempstead, Long Island. His mother had always wanted her own house and the Bronx was becoming too dangerous for Mike's aging parents. He had expected his mother to be happy, but although she thanked him, she maintained her reserve. Mike expected his father to be insulted by the gift, but his father took pride in openly bragging about "his genius son who had made a fortune in California."

Mike bought Roger an Apple II computer. He sent Carl and Suzanne on a cruise in the Caribbean so they could have the honeymoon they never had. Mike wondered if he would ever have a honeymoon of his own. The thought simultaneously scared and excited him.

Mike went to San Francisco's Union Square area to look for a present for Antonia. As he wandered through the jewelry department at I. Magnin's, he saw a beautiful engagement ring. A large emerald was fastened to the body of the ring by a vine of diamonds. The ring made him think of marriage. Suddenly, he was scared. He loved Antonia and he was desperately afraid of losing her. He wanted to show her how much he loved her, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to marry her. He bought her a string of pearls instead of the ring.

The gift made her unhappy.

"You don't have to buy me jewelry to keep me," Antonia said when he gave it to her.

"I wanted to buy you something that showed you that I really love you," he said.

"I know you really love me," she said. "If you think I need a ring or any other piece of jewelry then you've got the wrong girl. I don't know if I ever want to get married. I know I don't want to end up like my mother, just bringing food and beer to my husband while he watches the game on TV. Not that I don't love my parents, but I think it naturally gets like that between two people who have been together for a long time."

Mike felt like he should have been relieved, but he was hurt instead. This was the opposite response from what his male advisers had prepared him for. He didn't know how to react.

“I don't want to have a relationship like that either,” he said. “I like being with you too much to let things get that way. I love you so much that I constantly ask myself if I'm doing something wrong.”

“You worry too much,” she said.

Over time Mike learned to relax. The money made life easy, but Antonia's love made Mike's life whole. He felt lifelong tensions drain from his stomach, his neck, his temples, and his thighs.

He learned to give her the small presents that made her face shine with simple happiness. He took her for romantic weekends in Mendocino and Napa Valley. He went shopping and let her pick out new clothes for him. Most of all, he spent less time at work and more time with her, spending the evenings taking walks instead of staring at a computer screen.

At first, Mike took these walks solely to please Antonia, but over time he genuinely began to appreciate the beauty of land. He particularly loved the brilliant sunsets, which reminded him of the hope he'd felt when he'd seen his first California sunset from the Dumbarton Bridge. Antonia and Rosetta had turned that hope into reality and he sensed that the best was yet to come. At night, they lay in bed talking about anything and everything. The flowering of Mike's relationship with Antonia helped him develop a degree of self-confidence and sociability that he'd never experienced before.

Mike noticed that his new social skills had unexpected benefits. Women at work, including Robin, the receptionist who'd turned him down for a date, complimented him on his appearance and actively engaged him in conversation. People of both sexes treated with more respect. He even found it easier to get along with his family.

The only dark spot in Mike's life was the fate of his friends at work. Mike, Brad, Paul, and Tommy were assigned to a new manager, a mediocre programmer who stayed in his office all day. Jennifer was under pressure from Hilton about the way she was managing the documentation department and her sense of humor was one of the early casualties. William, who now had nobody reporting to him, was made vice President of Special Projects, but he was not given any important work. Remembering that Omar had said, “My door is always open,” Mike decided to say something.

“Excuse me Omar,” Mike said, cautiously knocking on the half-open door of Omar's large well-decorated office.

“Come in Mike. What can I do for you?” Omar smiled.



Mike still didn't quite trust that smile, but Omar had promised him the chance of a lifetime and had delivered.

"Why did you replace William with Ron Hilton?" Mike said surprised by his own boldness.

"Sit down," Omar said. He was not smiling now. He looked Mike up and down, appraising him in a threatening and condescending way. "I don't owe you an answer to that question, but you've been with us from almost the beginning and you've made a huge contribution, so I'll tell you. I like William. He was the first employee I hired. He built the first version of ThinkWrite, but Rosetta's grown since then and he doesn't have the experience to lead a large software department.'

"Why not give him a chance to learn?" Mike said.

"This isn't school. In start-ups, you've got to get it right the first time or you're dead. Our competitors may be stodgy and slow, but they're well financed and they'll be there if we stumble. I've always dreamed of making Rosetta Software one of the premier software companies in the world. Whether we achieve that goal or not depends on our resources and our team. Going public gave us the resources, but building a team is a subtler thing. Everybody on the team has a different contribution to make. I know you don't like Ron, but he has experience leading large engineering teams. I bought Ron in to do a job, and I'm going to back Ron just like I backed William when he was in charge."

Mike was not convinced. Omar seemed to read this in Mike's face.

"There's something else," Omar said. "William barely shipped ThinkWrite II at all, much less on time, and we're going to have to meet our schedules if we want to remain competitive. We have to get a product for I.B.M.'s new personal computer. They're going to move a boatload of those, and I want ThinkWrite to be standard equipment on them, just like it is on every other personal computer. I need somebody who's a low risk, and that person's name is Ron Hilton."

Mike nodded slowly. He didn't want to agree with Omar, but Omar's arguments made sense.

"I know how you feel," Omar continued. "Start-ups change. They become big companies. Some people adapt, some people leave. One of the toughest things about being a successful entrepreneur is that you must grow as your company grows, or your company will fail. I want you to grow with Rosetta, Mike. We still have a lot of work to do here."

Omar looked Mike straight in the eye. Mike felt guilty about not staying as late as he used to. He returned Omar's look, took a deep breath and said, "Thanks for talking to me Omar."

Mike worked harder for a few weeks after his conversation with Omar, but since everybody else in Hilton's group left by six-thirty, Mike quickly reverted to working normal hours. Leaving early made Mike secretly glad he wasn't working for William because he liked spending his evenings with Antonia, who always left her job promptly at five.

Mike also developed a grudging respect for other advantages of Hilton's style. Hilton was good at scheduling as evidenced by the accuracy of his predictions about the release of ThinkWrite II. Hilton's style rested on written communication in the form of memos and design documents. Strangest among these documents were the tapestry-length Pert and Gantt charts, which reminded Mike of the mazes that restaurants gave children to entertain them while they waited for their food. Hilton's insistence on formal designs decreased the initiative and productivity of the individual programmers. But Hilton compensated for this by hiring a staff that was three times the size of William's team. Hilton released the I.B.M. P.C. version of the product one month late, which in the world of software development, was equivalent to releasing a product early.

The I.B.M. P.C. version of ThinkWrite II was solid, but it lacked the imaginative and innovative features that were Rosetta's trademark. The product sold well and the stock continued to go up. Sales of ThinkWrite II were also helped by the end of the unrestricted copying of software that characterized the first phase of computer revolution.

Not only was Mike working less; he was making more. His salary rose to thirty-five thousand dollars a year. The success of the I.B.M. P.C. version took Rosetta's stock to fifty dollars. Shortly after reaching fifty dollars, the stock split two for one. The split meant that instead of owning ten thousand shares worth fifty dollars each, Mike now had twenty thousand shares worth twenty-five dollars each. Although he made no money directly from the stock split, the split was a sign of the stock's vitality. The new stock soon went up to thirty making Mike's twenty thousand shares now worth six hundred thousand dollars.

Despite all this apparent new wealth, Mike experienced an effective pay cut because his four-year stock options had expired. Mike got stock new options for ten thousand post split shares, but the option price was twenty dollars a share. Since Rosetta's stock was selling for twenty-six dollars a share, Mike's new options were only worth six dollars per share, instead of the almost fifty-two dollars per share that his old pre-split options were worth. He still loved Rosetta, but the expiration of his stock options accelerated the shift in his devotion from work to love.

Mike liked going home early and spending his evenings with Antonia. He loved the way Antonia was becoming a friend and a sister as well as a lover. They began to finish each other's sentences. They changed moods at the same time. Yet, Mike found himself little by little noticing other women. He loved Antonia's body, but he felt somehow deprived because she was the only woman he had ever made love to. He

suppressed these feelings because as long as was with Antonia, he was determined to be faithful to her. He remembered the pain Mary Liz had caused him by sleeping with Dominic and he was not about to do that to the woman that he loved.

When Antonia went to Los Angeles for a weekend to visit her aunt, Mike realized how much she had changed his life. He went to the Li River on Friday night with the old gang, but the explosion of going public had fractured the group's unity.

"Long time no see," Paul said to Mike as he sat down.

"I've been busy," Mike said.

"Not at work," Paul said.

Mike bristled, but of all the old Li River gang, only Paul still worked hard. Paul had sold most of his stock and tried to increase it by playing the stock market. Mike could always tell how the stock market was doing by looking at Paul's face. From Mike, Paul learned about stock splits, short selling, put and call options, P/E ratios, and many other financial terms that Mike didn't initially understand. But as Mike got to know Paul better, these terms became more comprehensible.

"I'm treating myself to a touch of internal retirement," Mike said by way of explanation.

"At least you're honest," Brad said. "William said he was going to retire after we went public."

The comment struck home. They all remembered the promise William had made on his birthday. As Rosetta's second employee, William had stock options that were now worth more than seven million dollars. William kept most of his stock, but sold enough to buy a row house in the exclusive Pacific Heights district of San Francisco.

"I still have a contribution to make to this company," William said.

"If you're staying on, Omar must have given you more stock to vest," Brad said.

Brad was still an enigma. Although Mike's respect and affection for Brad had increased since Brad had saved him, Brad remained distant. Brad's distance from the group as a whole had increased, partially because Brad did not join in the general bad mouthing of Hilton. Even more, Brad defended Hilton's policies.

"Lay off, Brad," Jennifer said sharply.

Jennifer had cashed out all her stock options and bought a modest house off Quito Road in Saratoga. Two weeks after the house closed, Hilton had removed Jennifer as head of technical support and documentation. The stress of buying a house and being demoted had broken Jennifer's spirit and destroyed her relationship with her

boyfriend. As a result her friendship with William had visibly deepened. They ate lunch together several times per week. Rumors circulated that Jennifer and William were having an affair, but they denied it and Mike believed them. For one thing, William was compulsively spending three nights a week in the singles bars. Jennifer didn't seem like the type of woman to share anything, especially a man.

"It's O.K., Jen," William said. "Brad's right I did get more stock options, but the amount is trivial compared to what I originally got."

"You got more stock too Brad," William said. "Is that why you're staying? I'm staying mostly because I helped build this company. It's part of me, part of us." William motioned around the table. "We're part of the stock. The people who bought Rosetta stock were investing in us. If we leave, the stock is worthless."

"Please," Jennifer groaned. "You're beginning to sound like Omar."

"In spite of what's happened to me personally, I really believe that," William said indignantly.

"William," Tommy said confidentially, "it's us. It's O.K. We know you got shafted."

Tommy had become a virtual nine to five, only in his case, he worked from noon to eight. Tommy was the most vocal critic of "the new Rosetta." When some exceptionally asinine bureaucratic memo was distributed, Tommy would grumble and talk about quitting and becoming a consultant.

"Listen people," William said. "You guys used to tell me I was full of it when I said this company was going to do it right and go public. I got screwed because I couldn't play the game of executive politics, but what do you guys have to complain about? Tommy, you live the way you please. Mike, you got compensated for delaying your college education. Jennifer, you got your house. Brad, don't give me that crap about your ex-wife's credit cards. Paul, you remember that you said we'd only make it if we did it right. Well we did it right. We went public, and I, for one, am grateful."

Nobody said anything. They all looked at William. He was no longer their boss, but he was still their leader.

When Mike got home, he was overcome by the confining poverty of his apartment and the nervous agitation of being alone. He had always taken a perverse sense of pride in the emptiness of his apartment, but now it just seemed lonely and shabby. Before he'd gotten involved with Antonia, being alone was simply a fact of life to be endured. The company of his friends at the Li River had eased his isolation, but now their companionship was no longer enough. He didn't want to return to a life that didn't include Antonia. Marrying her seemed like the logical way to make sure that this didn't happen. His friends at the Li River, who with the exception of Paul were all single, maintained attitudes toward marriage that ranged between toleration and

contempt. His friends at the Li River weren't the only people in his life who took a dim view of marriage.

Most of the important men in his childhood, Carl, Roger, and his father, treated marriage as an unpleasant obligation. Mike reasoned these men hated marriage because they saw it as something that was purely for a woman's benefit. He saw marrying Antonia as an honor, not a compromise.

The women in his life, Mary Liz, Suzanne, and his mother, had treated marriage as either a payment or a right. But Antonia said she did not want to marry anybody. Was that just an act? Or did it mean that she did not want to marry him?

What if he did marry her? Would he be bored? He thought about Carl's warning that a man woke up with a woman more times than he wanted to go bed with her. Although the logical voices in his head said there was no need to get married, his emotions screamed that he needed Antonia. The anxiety fed upon itself and he paced around the room feeling like he was going to explode. He needed an interrupt. He called Roger.

"Hello," Roger said with a voice that was thick with resignation and despair.

"What's the matter?" Mike asked sympathetically.

"I just broke up with Evelyn," Roger sighed. "She wanted to move in with me. When I told her no, she said she didn't want to see me anymore. I miss her, but I'm relieved that it's over. I've sweated my ass to get my education. In two more years, I'll have my master's and then it will start to pay off. I don't want to be limited by being with somebody I'm not in love with."

"If that's the way you feel, then you did the right thing," Mike said. "But you don't sound too happy about your decision."

"I'm not," Roger said. "I feel like I did the right thing for me, but I still feel lousy."

After hearing Roger's story, Mike realized that his friend needed him. Besides, Roger was not in a frame of mind to give advice about marriage. He'd called Roger for an interrupt and he'd gotten it. He decided not to talk about his own problems, but simply to listen to his friend.

Nice girl," Mike said.

"She is a nice girl, but I'm still glad it's over," Roger said, this time with certainty in his voice. "I didn't love her, so it had to end sometime. If we moved in together, we'd probably have gotten married, and ended up like my parents."

"I still don't believe marriage has to be like that," Mike said.

“Yes it does,” Roger said. “You can't get one thing without giving up something else.”

“I guess,” Mike laughed.

He'd ended up with Roger's advice without asking for it. It made him glad that Roger was his friend.

They talked for another hour. By the time Mike hung up, he felt better, but Roger's words had made him even more confused about getting married. He loved Antonia, but if he had to live without her, he knew he could do it. Now, the thought of an evening alone was just a matter of reprogramming his brain's leisure time module.

Mike got in his car and drove to the Software Shack, his favorite computer store. He searched the shelves for a good computer game that would rekindle his love for computers. While he was in the store, he saw another word processing program from a new competitor and asked the salesman some questions about it.

Since the salesman was a young man like himself, Mike wanted to like him. Instead of answering Mike's questions, the salesman steered Mike to a new computer that looked like an oversized briefcase.

“This Osborne portable computer is really hot,” the salesman said. “This company is the next hot start-up.”

Mike shrugged, “Maybe. Maybe not. Anyway, I'm interested in this word processor.”

“Sure thing,” the salesman said, but it was obvious to Mike that the salesman didn't know anything about the word processor. The salesman compounded the sin of ignorance with the sin of bullshitting. The salesman's behavior saddened Mike. Masking ignorance with lies was the antithesis of the Valley's “do it right” ethic. Mike sighed. The only way to get his questions answered was to buy the software and take it home.

Mike also bought an Adventure-like game called Dungeon Planet as well as the new word processor. Dungeon Planet turned out to be boring, so he popped the new word processor in the floppy drive. It was beautiful. The features were good and the help system was extremely well-done. Mike was momentarily jealous, and he wondered why he had not put these features in Real Rosetta. Mike vowed to make Real Rosetta superior. Mike spent Sunday afternoon totally absorbed in analyzing the competing word processor. He was still studying the word processor when Antonia called late that evening.

“Miss me?” she asked playfully.

“No,” he answered returning her playful tone.

“I don't believe you,” she said. “Tell me what you really did.”

“I worked,” he said. “I bought this really neat word processor. I have to admit it was better than the one I've been working on.”

“Nothing could be better than yours,” she said suggestively.

“This one is,” he was flattered by the innuendo, but he was slightly annoyed by the casual way she dismissed the subject of his work, “I'm going to fix mine so it will be even better.”

“We'll just have to try out the new model then,” she said suggestively.

When he got to her apartment, Mike forgot all about word processing.