

Part IV

14.

The immediate crisis passed. Mike went to bed early and slept late. The crisis started all over again every morning, but each day bought a gradual decline in the intensity of his depression. Avoiding any contact with Kube, now a division of Tidal Computers, also helped his emotional recovery. Mike had to sign some papers to finish the mechanics of the takeover. He paid his lawyer to act as an intermediary between him and Kube in this process. The service was expensive, but it was well worth not having to enter the mental torture chamber of Kube's boardroom.

Even after the initial pain and shock of losing Kube began to fade, staying home was not as pleasant as Mike had imagined it would be. When he was at Rosetta and Kube and under pressure to get a release out, he'd dreamed about staying home and spending the day in bed with Antonia. But now that he was home, he spent his days watching TV and waiting for Antonia to come back from her art classes.

Antonia attempted to comfort him, but the days passed slowly as he waited for a reply from Stanford. Antonia and Mike passed their evenings pleasantly, going dancing in the City twice a week. They made love about as often. Sometimes they made the deep love only possible between two people who have loved each other for a long time, but all too often they attacked each other like people eating fast food on a ten-minute lunch break. This happened more often when Mike was depressed by what had happened at Kube.

He wondered if things had would have been different if Kube had been successful. He had promised Antonia that if he wrote just one program, then Kube would free them from worry for the rest of their lives. But Kube had only succeeded in adding to the list of their worries. He wondered, "Does Kube's failure mean that I can't make it as either as a programmer or as a businessman? Or am I just a victim of bad luck?"

Mike found that a stiff drink dispelled these doubts, but he rigorously abstained from drinking before dinner. He was determined not to fall apart completely, especially in front of Antonia.

Antonia was consumed by the pursuit of her art. At first Mike tried sitting with Antonia in her studio while she painted, but sitting quietly made him feel like a useless piece of furniture. During one of these sessions, she asked for his opinion of a sketch of a man's face that she happened to be working on.

Mike picked up the sketch and held it at arm's length.

"It looks good. You can really draw," he said trying to avoid giving an opinion.

"Tell me what you really think," she said.

“How would I know what good drawings are?” he said. “I’m an engineer. I don’t understand art.”

“Just tell me what you think,” she said, becoming obviously impatient.

“I don’t know,” he said, considering the sketch carefully. “His nose is too long.”

She snatched the sketch back and scowled. Mike left her studio. He vowed to himself never to talk to her when she was working again. The promise made him feel even lonelier. He would never understand art and she would never understand computers. Yet, she was the only person he could ever truly share his life with.

He turned to his family for support. Although they were outwardly sympathetic, he could sense that they were secretly pleased that his good luck in California was finally turning bad, as they had originally predicted it would.

He tried to reach out to his friends. Roger was absorbed with his new girlfriend and his new job. Mike remembered how happy he’d been when Rosetta, Antonia, and everything else seemed to be going his way. Mike did not want to ruin his friend’s happiness with his own depression. Mike continued to see Jennifer. While Mike tried to avoid running into William, some contact was inevitable. The tone of these encounters was cold and unfriendly. The day after one of these visits, Jennifer called Mike and tearfully asked him not to visit her at home anymore. Mike was crushed. Jennifer sensed Mike’s feelings. She reminded him of her promise that they would always be friends. She offered to prove it by meeting him for lunch, but Mike declined. He’d rather be lonely than pitied.

The loss of both his job and his social life left Mike with too much time on his hands. He played with his computers, but computers had too many negative associations to be truly fun anymore. One day, in an effort to fill the empty hours, Mike bought a plastic model airplane kit.

“That looks like a little kid’s model airplane,” Antonia said when she came home from class that night.

“It is,” Mike said with a dreamy look in his eyes. “The clerk at the hobby shop looked at me like a child molester because he could tell that I didn’t have children. It made me think about having kids of our own.”

“I don’t think we’re ready yet,” she said.

“Why not?” Mike asked, unable to conceal his disappointment.

“We’re just not ready, that’s all,” she said. “Everything’s up in the air. You just quit your job and I’m in the first year of a new career, but even more importantly, we’ve both got some growing up to do first.” Her voice was soft, but firm.

Despite Antonia's gentle tone, her words both stung and disappointed Mike. Yet, something inside told him that she was right. He decided that if he was a failure at business and not even a freshman in college, he probably did have some growing up to do before raising children of his own.

"I guess you're right," he said. "Still I wish you weren't." His eyes made the appeal that his words could not.

"But I am," she said, with a voice that indicated that his appeal had been denied.

Several weeks later, an envelope from Stanford finally arrived. Mike's hands shook as he opened it. He didn't believe the good news until he read the cover letter a second time. He was ecstatic. He wanted to celebrate. He paced as he searched his mind for somebody to share his victory with. Antonia was in class. Mike called Roger, but Roger wasn't home. He thought about calling Jennifer, but he did not want to take the risk of William answering the phone.

Mike decided to begin the celebration alone. He opened a beer and toasted himself. He sat down at his P.C. and brought up Adventure. Since he wasn't working at Kube anymore, he was released from his promise. But the celebration seemed empty and the big house seemed to accentuate his loneliness.

Mike took a drive on 280 and scanned the radio. He found a song that reminded him of his early days in California and the easy camaraderie of his early days at Rosetta. He drove to Tower Records in Mountain View and bought over two hundred dollars worth of compact discs. When he got home, he cranked up the stereo and danced to his favorite songs. The music inspired him to push his body to its limits. It felt good. He realized how long it had been since he'd enjoyed anything about himself. It felt better than sex, certainly better than sex had felt recently.

When Antonia came home that afternoon, she found him dancing around in the living room. The music was so loud, he obviously didn't hear her come in. She snuck up behind him and locked her arms around his chest.

"Hi," she said, pleasantly surprised by his happy mood.

"Hi. Want to dance?" he said, taking her into his arms and leading her around the floor in perfect time. "I've been accepted to Stanford."

"That's wonderful," she said. When the song stopped, their eyes met and they kissed. It was a kiss that had the probing passion of their early relationship. He was sure this was the start of something good.

Being accepted to Stanford eliminated the despair, but not the boredom of Mike's daily life. He relied on Antonia's companionship to fill his days, but Mike sensed that Antonia was coming to find Shevaun's company more desirable than his.

Mike particularly resented Shevaun's role in Antonia's life, because Antonia had never liked his friends. It was a source of constant disappointment to Mike that Antonia had not formed a bond with his friends. Mike had initially tried to become friendly with Shevaun, but Mike had the feeling that Antonia did not want him to get close to Shevaun. Mike suspected that Antonia wanted him to remain distant from Shevaun because she was the recipient of Antonia's confidences, particularly those that pertained to him.

Mike's suspicions were correct. Antonia was able to talk to Shevaun about things that she couldn't talk to Mike about. Shevaun was able to understand how the death of Kube had affected Antonia, something Mike was too lost in his own grief to notice. Kube's failure had also destroyed Antonia's dream of permanent financial security. Even worse, Mike was going to be paying tuition instead of collecting a salary for the next four years. The prospect of neither of them having a job had always scared Antonia and she felt compelled to make her artistic career start paying off as soon as possible. By contrast, the staggering growth of Richard's commercial real estate business had made Shevaun wealthier than ever. Shevaun wanted to help her friend, but she knew that Antonia would be offended by the offer of any gifts. Shevaun found that she could brighten her friend's life a little by inviting Antonia to play tennis at the Longacre Ranch Country Club. Shevaun and Antonia were well-matched. Antonia was stronger, but Shevaun was quicker.

"You're too tough for me," Shevaun said, after losing her second set in a row. "It seems like you need an outlet for your frustration. Those college boys on the next court might be able to help."

"Shevaun, I don't want to talk about it. I'm happy with Mike."

"Sure you are, and I'm as pure as the driven snow," Shevaun said in her deepest brogue. "I'm too smart to listen to those fibs from the likes of you, Antonia Danzig. I've caught you looking."

"Looking and doing are two different things," Antonia countered primly.

"Yes, and the second is better than the first," Shevaun volleyed back.

"It's not exactly another man that I want. Mike's fine that way. I want someone to make feel special again. I used to feel that way with Mike, but I don't any more."

"You always did confuse sex with marriage," Shevaun said.

"Sex alone can't make me feel special anymore. I hope if my art starts to be successful and Mike does well in school, we'll both feel better about ourselves. Maybe that will make things better," she said as her voice trailed off.

Shevaun sensed that she had pushed Antonia far enough, so she dropped the subject.

The first day of Stanford's Fall Quarter finally arrived. Mike beeped the Ferrari's horn nervously as he zipped his car through the traffic on Page Mill Road. He didn't want to be late for his first day of school.

The core of the Stanford campus was a knot of Romanesque buildings surrounded by a ring of modern buildings, athletic playing fields, and tree-lined streets. Mike wondered if he would be able to measure up to the tradition they represented.

His initial anxieties about school were relieved by the tone of freshman orientation. University officials gave speeches informing him that he was a member of the most qualified freshman class that Stanford had ever admitted. Mike was relieved that this attitude differed from Roger's description of his freshman orientation at M.I.T.

Mike was also encouraged by the personalities of the other freshmen. Although some of them were snobbish in a laid-back California way, most of the students seemed friendly, intelligent, and unpretentious. The large number of students talking about computers also encouraged Mike, but Stanford's students didn't seem to be as reluctant to party as their M.I.T. counterparts.

Even though Stanford had gotten the city of Palo Alto to pass an ordinance banning liquor stores within the city limits, there was plenty of alcohol available and the students seemed eager to drink it.

The next day, Mike bought his textbooks. With their colorful covers and pristine white pages, the thick books, reminded him of unopened Christmas presents. He couldn't wait for his classes to start.

Mike walked in to his first history class five minutes early. Listening to three boys in the row in front of him talk about the pranks they had played on their dorm-mates the night before made Mike conscious of being the older than the other first-year students.

A squat, balding professor entered the class with his hands clasped behind his back. "Since you are all high school graduates," his voice boomed. "I am going to assume in this class that you already know, or can look up, the basic facts of history. What we are going to examine in this class are the motivations behind these facts. It's motivation that makes facts important. This world places too much importance on facts. They think the world can be summed up by a computer program."

The professor's comment about computers bothered Mike. He raised his hand. The professor looked amused at the hand and the earnest face.

"Speak your mind," the professor said with bemused tolerance.

"I disagree with you," Mike said. "I think the facts are what count. Anyone can have opinions about what happened."

The class laughed nervously.

“Thank you for that insight,” the professor said dismissively and continued his lecture.

As Mike walked across the campus to his car, he wondered if the University was truly the marketplace of ideas. Whether it was or not, it was certainly a beautifully developed piece of real estate. He decided to get something to eat and enjoy his surroundings. He was in no hurry to get home since he knew Antonia wouldn't be there. Antonia had won a contest at art school. The prize was having the sketch shown at a New York gallery. Antonia had taken a plane to New York that morning so she could attend the opening.

Mike sat on a bench enjoying the warm September afternoon. The sound of a saxophone drifted over the campus, adding a melancholy profundity to his relaxation. He watched the female students as they walked by and he wondered what their bodies looked like under their loose-fitting T-shirts. He thought about how routine his lovemaking with Antonia had become. He could tell the passion was gone for her too, but he didn't know what to do about it. He wished he'd had more experience with women.

A soft touch on his shoulder interrupted his thoughts.

“Mike, is that you?” a woman's voice asked.

He turned around and recognized Jennifer, “Hi! What are you doing here? I mean, how are you?”

“I'm fine. I'm a graduate student here,” she said. “Would you like to join me for a cup of tea?”

Mike thought for a minute. He didn't want to get Jennifer in trouble with William.

“Are you sure it's O.K.?” Mike asked.

Jennifer pressed her lips together in a tight smile. “I'm positive,” she said. “William and I don't live together anymore.”

The news shocked Mike. He groped for the appropriate words, but all he could manage to do was ask, “Why?”

“Because he didn't love me,” she said. “I spent a lot of time in therapy. I'm still going twice a week. I know he never wanted to marry me. Ian was an accident. I figured it was smarter to spend my energy building a life for Ian than ending up making all three of us miserable. Come on back to my house and we'll talk. I don't want to talk about this out here.”

When Mike got to Jennifer's house in Saratoga, he saw a "For Sale" sign outside.

"What's that about?" he asked Jennifer as she let him in.

"Ian's medical bills," Jennifer sighed. "I'm covered at Stanford now, but when William was fired, he lost his medical insurance. Since Ian was covered by William's insurance and I wasn't working, we had to pay a hundred percent of Ian's medical bills. There's talk about a law to provide medical insurance for people who lose their jobs, but as it stands in 1983, everybody's on their own. We both tried to get private insurance, but none of the insurance companies will cover Ian because he has a pre-existing condition."

Mike saw that this was an extremely painful subject for Jennifer.

"We don't have to talk about this," Mike said.

"No, I want to talk about it," Jennifer said, biting her lip. "What really bothers me isn't the money, or even William. It's me. Ian's birth defects were probably caused by the job I took at that goddamn clean room when I first came to the Valley. The chemicals they used in that factory can cause birth defects just like the ones Ian has. You know what my job was? Fabricating chips in a clean room. A clean room? Isn't that a joke? They kept out the dust so the chips wouldn't get contaminated, but they didn't mind if the people got poisoned."

Tears started to stream down her face and she was obviously too overwhelmed by grief to say anymore.

Mike gathered her in his arms and held her to his chest.

"Even if Ian's problems were caused by your job in the clean room, you didn't know those chemicals were dangerous until after you stopped working there," Mike said softly. "Don't punish yourself for something that's not your fault. You shouldn't have to sell your house just because that bastard William won't give you enough money to take care of his child."

She sniffled and stopped crying. She gently pushed away from Mike and blew her nose.

"William sends me money every month," Jennifer said, "and I certainly don't want any more from him. I've taken enough already. Besides, he wasn't always a bastard. It was the Valley that turned him into what he is now. When I first started at Rosetta, I thought that Silicon Valley was great. We were all going to get rich, fall in love, and live happily ever after." She raised one corner of her mouth in a wistful smile, "I'll miss the house, but it's just another part of that dream. I'm through dreaming. I'm just going to grind through school, get my master's and get a teaching job. That way I'll have the time and health insurance to bring up Ian right."

“Why don't you at least let me lend you some money until you graduate?” Mike said.

“I can't take money from you just so I can live in this house,” she said shaking her head, “I can't.”

“Yes you can,” he said. “Call it a loan.”

He wrote her check for ten thousand dollars.

“Thanks Mike,” she said, “but I insist on paying you back. Why don't you write up an agreement so it's all legal?”

“Sure. Whatever makes you comfortable,” Mike said.

Jennifer laughed. “It's funny. Of all the people that I counted on, I thought William would be my best hope. When I was growing up in Texas, I always dreamed of having a man like William. If you're a high school girl in Texas, you're either a pretty little thing or you don't exist. Your real class rank wasn't determined by your grades, but by whom you were screwing on the football team. I hated that society. I escaped from Texas, but I guess some of their dreams stayed with me. I believed that a knight in shining armor was going to come along, marry me, and love me forever. When I met William, I thought he was that knight. Now that he's gone, it's my fellow nerds, like you and Brad, who are willing to stand by me.”

“Brad?” Mike said, slightly offended to be included in the same class with his formal rival. “I had no idea you even kept in touch with him.”

“He called me every once in a while after the wedding,” she said. “When I told him about the divorce, he was very understanding. He baby-sits for Ian when I can't find anybody else. Brad says he understands the bitterness of divorce.”

Mike laughed, “His ex-wife certainly seemed to leave an impression on him. “

The conversation continued pleasantly for several hours. Then a silence pervaded the room and Mike began to feel conscious of Jennifer's physical presence. It made him uncomfortable. Antonia was his wife. Jennifer was his friend. He was a student with studying to do. He mumbled something about the time and left.

Antonia arrived in New York feeling sticky from sleeping on the plane. She bristled with excitement from the moment the plane touched down. Although Mike had taken her to New York on their way to Paris, now she was going to New York in the way she'd always dreamed of, as an artist, not as a tourist.

After checking into her hotel, she took a cab to the gallery where the show was being held. Looking through the windows of the cab, Antonia was initially frightened by the SoHo neighborhood with its dirty streets and graffiti covered steel doors. But she

began to relax when she realized SoHo was also full of art galleries, cafes, and artists' studios. The gallery itself was on the ground floor of an old five-story building with large, plate glass windows.

The gallery was owned by Doris Kaplan, an attractive, slightly overweight, woman of forty-five. Doris wore an immaculate white suit and too much costume jewelry. Doris was impressed by the promise shown in Antonia's work, but she knew that Antonia was hopelessly naive about the intrigues of the New York art world.

"You must be Antonia Danzig!" Doris said. "It's so nice to finally meet you."

Antonia smiled and nodded back, caught off-guard by Doris's warm reception.

"C'mon," Doris said. "I'll show you around. SoHo may look like a slum to a nice California girl like you, but it's really just an artists' colony with dirty streets."

Antonia enjoyed Doris's company. For the first time in her life, she was treated like a real artist, which made her feel good in a way that academic success, wealth, and even love never had. She was glad Mike wasn't with her.

Antonia wore a simple dark blue suit to the opening, which accented her large dark eyes and her wide sensual mouth. The suit also marked her as an out-of-towner, which reinforced her nervousness. She milled about the room drinking wine, eating pieces of cheese, and surreptitiously watching peoples, reaction to her sketch.

"Don't worry," a soft male voice whispered in her ear. "The art is never the main attraction at an opening."

She spun around to face a smug, fashionably dressed young man with a pair of soft brown eyes that stared unblinkingly into hers.

"What makes you so sure I'm worried?" she said testily.

"You've been trying to see how people react to that sketch without letting them know you're watching them," he said. "You've been oblivious to everybody else, so you must be the artist. Since this is a group show of new artists, this must be your first show."

Antonia felt like slapping the man.

"So what makes you such an expert?" she said.

"I've been through this a few times myself," he said. "My name is Klaus Leyden."

"Klaus Leyden!" she said, flushing and putting her hands to her mouth. "I've seen your work. You've had shows at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, everywhere. I don't what to say."

He gave her an amused and indulgent smile; "Say you'll have dinner with me."

"I don't know," she said, recovering from being star struck. "I was supposed to go to dinner with Doris."

"Doris will understand," he said quietly.

"I have a husband in California," she said.

"Don't tell him," Klaus said, and his smile widened to include his eyes.

Antonia thought about his proposal for his moment. She thought about what her mother would do. She thought about what Shevaun would do. She said yes.