

13.

The nine o'clock staff meeting was not a happy gathering. In addition to the members of the executive staff, Andy and Lew Galena, the other outside board member, were also seated at the conference table. The centerpiece of the meeting was a letter from Parker-Belmont saying they were not happy with the product and they wanted some guarantee that things were going to change in the near future. There was a heavy silence after William finished reading the letter.

"I recommend that we ship another release to Parker Belmont," Arnie said, breaking the silence.

"We can't just ship new versions of the product every week," Mike protested.

"What else can we do?" Arnie said with restrained frustration. "We don't have much time, Mike. We need to get Parker-Belmont as a reference account so we can start selling to other customers."

"Arnie," Mike said. "You told me we had to ship the product, so we did. Why not just take the time to do it right? If we lose Parker-Belmont, let's lose them. William, help me out here."

"If we had the money we needed," William said. "I'd say screw them. I really would."

"William's got a point about the money," Derek said.

"But Derek, you said we could get more money to support the development of a quality product," Mike said.

Nobody said anything. They all looked at Mike. Mike got the feeling of isolation that precedes exile.

Andy broke the silence, "Would the people who aren't on the board please give us some privacy."

Andy waited for Arnie, Derek, and Lloyd to leave.

"Mike, I'll get right down to business," Andy said. "Things are pretty bad at Parker-Belmont. It will be at least another three months until the product is ready to ship. As Derek said, we don't have that much money. We'll provide the money, but we think it might be better if Jurgen took over day-to-day administration of product development. Mike, you hate operational details. You love programming. Do what you love. We've created the position of Vice President of Research for you so you can concentrate on the long-term design of the product. Your salary and stock won't change. The only other thing you'll have to give up is your seat on the board."

Mike's mind spun with the shock. In the whirl of thoughts and feelings, he found one thought that he could cling to. They couldn't demote him in his own company.

"I don't think you're in a position to give me orders Andy," Mike said with all the composure and self-assurance he could muster. "William and I are the majority stockholders."

"The board of directors controls the daily operations of the company," Andy said with quiet confidence. "You'd need to call a stockholders' meeting. Even if you did, I don't think William will vote with you."

Mike stared at William, but William refused to meet his gaze.

Jurgen's betrayal was not unexpected, but William's betrayal was more than he could stand. William was supposed to be his friend. Mike lost his self-control.

"You fucking son of a bitch!" Mike screamed at William. "How could you sell me out?"

"Mike, it's for the good of the company," William said in a voice that pleaded for understanding. "You'll still work on the design. You're a programmer, not a manager. The product shouldn't have been shipped."

"You and Arnie made me ship the product," Mike shot back. "I had no choice. All I need is more time to get the product right."

"Mike it's not just time you need," William said gently. "I didn't want to say this, but while you were gone, I got an outside consultant to do a design review. He said the code is like spaghetti, you can't tell where one strand ends and another begins. Jurgen thinks he can fix things. He's given us a schedule and we think he has the background and experience to meet it."

Mike regained his composure. He knew he'd lost. He could only hope for justice on another day, but his pride demanded that he make one parting shot.

"The art of board room slime was never my chosen field of endeavor William," Mike said. "I'm sorry it's become yours."

William said nothing, but he stared at Mike with controlled fury. Mike wondered if they could ever be friends again. He doubted it.

Andy tried to mollify Mike, "I've spoken to the other investors and we're going to put in another million in exchange for twenty percent of the company, which will provide enough money for the company to get back on its feet. I think your continued association with the company will significantly contribute to that effort. When we go public, you'll see this in its proper perspective."

Mike wanted to shout in outrage, but he checked himself. They might have taken his company, but he was not going to let them have any more of his dignity.

Driving home, California no longer struck Mike as charming or glamorous. The expensive one-story ranch houses on San Antonio Road looked small, cheap, and flimsy. Even the palm trees in their front yards had an artificial appearance, like props from the set of a high school play. More than once, Mike had noticed how even the most expensive houses were built with cheap plywood. Even the tenements of the Bronx were built from steel and concrete. When he thought of how badly the Bronx had deteriorated, he wondered how bad California would look in fifty years. When Mike finally got home, he was upset to find that Antonia was having coffee with Shevaun. He needed Antonia for himself.

“What happened?” Antonia said with obvious alarm.

“I got demoted,” Mike said. “My asshole partner told me I was the reason that Kube wasn't successful yet.” Mike paced agitatedly across the kitchen floor as he spoke. “Imagine that. Me. If this mess is anybody's fault, it's his.”

“Why don't you tell me the whole story?” Antonia said.

“I'd better leave,” Shevaun said, grabbing her jacket and making for the door.

While Antonia was saying goodbye to Shevaun, Mike fixed himself a scotch and water.

“This all happened because I went on vacation,” Mike said bitterly, taking a sip from his drink.

“So now it's all my fault?” Antonia said angrily.

Her angry rebuke made him feel like everything in his whole world was turning against him. His subordinates, his best friend, and now his wife were all betraying him, but he didn't want to lose Antonia out of pride. He needed her now.

“I didn't say it was all your fault, but I feel that you're at least partially to blame,” he said.

The expression on Antonia's face showed tightly controlled anger. “So now you're going to come back here and take it all out on me?” she said furiously.

He didn't want a fight, but he didn't want to back down either.

“I'm not taking it out on you,” he said, “but you were partially responsible. I was under a lot of pressure and I needed certain things from you that I didn't get.”

She stared at him angrily. He knew it was up to him to try to make peace.

“Look,” he said. “The past is the past. I'm asking for your help now.”

“I'm willing to help you, but I'm not willing to let myself be abused for it,” she said with thinly veiled anger. “I try to be there when you need me, but you're not always there when I need you. A lot of the things that I think are important, you just laugh at. Like seeing my relatives. I have my own life. Besides, you have to solve your own problems.”

Her words made him feel lonely and bitter. “Yeah well, I guess you're right,” he said. “You can't count on anybody but yourself.”

She knew he was having a hard time. She took a deep breath. “It's not that you can't count on anybody. It's just that people let each other down sometimes. That's part of human nature. They don't just come on command like a pet dog or a computer. You love your computer because you push a key and something happens. A computer is very reliable ' but what about when you need somebody to talk to? The computer isn't sympathetic. When you've got a bug, it doesn't say, 'well I understand this is really important, I'm going to help you out.' But people understand when things are important and they do help out.”

He didn't want a sermon. He wanted help. He was tired of trying to be strong. He was tired of trying to be smart, but most of all he was tired of being pulled apart. He hated anger and fighting. It reminded him of his parents. He felt his eyes swell with tears.

“I need to be alone,” he said and went into his study. He would not give any of them the satisfaction of seeing him break down. He grabbed a beer from the small bar refrigerator he kept in his study. He thought about playing Adventure. He knew he'd promised Antonia not to play it while he was working at Kube, but he was confused. He wasn't sure if he was going to be working at Kube much longer, or if Antonia's insensitivity had implicitly released him from his promise. He felt the tears leak out of the corners of his eyes. He hated everything, including himself. A few minutes later, he felt Antonia's hand on his hair.

“I'm sorry if I was a little rough before,” she said. “I love you. Don't let Kube get in the way of our relationship. The stock is only paper. If I have to go back to work and we run out of money, so what?” she said.

“Don't say that!” he said hysterically. “The stock is going to be worth something, even sleazy Andy said that. Please help me hold on just a little bit longer. I need your help.”

Antonia took a deep breath and kissed him, “I want to help you baby, but ever since I've known you, the bugs in your programs have controlled your life more than anything else. I love you. Your programs don't. That's what I was trying to say before. I want to help you by making sure that you'll be alive and healthy long after those

start-ups are through with you. Those start-ups just want to set the world on fire. They don't care if they have to use you as fuel for that fire, but I'm not going to let them do that."

"This start-up is important," he said, looking at her with pleading eyes. No matter how supportive her words were, he knew she was telling him to let go, to accept his loss. He understood she was saying this because she loved him. Intellectually, he knew she was right. Emotionally, he couldn't lose Kube the way he'd lost Rosetta.

She realized that talk wouldn't do any good. She put his head between her breasts and comforted him. When they made love, she did it out of charity and not desire.

Mike's demotion actually made his daily life easier. Since he no longer bore responsibility for product development, he worked a forty-hour week. He came home early and stayed up late talking to Antonia. Intimacy was eclipsing lovemaking as the primary bond between them. Mike enjoyed his quiet contentment with Antonia in a way he never thought possible. He'd come to accept her short temper. He thought of Antonia as a symbol of the immigrant experience in California. People who came to live in California began to stop lusting after its treasures and started to love it for its intrinsic beauty. They knew it could be as suddenly brutal as an earthquake, but they knew it also could be as sublimely beautiful as sunset over the Pacific Ocean.

Antonia was happier, but it wasn't only because Mike was spending more time at home. Her deepening friendship with Shevaun gave her somebody she could be completely open with for the first time in her life. Antonia and Shevaun went shopping several times a week, but their most intimate talks occurred on long afternoon walks they took on the windy beaches between Santa Cruz and Half Moon Bay. The empty landscape and rough surf were not to the taste of many Californians, but Shevaun said it reminded her of Ireland. Shevaun revealed her true personality on these walks. Her sensitivity emerged, but so did her sharp wit. She made cutting comments about Richard's mannerisms, both in and out of the bedroom. Antonia was not quite as unkind about Mike, but she was able to talk and laugh about Mike's nerdier habits. More importantly, Antonia was able to tell Shevaun things that she'd never told anybody, including her husband.

Perhaps the most important activity that lifted Antonia's spirits was carrying out her decision to being an artist that she'd made in Paris. Although Mike was extremely supportive about her artistic career, she resented his involvement. She wanted it to be all hers.

Antonia enrolled in classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. She appreciated the greater experience of her new teachers, but sometimes found their criticism hard to take. Most of the time, she knew they were right. She knew she still had a long way to go.

Antonia's outside interests combined with Mike's reduced involvement at work gave him more time to himself. He took a brief visit back home to see Tracy, his new baby

niece. He found himself revitalizing his friendship with Roger calling him once or twice a week instead of once a month. Roger had graduated and gotten a job in the advanced research lab of a multibillion-dollar company in New Jersey.

"How do you like your new job?" Mike asked after Roger had settled into his job.

"I don't look bad with a laminated plastic badge clipped to my pocket," Roger said lightly. "I'm a model citizen of the eighties. I've got a new girlfriend and I'm in a management training program."

"That's good," Mike said without enthusiasm.

"You say that with the same tone that most engineers say it," Roger said, "but to me people are as interesting as technology. Getting people to work together is really a type of engineering."

"Management is a necessary evil I suppose," Mike said. He realized that he might be insulting his friend's career choice. "I didn't mean to sound so harsh," Mike said apologetically. "It's just that my recent experiences with William and Jurgen have sort of soured me on the profession."

"I know. They're a bunch of scumbags," Roger said, the humor in his voice replaced by sympathy. "Don't let them get you down. There are plenty of other things you can do."

"Like what?" Mike said.

"Like going back to school," Roger said.

"I'm too old to go back to school," Mike said.

"First, you're never too old," Roger countered. "Second, you're only twenty-five. Go to college and major in computers. It'll be easy for you. Besides, going to school can't hurt."

Mike laughed. "I know you still think I should have gone to M.I.T. instead of going to California."

"No I don't," Roger said. "California worked out very well for you. Rosetta was wonderful experience and Antonia is an exceptional woman. I'm respectfully jealous. Don't judge your whole experience in California just because Kube's a failure."

"The jury's still out on Kube," Mike said weakly.

"You have unvested stock," Roger said. "You can do something else while you're waiting to find out if Kube becomes successful. Remember you once told me that I should diversify my paper collection, by adding some stock to my degrees. All I'm

saying is that you should consider diversifying your own paper collection by adding a degree to your stock portfolio.”

Roger's words lingered in Mike's mind long after the conversation ended. Mike didn't see a future for himself at Kube. He'd put his best into Kube, and it didn't seem to be producing anything but frustration and failure. He wondered if his success at Rosetta was the result of his own ability or just a stroke of good luck.

Rosetta had been on Mike's mind lately because it had been the subject of several recent newspaper articles. Rosetta had gone into chapter eleven bankruptcy and been acquired by a large Eastern computer manufacturer for less than five million dollars. The demise of his former company saddened Mike. If Rosetta was just a stroke of good luck, he didn't want to risk becoming like a gambler who loses his winnings by playing too long, spurred on by the belief that he will always come out ahead in the end.

He decided that Roger was right. School couldn't hurt. Antonia certainly seemed to be enjoying art school. Mike felt he could now both afford and appreciate a formal education. He decided if he were going to college, Stanford University looked like the best choice. Stanford was in the same class as the most prestigious Eastern schools and it was also only fifteen minutes away from his house in Los Altos Hills.

Money was not really an issue. The interest on the one and half million dollars that still remained from the money he'd made on his Rosetta stock options more than covered their living expenses. The stock was the major economic reward for working at Kube, and since he was a founder, the stock was his whether he worked there or not. Even with all these arguments, he was still reluctant to abandon Kube. But he had to consider the possibility that Kube would not succeed and he would have to do something else with his life. A Stanford education seemed to be a good place to start, if they let him in.

Mike exhaled profoundly as he filled out his application to Stanford University. When he was a teenager applying to M.I.T., he'd worried that he would never do anything with his life. Now he worried that he'd done too much, most of it wrong. It was the first of many ironies bought out by the application process. He looked at the financial aid part of the application. When he was in high school it was the biggest barrier between him and a college education. Now he didn't even bother filling it out. But many of the questions that had been routine in high school were now the most emotionally difficult. The question asking for his date of birth was particularly depressing. He thought, “Roger has a master's degree and I'm still not even a freshman.”

The essay question asking him to describe the significant events of his life was the worst part. None of the drafts he wrote seemed either believable or convincing. He pushed words around with his word processor until he was exhausted and went to bed. The next morning as he watched his P.C. boot up, he realized with a flash of inspiration that the computer was the key to getting in to Stanford. He wrote an

essay about why he'd come to Silicon Valley and what he'd done since he'd arrived. He ended the essay by saying that after spending six years driven by deadlines, he wanted to be in an environment where learning for its own sake was the primary motivation. But even as he typed the words, he suspected that they might be lies.

Jennifer listened more sympathetically than anyone else to Mike's doubts about applying to Stanford. Mike's friendship with Jennifer had survived his rupture with William. Jennifer was also applying to Stanford for a master's degree in education. She had decided to switch from start-ups to school after giving birth to her son, Ian.

Ian was born with multiple birth defects in his heart. Although surgery was able to correct some of the defects, his deformed heart would never allow the boy to live a fully normal life. Ian's disabilities hurt Jennifer deeply. She loved the baby, but Ian spent so much time in the hospital that she was unable to enjoy the normal joys and trials of early motherhood. Despite William's efforts to be supportive, Jennifer could feel William's resentment of the child. Her knowledge that William hadn't wanted the baby in the first place compounded the depression and self-doubt caused by giving birth to a defective child. For William, the necessity of supporting Ian for the rest of his life put even more pressure on him to make Kube successful. William accepted his responsibility, but he did it with grim determination instead of with the optimistic spirit that had previously been the hallmark of his career.

Mike would often visit Jennifer on his way home from work, especially on evenings when William was working late and Antonia was in class. Mike enjoyed playing with Ian. Although Ian tired easily, he was obviously bright and liked people. Mike thought of Ian and his niece Tracy every time he saw one of the trendy "Baby on Board" stickers in the rear window of a car. Thinking about Ian and Tracy made Mike want children of his own. This dream seemed particularly appealing now that his job no longer consumed his life and he had the time to help bring them up. But Antonia said she wanted to wait until she'd finished art school.

Mike's reduced responsibilities also meant he had more time to enjoy the social aspects of work. He found that since he was no longer a manager, people spoke to him more freely on everything from office gossip to product design. Most surprisingly, they seemed to respect him more.

Relations among the members of the executive staff were not good. Jurgen had released his version of Kube Complete. Lloyd's marketing department had put out glowing press releases saying, "We believe that Kube Complete is more than just another software product. It puts data at the user's fingertips in the way that could only dream about before the introduction of Kube Complete."

The computer magazines, which had become more sophisticated since the beginning of the personal computer revolution, did not share Lloyd's opinion. More established software companies had developed similar products and they were getting the publicity that Lloyd had promised for Kube Complete. Worse, the magazines had done independent reviews of Kube Complete and they were not good.



While the sales and marketing departments “re-strategize” in the face of the newly emerging competition, Mike developed his own version of the product. He worked on his version of the product in the same way he’d worked on the poker program back at St. Luke’s. He developed his own version of Kube Complete that conformed to his own ideas, not to Jurgen's elaborate design documents or to Arnie's constant demands for new features. Programming for his own satisfaction also made it easier to live with the daily shame of his own demotion. He used the power of his nominal vice presidency to send his version to a small core of loyal users, including some of the lower level employees at Parker-Belmont.

Mike would not have been allowed to send out private versions of software unless his presence at Kube had been essential for Andy to convince his partners to put more money into the company. Venture capitalists are reluctant to invest their money in a company whose founders have quit.

Mike stayed at Kube, but other people decided to leave.

“I've decided to quit,” Paul told Mike over lunch at Japanese restaurant.

“So that's why you didn't want to invite anybody else to lunch today,” Mike said.

“Please keep it to yourself,” Paul said. “I haven't told anybody else yet. I don't socialize with anybody else at work. I don't like going to the Li River any-more. The last few times I've been there it's been with Jurgen and the rest of the 'team.' Kube's turned from a start-up into a nightmare. At Rosetta, we used to go to dinner to socialize and to talk about life. Now, it's a design review. Jurgen can't stand anybody's questioning his decisions and he's become very rigid. Last week Jurgen banged his fist on the table when I disagreed with him about a technical point and started reaming me out in front of everybody. He is an asshole.” Paul pronounced the two syllables of the last word very slowly like they were a Chinese curse.

“We've known each other a long time and I hate to see you go, but I understand why you're leaving,” Mike said. “What are you going to do next?”

Paul smiled, “I'm going back to Taiwan. Two friends of mine from school are setting up a company to serve the Taiwanese brokerage houses. It's not a big company, but they've got some connections. Besides, I don't think I'm cut out to be an American.”

“Well I'll miss you,” Mike said. “Call me from Taiwan.”

“Sure,” Paul said. “If you're ever in Taiwan, don't stay at a hotel. Come stay with me, or hopefully with us.”

They ordered sake and toasted each other. After dinner they shook hands with the warmth of an embrace. Paul's leaving saddened Mike. It also made Mike feel impotent and guilty. He'd recruited Paul with a promise to protect him. Because of

his demotion, Mike hadn't been able to keep this promise. Intellectually, Mike knew his failure to keep his promise to Paul was beyond his control, but emotionally he felt like he'd let his friend down.

Mike drove his car carefully on the way back to work. He knew he'd drunk a little too much sake at lunch. A few weeks before, the president of Eagle Computer had killed himself and a yacht dealer by drunkenly driving his brand new Ferrari into a lake in Los Gatos. The accident had become an instant Valley legend because it happened on the day Eagle went public. Mike dropped his own Ferrari from third gear to second.

Three weeks after Paul quit, Mike went in early to take an east coast phone call from Parker-Belmont. After the phone call, he went to get a cup of coffee. As he was pouring his coffee, Derek entered Kube's little kitchen. In his small round glasses and button down collar, Derek looked very much the Swiss banker.

"It's not often you get in before me," Derek said with a teasing smile.

"I just got done facing the lions of Parker-Belmont," Mike said. "They're the kind of real arrogant assholes that give New York a bad name. It takes a lot of patience to deal with people like them at six o'clock in the morning."

Derek laughed slightly.

"How do you think the product's coming along?" Derek asked in a more serious tone.

"Ask Jurgen, he's in charge now," Mike said.

"I'm asking you," Derek said with a voice that indicated the utmost seriousness.

"The bug list is growing," Mike said. "The new code's not mature, in fact it has more patches on it than mine did. The engineering team hasn't done anything but patch holes in a leaky boat for the past year. They're tired and demoralized. Overall, I would say it's not going too well."

"I've got some pretty interesting news today for you, but I'd like to talk you in private," Derek said, motioning toward his office.

When they got to Derek's office, Derek closed the door with quiet solemnity. Mike could see that this was not a casual conversation.

"What's up?" Mike said, glad to relieve the anxiety that had built up on the silent walk to Derek's office.

"I've been talking to Andy Newfarmer," Derek began slowly as he closed the office door.

“Let me guess. He's disappointed,” Mike completed the sentence.

“I wouldn't say disappointed,” Derek said. “Concerned is a better word. He's particularly concerned about William.”

“William! What for?” Mike said, unable to hide his excitement.

“Lack of leadership. Lack of profits,” Derek said gravely. “He rubs people the wrong way. I think Andy realizes he made a mistake when he allowed William to promote Jurgen over you. You're much better with people. I agree with you that it was Arnie and William's insistence on shipping that got us into trouble. We think that if anyone can turn this company around, you can. Andy will stay as Chairman of the Board. He's creating an office of the President consisting of Arnie, you, and me. Arnie will take care of sales and marketing, I'll take over the general management issues, and you'll oversee all the technical areas including engineering.”

Mike, who had been dreaming about revenge for more than a year, was ambivalent about sticking the knife into William, someone he still couldn't help thinking of as a friend.

“Maybe you should give William more of a chance,” Mike said.

“We've given him many chances. Too many,” Derek said in a tone that indicated that there was no appeal. “I think Jurgen's not working out as a manager either. What do you think?”

“I'd have to agree,” Mike said, trying to suppress a smile.

“Let's keep this just between ourselves?” Derek said with a cold grin.

Mike nodded. However, he could not keep this secret. Mike couldn't screw William the way William had screwed him.

Mike invited William out to the Li River to tell him about Derek and Andy's plan. Mike was surprised to see that Jennifer and Ian showed up at dinner with William.

“I remember when we used to do this all the time. We used to talk about anything and everything,” Jennifer said wistfully.

“That's the price of experience and success,” William said. “You know too much.”

“I certainly know more than I want to,” Mike said. “I know that Andy and Derek are getting ready to fire you.”

Mike saw anger cross William's face, but then he saw William's jaw muscles forcibly relax.

"I guess that makes you happy," William said.

Mike shrugged, "Not exactly. I admit that after the way you demoted me, I'm not happy, but I still care enough about you to take the risk of telling you."

"Caring about people is a losing proposition," William growled. "If you're going to build a company, the welfare of the company has got to come before the egos of the people working there. Demoting you was for the good of the company. Jurgen's a better manager than you are, and what's more he's a better programmer."

William had hit hard and he'd known where to hit. William's comment riled Mike, but he didn't want to fight, especially in front of Jennifer and Ian. At the beginning of the meal, the child had been happily gurgling in his baby carrier. But as the voices of the adults became more strident Ian stopped moving and stared at the grown-ups with apprehension in his eyes.

"I just came here to warn you William," Mike said. "I don't want to discuss philosophy." Mike got up from the table. He said goodbye to Jennifer, made a happy face at Ian, and left.

He'd had his opportunity for revenge and he'd blown it. As Mike drove home, he wondered if William was right when he said that caring about people was a losing proposition. Mike felt a chill pass through him. Caring about Antonia was worthwhile, wasn't it? Mike hated William for making him doubt the solidity of the foundation on which he'd built his life. When he got home, he wrapped his arms around Antonia and held her close for a long time.

Being promoted brought Mike little pleasure. Even firing Jurgen wasn't as much fun as he thought it would be. To avoid a lawsuit, Derek made Mike issue a series of memo that formally placed Jurgen on probation. Derek dutifully put copies of these memos and Jurgen's responses in Jurgen's personnel file. After four weeks of this process, Mike was allowed to actually fire Jurgen.

The process of dismissing Jurgen irritated Mike, but it was Kube's finances that really gave Mike a chronic forehead-rubbing headache. After almost two years, Kube still had yet to make a penny of profit. Kube's capital had dwindled to within ninety days of bankruptcy. It became obvious that Kube would have to raise more money to continue operating. Going public seemed farther away than Pluto. The only way they could raise cash was to issue more stock. Selling stock under these desperate circumstances would drastically decrease the value of the stock purchased by Mike and Kube's other early investors. But the alternative was going broke.

Since Andy's firm refused to put any more money into Kube, they had to raise money from other investors. Andy and Derek took Mike on a whirlwind tour of venture capital firms, pension funds, and life insurance companies. Mike learned the fine points of making a presentation and how to use the buzzwords of "strategy" and "proprietary technology" at appropriate times. Every conversation became a

negotiation. Mike hated the whole process. Mike's distaste for the process of raising money was compounded by a lack of success.

The venture capital community had changed since Omar raised the two hundred thousand dollars that he used to found Rosetta. The venture capitalists had been burned and were now less into adventure and more into capitalism. The market for integrated spreadsheet, database, and word processing was not growing as fast as the analysts had originally predicted. Kube, which was losing market share in a shrinking market, did not look like an attractive investment.

Mike felt the world crumbling around him. He'd worked his butt off for two years and his company was going broke. This was not the American Dream. This was the American Nightmare. Most of Kube's employees lived from paycheck to paycheck, and he knew the consequences of Kube's failure would be worse for them than for him. Determined to make the payroll, he threw himself into work with his old dedication, but hard work wasn't enough. They had to fire five people to conserve cash.

"Firing those people today was awful," Mike said. "I just hired them. They quit jobs to work here. Some of them have families. Don't these start-ups ever end happily?" he asked Derek.

"Not often," Derek said. "Just don't drive yourself crazy over it. They'll find other jobs."

These thoughts plagued Mike as he prepared to address the employees at the weekly beer bust. He did not know what to tell the employees, but he knew that it was his job to say something to improve morale. Start-ups, like ships, take on the personality of their captains. Mike didn't really want to be the captain. He wanted to be somebody else.

Mike stepped to the center of the room. He felt thirty pairs of eyes looking at him in silent anticipation. He didn't feel qualified to speak, but he knew he had to say something and he knew it had to be good. He searched for fancy words, but then he thought about Hilton's speeches and decided that honesty was more important than eloquence. He watched Arnie and Derek glare at him as he told the employees the truth.

"We're almost broke," Mike said. "We need a product that sells. None of us sitting up here can force you to do anything. All of us have put a lot into this company. Let's pull together and work a little harder and maybe we can save the company. If there's anything I can do to help you get your jobs done, let me know and I'll try to do it. Thank you very much."

Despite the disapproval of Arnie and Derek, Mike's speech and the attitude that went with it improved morale tremendously. An even stronger boost to morale was the development of a relationship with the large computer manufacturer, Tidal Computers.

Tidal Computers was interested in Kube's product because Kube had been somewhat successful on Wall Street. Parker-Belmont had requested so many modifications that Kube Complete became the perfect product for brokerage houses. Parker-Belmont loved the private version of Kube Complete that Mike had developed when Jurgen was in charge. Now that William and Jurgen were gone, this version could be sold openly. This private version included an interface to Parker-Belmont's mainframe computer system, which was built by Tidal Computers. When Tidal's salespeople found out about what was happening at Parker-Belmont, they became very interested in using Kube Complete as tool for selling their computers to the other financial institutions on Wall Street. With Tidal's salespeople selling Kube Complete, sales were up and expenses were coming down. Derek and Andy seemed very pleased with Mike. During the next three months, they took him out to lunch almost every day.

Mike went to the staff meeting without dread for the first time since Kube's earliest days. His happiness did not last long.

"We have received a buy out offer for fifteen cents per share from Tidal Computers after a two for one reverse split," Derek said. "Although the terms may not be everything we desire, I motion that we accept their offer. Mike, they'd like you to stay on. They've put together an attractive incentive package for the existing executives."

Mike was shocked. He'd heard nothing of Tidal's interest in buying the company outright. He'd worked hard to put Kube back on his feet and now when things were starting to turn around, they sold it out from under him. He knew there was a reason for their decision and that reason was a quick buck.

Mike looked at Derek. "How long have you known and how much are you getting?" Mike demanded.

"I don't think that's relevant," Derek said.

"How much?" Mike said in a low rumble that could not be denied.

"Two hundred thousand dollars," Andy said, answering Mike's question because Derek was obviously too scared. Andy continued, "I understand that this must be a blow to your ego, but try to consider it from a businessman's or an investor's point of view. You will take a loss on this, but at least you'll recover a good part of your capital."

"Capital," Mike said, nodding his head slowly, like a bull getting ready to charge. "Capital and deadlines, that's all you guys know about. You have no love or

understanding for the creative process that built this Valley. If you weren't so concerned with immediate return, we could have developed this product right in the first place. It would have been late, but we would have made more money in the end."

"That will be quite enough," Andy said in an icy tone.

"No it won't," Mike said. "You're a flaming asshole who has poisoned the ideas of this company since you first heard about it. You only want me to stay because I'm an asset like a piece of furniture, and my leaving would lower the price per share to Tidal."

He looked at Andy. He looked at Derek. In his mind, he had two choices: to punch them out or to leave. He said, "Well, I'm not for sale. I quit."

As Mike drove home, rage gave way to depression. He had gotten two hundred thousand dollars back on a four hundred thousand dollar investment. In the end, he had paid to work at Kube. As he merged on to Foothill Expressway, he didn't notice the car in the lane next to him. At the last instant, he saw the car, swung the wheel hard, and missed getting into an accident by a few inches. When he realized he could have been killed, he thought he might have been better off if he had.

When Antonia saw Mike home at three o'clock in the afternoon, she knew that something had gone wrong.

"What's happened?" she said.

He knew how she'd lost respect for him when he'd fallen apart after his demotion, so he forced himself to maintain his composure now. As calmly as he could, he told her the story of the buy out.

After he was finished, she wrapped her arms around him and whispered consoling words in his ear.

When her face was safely buried in his shoulder, he let himself show his pain on his face.

She broke the embrace and started to lead him to the bedroom.

"Why don't you go and do your painting first?" he said, forcing a smile.

"You don't mind?" she said happily.

"No, it's fine," he said and gave her kiss on the cheek as a sign of encouragement.

She ran off to her studio. He inhaled deeply. He knew he had to do something to fight his depression. He went into the living room and poured himself a scotch.

He looked at the lights of the valley and their orange glow against the black sky. The scene reminded him of the set of a futuristic city from an old science fiction movie. In those movies, the inhabitants of those cities whizzed around in flying cars and had their every need served by intelligent robots.

In many ways, the chips and computers that had actually been invented were more incredible than the machines envisioned by science fiction authors. But neither the techno-prophets nor the scientists had paid much attention to the byproducts of innovation that turned the sky orange. Mike chuckled as he reflected that the fulfillment of fantasies often had unexpected side effects, but his laughter was sardonic and it faded quickly.

Antonia saw Mike sadly gazing out the window with a drink in his hand and she went to comfort him.

“Whatcha thinking?” she said in her sweetest voice.

“I'm thinking about how I got where I am. I just came out to California looking for a chance. I didn't even dare to dream that I would get all this or find someone as lovely as you,” he paused and sighed. “But all the good things I found out here grew out of one seed, the personal computer revolution. I've spent my entire adult life being a part of that revolution. Now after losing my reputation, a good part of my fortune, and my best friend, I'm just a casualty.”

Antonia wanted to soothe his pain, but she wasn't in the mood for his philosophical depression.

“Right now it feels that way,” she said, “but life is full of surprises. If you're not smart enough to outsmart every other computer nerd and entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, at least have the humility not to predict the future.” Then realizing she might have been too rough, she added, “Things have a way of working out. I've got an early class tomorrow. Let's go to bed.”

“Sounds like the best idea I've heard all night,” he said, smiling at the thought of her.

They went to bed and made love. They each pretended to enjoy it for the sake of the other's feelings, each hoping that tomorrow, now that Kube was gone, things would really be different.