

15.

Home felt good as Antonia pulled her car into the garage of the house in Los Altos Hills. She'd been traveling for ten hours and she hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. Klaus had taken her to dinner and then to a string of parties. By one o'clock they'd both had enough wine so that neither of them were feeling any pain. Klaus was much more suave and sophisticated than Mike, and Antonia was definitely turned on. Klaus moved to kiss her in the taxicab, but she could not betray Mike this way. She said no. Klaus did admirable job covering his disappointment with nonchalance.

In her hotel room that night, she stayed awake thinking of Klaus. Although she was hung over and tired the next morning, she was unable to sleep on the plane. By the time she got to California, she was so tired that she was just thinking of bed only as a place to sleep. As she opened the door from the garage to the house, her mind was consumed by a vision of clean fresh sheets. When she got to the bedroom, she saw that the big king-size bed was a mess. Mike's textbooks littered the bed. The sheets were coffee stained and stale with sweat.

"Dammit, why can't he clean up after himself?" she said aloud. She felt like she might have made the wrong decision when she turned down Klaus in the taxicab.

She kicked off her shoes and lay down on the bed. The sharp edges of Mike's textbooks poked her in the side. With a sweeping motion of her arm, she pushed them all off the bed. She pulled the blanket over herself, but sleep would not come. Images of New York filled her mind. She wondered if Doris would sell the sketch. She hadn't realized that she'd drifted off to sleep until the sound of Mike opening the bedroom door waked her up.

"Hi," Mike said. "How was the opening?"

"It was fine," she said sharply. "Did you ever think about making the bed? I'm your wife, not your maid."

"I'm sorry. I'll clean it up," he said, in a tone that was half apology, half rebuttal.

Antonia didn't want a fight. She searched her mind for a way to make peace, but the only things that she could think of were guaranteed to make things worse. She flashed Mike a smile that they both knew was fake and went to her studio to call Shevaun. Shevaun listened sympathetically to Antonia's story about coming home and the mess on the bed.

"He's so involved with himself that he doesn't even notice if I'm happy or not," Antonia complained.

"Don't let him stop your progress with his failures," Shevaun said.

"I feel like he needs me, but I need me too," Antonia said, in an agitated voice. "I know it sounds selfish."

"It's O.K. to be selfish. It's your life," Shevaun countered. "Look, I don't view marriage as a way of fulfilling all my romantic needs, but you do. If Mike isn't meeting those needs then you have the right to do something about it."

Antonia felt that if the conversation continued in this direction, she would be forced into territory that she was not ready to enter. She changed the subject.

After she hung up, Antonia felt calmer but not better. She walked out of her studio looking for Mike. She found him sitting in front of his computer drinking a beer. His pale face looked sickly in the glow of the computer screen. His jaw was slack but his eyes were bright as he shot at the blips of color that were supposed to be marauding aliens. She felt both pity and revulsion. She reminded herself of all the wonderful things Mike had done for her, but it was no use. She knew she wasn't in love with him anymore. She saw clearly what she had to do, but she didn't know how to do it.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," he responded. His eyes were wide with boyish remorse. "I'm sorry about the bed. I cleaned it up."

"Thanks," she said, "but it's not just the bed. We have to talk."

"O.K., let's talk," he said anxiously.

She inhaled deeply. She looked at him, hoping something in his face would change her mind, but nothing did. She cared for him. She felt if she had to, she would die for him, but she was not prepared to live for him. She let her breath out and inhaled again for courage.

"We want to do different things," she said. "We're too young to make compromises about what we want to do with our lives. Why don't we just try it on our own for a while?"

Mike's eyes were wide with shock, "Antonia! You've got to be kidding."

"I'm not kidding Mike," she said breaking into sobs, but feeling a great weight lifted off her shoulders.

He saw her crying, but his pain overwhelmed his desire to comfort her, "Why?"

"Because I'm not in love with you anymore," she said.

She saw the pain in his face. She reached for some consoling words.

"I still love you," she said. "I just don't love you in that way. I'm just saying I want a trial separation. I'm not saying I want a divorce." She felt guiltier with every word and she desperately looked for ways to soften the blow. "I spent the best times of my life with you. I don't want to ruin the memories of those times by letting us grow to hate each other."

He nodded slowly, "I see. How do you expect me not to hate you for kicking me when I'm down?"

She started to cry again, "I'm not leaving you to kick you. I'm leaving you so I can go on with my life. I have things I want to do, and I can't do them while I'm living with you."

"You're really a piece of work," Mike said, shaking his head in angry disbelief. "Ever since we got married, I've made sure you've had everything you've wanted."

"I didn't want that company," she shot back fiercely. "I wanted you. Right after we got married, you just started that stupid company. You said we needed more money. As far as I was concerned, we had enough money already. You don't respect Shevaun because you think she married for money. Well I didn't marry you for your money, I married you because I loved you."

"If you love me, don't leave me," he said. "I need you now."

"You used to need me to leave you alone so you could work on your precious programs," she said. "Now that you don't have them anymore, you need me to fill up your life. Well, I'm not just another machine, waiting to be turned on when you get around to it. For the last two years, I kept waiting for you to love me without needing me like some drug, but you were either too stressed out or depressed to notice. I just got tired of waiting. I tried to make you happy, but all you wanted from me was a recharge so you could go out and do it again. Now, I need that energy to recharge myself."

She was sobbing loudly now. His heart went out to her, but he felt it would be weakness to show sympathy after she'd wounded him so deeply.

"Free to recharge yourself with my money," he said, still angry and suspicious that she wasn't telling him the whole truth about why she was leaving.

"Damn you and your money," she said, her remorse turning to anger. "Once upon a time I met a wonderful man named Mike Danzig. He was really more of a big kid than a man, but he was smarter and sweeter than anyone I'd ever known. He didn't even have money back then, but he had a kind soul and a good heart. He married me, took me to his castle, and told me that I would be his queen. But he locked me away in that castle and I watched that sweet kid turn into a fiend that only cared about revenge and success. I know there's a sweet boy underneath who is still capable of

love. I want to talk to that boy because I think he's the Mike Danzig that I fell in love with, not the one I'm leaving."

Mike was still angry, but her words touched him. He reached down inside himself the love he needed to overcome his anger.

"I'm here baby," he said softly. "Let's straighten this out so it doesn't hurt anymore. Who should move out, you or me?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. Please don't hate me. Please," she said sobbing against his chest.

He held her and patted her back gently. Over her shoulder he looked out the window. The night was beautiful and clear. The stars shone through the redwoods, and the lights of Silicon Valley twinkled below. He remembered seeing this scene for the first time on the night he'd proposed to Antonia at Omar's party. That memory had always made him smile. Now, like the memory of so many other things, it was permanently tainted. He sighed deeply.

"I don't hate you," he said.

It was a lie that he wanted to believe.

Mike rented a large two-story condominium in downtown Palo Alto. He considered moving on campus to escape being alone, but he felt too old to live with eighteen year-olds fresh out of high school. The condo was spacious and luxuriously appointed, but it depressed him in a way that his studio apartment in East Palo Alto never had. The East Palo apartment had been a foothold in paradise. The condo was a way station on the road to hell.

He decorated the condo by leaving the furniture wherever the moving men dropped it. He kept the curtains closed and left most of his boxes unpacked. He took a perverse satisfaction the condo's bare and gloomy atmosphere. Pretty places just reminded him of the house in Los Altos Hills and Antonia, William, and Kube. Less than one year ago, his future looked bright. Now, his life seemed over.

Of all the things that had slipped through his hands since moving to California, friends were the ones he missed most. The old Li River gang had fallen away. Between working in a start-up and being married, there just hadn't been time to meet more people. Now he needed to talk to somebody about Antonia, and he didn't know where to turn.

He tried to find a social life in his classes, but he couldn't get past small talk. Besides, Stanford's intense academic demands didn't leave him much time for socializing. He tried to focus on his schoolwork, but the pain of the separation from Antonia seemed to permeate every cell of his body. The pain of losing Antonia was even worse than the pain of being demoted at Kube. Even sleeping didn't help.

He would open his textbooks and find himself reading the same passage over and over again without even noticing he was doing it. His inability to concentrate made him angry. He tried to persuade his brain to focus by giving himself a little speech in which he reminded himself that Stanford's tuition wasn't cheap, and that a college education was his best hope for a new start in life. But these self-discipline sessions provided almost no practical help in conquering the pages of his textbooks. When his sermons failed, he tried to force himself to concentrate, but will power alone was a clumsy and ineffective tool.

Mike tried to muster his old enthusiasm for learning, but his computer class was too easy and his chemistry class was too hard. Only his history class really interested him. The history professor took a socialist, and therefore anticapitalist, approach to history. In the history teacher's vocabulary, "P.C." stood for politically correct, not personal computer. The teacher was fond of making pointed remarks about the "exploitation of the working class by a small number of Wall Street parasites."

Mike felt compelled to defend American business in general and the computer industry in particular. Mike contended that he had pulled himself out of poverty, and that he'd done it by participating in the development of new products. He argued that the system wasn't corrupt, only individuals were.

The professor smiled patiently at Mike's arguments, made a few caustic remarks, and continued lecturing, but Mike took these arguments very seriously. He spent evenings in the library looking up facts to support his positions. He worked hard on his history papers. He usually regretted handing these papers in when they were due, not when he considered them done. It seemed that so much of life was driven by deadlines instead of quality.

As the quarter progressed, his concern about his academic competence increased. He almost failed his chemistry midterm. He felt intimidated by the students who smiled when they got their grades back.

Mike felt left out of the school's social life as well. Many students seemed to be focusing on the upcoming "Big Game," an annual football game between Stanford and The University of California at Berkeley. Mike wasn't any more interested in football at Stanford than he was at St. Luke's. On the day of the Big Game, Mike went to the computer room and tried to study. As usual, it was not his schoolwork that was on his mind, it was Antonia. He'd seen her a few times since he'd moved out, but each visit was stiffer than the one before. When Mike had brought up the subject of her personal life, Antonia declared that subject off-limits. Her refusal to discuss her personal life made Mike increasingly obsessed by the question, "Is she sleeping with somebody else?" His jealousy was making it impossible to study, but that didn't stop it from monopolizing his thoughts. Desperate for a distraction, he accepted his mother's annual invitation to come to Long Island for Thanksgiving. He hoped the trip would somehow pull him out of his rut.

Mike took a deep breath when he got off the plane at Kennedy Airport. New York air was colder and more polluted than Silicon Valley air, but it had some indefinable ingredient that his body craved. He thought about Antonia and how different they were. She grew up in the orchards of the Valley. He grew up in the tenements of the Bronx. Yet he felt that in many ways she was tougher than he was.

Roger met Mike at the airport and gave him a ride to his parents' house. Roger seemed happy and Mike let his friend do most of the talking. It was clear from the way Roger talked about work that he liked his job. Roger was working on an important project and he had just been given three new people to supervise. Mike looked out the window and saw a branch of the Five Boroughs National Bank, where he'd had his first computer job. Things had seemed so simple then. When he was young he'd craved experience because it would make him competent. He wondered why now, when he had a respectable resume, he felt more inept than ever.

"You're real quiet," Roger prodded. "You don't look so good."

"I'm not." Mike said. "My life's a disaster. My business failed, my wife left me, and my grades are shit. Worst of all, I know it's my own goddamn fault. I used to think I could do anything I set my mind to, but now it looks like I'm going to end up even worse off than my mom and dad. At least they stayed married."

"Well I've never been married or run a business, so I can't really speak to that," Roger said, "but I've gotten through a tough school and I've seen you as a student. You'll do well. Just hang in there."

Mike wondered if Roger was giving his honest opinion or if he was just being nice. In either case, Roger's words were evidence of how much Roger cared for him. The very fact that his friendship with Roger had survived despite the different paths they had chosen boosted Mike's self-confidence tremendously.

The next day, Mike sat down to Thanksgiving dinner with a smile on his face. He liked the familiar surroundings of his parents' Long Island tract house and the smell of overcooked food. Carl and Suzanne had two little girls now, a three year-old named Tracy and a ten month-old named Ashley. Mike enjoyed his nieces. Ashley was too young to talk, but old enough to know how to make herself the center of attention in a roomful of adults.

Mike was enjoying Thanksgiving dinner until he became the focus of his father's slightly intoxicated attention.

"Well Mike, at least one of your investments is doing well," his father said, referring to his liquor store.

"That's because your partner runs it," his mother said.

George Danzig smiled an evil smile at his wife and then turned back toward his younger son.

“Mike, I think Carl's going to be giving you some competition,” his father said. “He and Suzanne are going to make almost seventy thousand bucks this year.”

Carl smiled that pseudo-self effacing jock smile he'd developed for those occasions when he had to look modest in front of the coach after he'd scored a touchdown. Carl's expression made Mike want to throw up in disgust, but the fact that his father might be right meant that he had to sit there and take it. His humiliation had made him remember what had inspired him to go to California in the first place. He'd gone to California certain that he would do better by leaving than by staying. His initial successes had made his family's dire predictions of failure seem foolish, but now time seemed to be proving them right after all. Being a failure made him feel like a gunslinger without ammunition.

Mike walked over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a long drink. It didn't help. He thought about pouring himself another and decided against it. He grabbed his coat and went for a walk. He found the crispness of the late fall air invigorating. Two blocks from home, he saw three high school girls smoking cigarettes on a porch. The girls reminded him of Mary Liz. He looked away from the porch. He didn't want think about Mary Liz, Antonia, or any other woman. Desire for women had only brought him pain.

So many things about his trip back home had rubbed salt into the open wound of his disintegrating marriage. His mother had told him, “There must be a way to keep your marriage together. You have to try.” Mike didn't have the strength to tell his mother that he'd tried everything he could, but his wife simply didn't want him anymore. It seemed cruel that he who had wanted to get married should lose his wife and that Carl, who had never wanted to get married, seemed to be enjoying his marriage and the children it had produced.

Mike returned to California a day early. He changed his ticket to first class, which gave him a brief, but satisfying wealth and power rush. He took great satisfaction in obviously being the youngest person in the first class cabin. He downed the free drinks, flirted with the stewardesses, and felt proud of himself for doing it.

Mike's euphoria wore off the next morning. He'd promised himself that he would study on the plane, but the books had remained unopened in his flight bag. Suddenly, he felt the proximity of exams and with them a portent of disaster. He convinced himself that it would be easier to study if he gave himself the reward of seeing Jennifer first. He stopped by her house on the way home from the airport.

His reasons for seeing Jennifer were complex. His physical attraction to her had begun to grow, but Mike's attraction was much deeper than random lust. She was the all that remained of the best part of his past. Most of all, she understood what he was going through. She had lost her ideal man. He had lost his ideal woman. They

were both students working toward new careers and new lives. Talking to her about his problems usually lifted his spirits, but on the night he came back from New York, conversation was stiff. He just saw Jennifer as another woman he couldn't have.

He hauled himself back to his apartment and microwaved a frozen dinner. He felt too tired to study and set the alarm for six and went to bed, but thoughts of Antonia's sleeping with another man made sleep impossible. He was just twenty-six, but he felt like forty. By two o'clock in the morning, he was so overcome by jealousy, he picked up the phone and called her.

"Hello! Who is this?" Antonia asked with a mixture of indignation and fear caused by being woken up.

"It's me," Mike said. "I had to talk to you. Did I call you at a bad time?"

She was offended by the question. Klaus had come to see her when he had a show at a prestigious San Francisco art gallery. This time she had slept with him. She was certainly not ready to talk Mike about it. Antonia panicked as the thought crossed her mind that he might be spying on her.

"Two o'clock in the morning is never a good time," she said sharply. "Why did you call?"

"No reason," he said. "I mean I just needed to talk to you." He exhaled deeply and said, "What I really mean is that I can't live without you."

"I can't live with you," she said trying to restrain the annoyance in her voice as much as possible. "Since I started living alone, things have really started coming together for me as an artist. This is my shot to make something of myself and I need to make the most of it."

"What about my needs?" he moaned.

"I tried to meet your needs," she said in a voice that contained both sympathy and frustration, "but I couldn't take care of your needs and mine at the same time."

"Can't you try again?" he said plaintively.

"No. We're just too different. I want to say yes, but I can't. Please try to understand," she said.

"Is it the way I am in bed?" he said summoning up his courage. He had to know.

"Yes. No," Antonia said.

Antonia could feel the anguish in Mike's silence and searched for words to soften the blow.



"I've had the best times in bed with you that I ever had with anyone," she said, "but it's over. When we stopped talking and when taking care of you became all that was left of our relationship, I couldn't give myself totally to you. I still love you, but not as a husband."

Mike inhaled deeply. He wanted to cry, but some inner strength inside checked him. He knew it was over, the most merciful thing was to end it quickly.

"Then I guess we should get divorced," he said. "I've never done this before."

"Neither have I," she said. Then she broke down and wept.

Mike sighed heavily to prevent himself from crying too. He had called her to make himself feel better and instead he'd ended up getting one of the worst pieces of news he'd ever received. After he hung up, he tried to study, but he was too upset to even read. He went into the kitchen and poured himself a scotch. He knew he was starting to drink more than was good for him, but he decided to deal with that problem later. He looked over at his bedside clock and reset the alarm for nine.