

16.

Three months later, Mike had gained ten pounds and he was sleeping twelve hours a day to avoid thinking about his failures. His fall quarter grades were a disaster and he received a letter that diplomatically informed him that he was in danger of being placed on academic probation if his grades did not improve.

He went to see his adviser, a kindly looking older professor, who treated Mike like he was fifteen years old. Mike, a self-made millionaire and a former executive, was rankled by this treatment. He was no longer a parochial school student who was afraid of not conforming to the dress code. Mike explained that he was going through some personal difficulties and vowed to work harder. He didn't want to talk about his personal problems with this man.

Even more depressing than his visits to his adviser, were the visits to his divorce lawyer, a middle-aged San Francisco attorney with an office overlooking the Bay. Mike had delayed the actual processing of the divorce. By February, Antonia's patience had been exhausted so she had gotten a lawyer, so Mike had been forced to get a lawyer of his own.

Each visit to his lawyer made Mike angry. The lawyer seemed fond of telling Mike what he couldn't do, but the lawyer was disappointingly devoid of creative methods for helping Mike to defend himself. Even worse, Mike's lawyer assured him that the case would proceed along a certain path, but Antonia's lawyer would usually do something that would make the outcome very different. Mike got another lawyer who was more aggressive, but not much more effective. Both lawyers sent him large bills.

Mike was angry with the lawyers for burning up his money and he was angry with Antonia for leaving him. He wanted revenge, and the list of accusations that he considered using in his legal battle with Antonia became nastier and nastier.

The night before Mike's chemistry midterm, Antonia called.

"Hello, Mike," she said tentatively.

"Hello, Antonia," he said sharply. "What do you want?"

"I'm calling you to make peace," Antonia said. "Please call off your lawyer."

"Call off my lawyer? You call off yours, or did she put you up to this?"

"She told me not to call," Antonia said, "but I don't want end our love with lawyers. Let's work this out between ourselves. I don't want to go to court."

Mike thought about what Antonia was saying. He realized that his legal battle was just a way of trying to bludgeon her into loving him again, but the legal battle was only driving her farther away.

For the first time, his heart, as well as his head, accepted that their marriage was over. He knew that the only thing left to do was try to bury the past and go on. Maybe if he did that he could keep some measure of their friendship. He desperately wanted to salvage something from the ruins of his marriage. He wanted to feel that all the love that he had shared with Antonia had value beyond the time they had spent keeping house and keeping each other warm. He inhaled deeply and said, "You're right. Let screw the lawyers before they screw us. Let's just settle this between ourselves."

The next day, Mike drove up to the house to negotiate an end to their marriage. They both bargained hard, but without getting angry.

"I want enough money so I can pursue my career as an artist for ten years," Antonia said.

"Ten years!" Mike said.

"I'm entitled to it," she said.

"No you're not," he said. "I made that money before we were married. It's not community property. You have no legal claim on it."

"I quit my job because you told me to, so I'm legally entitled to alimony," she shot back. "But I'm not primarily appealing to you on legal grounds." Her voice softened. "You encouraged me to find a career I liked. Now I have, but it's a career that takes time to develop, especially for a woman. You had your shot. This is mine."

He saw her point, but he didn't feel she'd taken his side into account. He felt that his obligation to her had been offset by her lack of support when he was at Kube. But they had gotten together to settle things and his intuition told him that this was the best time to do so.

"O.K. Let's talk about how much," he sighed.

Antonia got half a lump sum settlement of four hundred thousand dollars. Their lawyers, who urged them both not to settle, got another fifty thousand. In addition to the money, Antonia and Mike agreed to sell the house and split the proceeds. Although the value of the house had almost doubled since they bought it three years ago, Antonia hated selling it, but Mike was glad. His share of the house covered most of the cost of the divorce. It was the only profitable investment he'd made since leaving Rosetta. Mike reflected that between taxes, Kube, and the divorce, his four million dollars had dwindled to one and three-quarter million dollars in less than five years.

Antonia was going to live in the house until they sold it. The real estate agent informed them that the house would show better if Antonia's paint splattered studio

were cleaned up. An artist's studio can only remain clean if it remains unused. The studio was her life, so she decided to move.

She found an empty loft on the third floor of an old factory building near First and Townsend Streets in San Francisco. The neighborhood was a haven for alcoholics and other street people, but rent was cheap and the large unobstructed space made an ideal and affordable studio.

Leaving the house in Los Altos Hills depressed Antonia. She felt like she was jumping into a void. Shevaun became the rock on which Antonia built her new life. Her family, particularly her mother, was opposed to the divorce, but Shevaun always had a sympathetic ear for Antonia's midnight phone calls.

Antonia painted and sketched at least a seven hours a day and sometimes as much as sixteen. Yet the harder she worked, the more unattainable success seemed. She found herself having imaginary conversations with Mike about her career. He understood the thrill of creation. But that was the old Mike, not the simpering man he had become. Sometimes she had second thoughts about making the decision to divorce Mike and pursue her art, but her doubts were never serious.

Klaus called her regularly but she didn't want a man in her life. Work was a satisfying lover. Besides, men, even for an evening, meant letting an alien presence into her life, and she had arranged her life just the way she liked it. She'd come to the conclusion that men were like the act of sex itself. They were hard and full of energy until they were spent, then they became soft and a weight that lay on top of a woman and constricted her breathing.

Antonia and Mike were both required to be at the Los Altos Hills house to close the sale. Antonia felt depressed as she walked through the house for the last time. She felt she would never again live in a place that was as beautiful as this. But she knew that giving up the house was the price of being true to herself, so she forced herself to put on a mask of indifference.

Mike looked at the emptiness of the house and felt a peculiar sense of triumph. In the end, the house was the way he had always wanted it. He had bought it for Antonia as a way of making her happy. In his desire to please her, he had let her take it over until he had no longer felt at home there. Now, she did not even seem to care that it was being sold.

Mike felt that in some way Antonia was doing him a favor by leaving him. She was doing it to free herself, but in the process she was also freeing him. Silicon Valley was not built on good taste, it was built on brashness. His life, like the house, was at its best when it was simple and uncluttered.

Selling the house lifted his spirits for a while, but his difficulties in school pulled him back into the quicksand of depression. At his adviser's insistence, he signed up for

only four moderately easy classes in the winter quarter. He worked hard and his grades improved slightly, but his depression prevented him from maintaining the discipline required to achieve academic excellence. He would make schedules for himself, fall behind, and vow to work twice as hard the next day, but the next day inevitably turned out to be as unproductive as the last one. Soon, he gave up on the schedule.

Mike began to wonder if school was the right place for him. Maybe his grades were just a sign that going to school was just another in a series of bad decisions, which would leave him worse off for having made it.

But school was not the only thing that was turning sour. Even driving his Ferrari no longer gave him pleasure. The car had just cost him over three thousand dollars in repair bills in the five months since moving to Palo Alto.

Jennifer tried to lift Mike out of his despair by encouraging him to take it easy on himself. She told him that recovering from a series of disappointments meant taking things one step at a time. She encouraged him to see a therapist. He listened politely, but he was convinced that taking her advice would be an admission of defeat. He reminded himself of his proverb, "Losers blame their luck. Winners make their luck." He threw himself into studying. He was determined to make a new beginning by doing well on his finals.

He studied hard and rigorously prohibited himself from having a drink before six o'clock, but a week before finals, he received his divorce in the mail. The divorce would not be final for another four months, but seeing the demise of his love presented in such a cold legal format made him feel sick inside. It was only two o'clock in the afternoon and he knew he'd never to make to six o'clock without a drink unless he left the condo immediately. He decided to take a walk on campus. The sea of people scurrying about seemed to accentuate his loneliness. He decided to go back home.

When he got back to his condo, he lost it. "Why did you do this me Antonia?" he screamed as if she were really in the room with him. "I gave you everything that a woman could want. Why do you have to be such an ungrateful bitch?"

But even as cried out these words, his mind filled with the image of Antonia's face and he was overcome with love and desire. He smashed his fist against the wall. Then he lay down on the bed and sobbed "Antonia, Antonia."

When his emotions were completely drained, he looked at the books on his desk and thought, "I know I should study, but why bother? It's all going to end in failure anyway."

He went to a liquor store and bought a bottle of Glenlivet. He cursed everything and everyone. He even began to hate California itself because everything in it was tainted

with her memory. He decided not to go back to his apartment. He did not want to drink alone.

He drove to Jennifer's house. He knew he should call first, but he didn't feel he could deal with the phone. He hoped she would understand.

"Sorry to bother you like this," he said when Jennifer answered the door, "but I just couldn't be alone."

"It's O.K.," she said, reading the obvious distress on Mike's face. "What happened?"

He told her about the divorce documents.

"Mike, I'm sorry," Jennifer said. "I've been there and I know how bad you feel. Is there anything I can do?"

He thought about her words. He had read once "that every problem is an opportunity." Jennifer was recovering from her divorce. He was recovering from his. He had always been attracted to her. Wasn't it reasonable to think that she'd been attracted to him? Certainly, sleeping with each other would provide a welcome vacation from sleeping with memories of their former spouses.

"Sleep with me tonight," he said simply. He kept his eyes downcast, bracing himself for her refusal.

"I can't Mike," she said.

She bit her lower lip. "You know how much I care about you Mike, but it just wouldn't be right. We're friends. I've mistaken friendship for love before. It doesn't work, believe me."

"You never know till you try," he said and he reached out to kiss her.

"No Mike!" she said sharply and moved away.

He stopped and returned his hands to his side. He was overcome by embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I've got to go."

On the way home, he realized that he'd left the unopened bottle of scotch on her coffee table. He stopped at a liquor store on the way home and bought another bottle. He wasn't about to risk losing this bottle without even opening it. Before starting the car, he unscrewed the cap and took a furtive hit off the bottle. He put the cap back on and drove home as fast as possible. When he was safely in the condo's garage, he took a long, proper swallow. He spent the rest of the night drinking, watching TV, and feeling miserable. When he woke late the next morning, he walked

to a restaurant on University Avenue and ate a cheeseburger for breakfast. It sat in his stomach like a rock. He went home and washed it down with a beer.

He went to class drunk. The smell of his unwashed body elicited looks of disgust from the other students, especially the women. He tried to focus on getting through finals. From the conversations he overheard in the library, many people were staying up studying for their finals by taking some kind of amphetamines. Mike was scared of taking illegal drugs, so he drank massive amounts coffee, sometimes laced with scotch, to stay up.

His adviser was alarmed by Mike's condition. He told Mike to sober up, get some sleep, and study. Inwardly, Mike knew his adviser was right, but an inner voice assured him that everything would be alright if he could only summon the will to stay up all night and study. He stayed up for two days and got the dry heaves during his chemistry final from the six cups of coffee he'd drunk the night before.

The real turning point came on his history final. He'd studied, but the more he read, the more he differed from the professor's interpretation of history. There were two ways of answering each question. The first way was to give the answer the professor wanted. The second way was to give the answer that he truly believed was right. Mike thought about how personally the lectures had affected him and he chose the second way.

When finals were over, Mike walked across the quad in a depressed daze. He'd expected to feel relief, but he only felt nervous and exhausted.

Mike became restless as he waited for his grades. He wanted to apologize to Jennifer, but at the same time he resented her for rejecting him. He tried to forget that he had ever wanted her. Surely, there were other women in the world. He remembered how William had always told him that a night of bliss with a woman was only a matter of going into a bar and having a good time. "I've had enough pain in my life lately, I certainly deserve an evening of happiness," he thought.

He went to a Palo Alto dance club. He ordered a Glenlivet and soda at the bar. He tried to sip it, but Glenlivet was his favorite kind of scotch and it was gone in five minutes. He felt guilty about finishing the drink so quickly. He thought, "Why should I feel guilty? I'm here to have a good time."

He watched the women's bodies move on the dance floor. The smell of their sweat aroused him. His eyes scanned the crowd and came to rest on an attractive redhead who was apparently alone. He was no longer an innocent virgin. He looked at the redhead again. He knew William would try to pick her up. Mike thought, "Why not me?"

The redhead told him to get lost. He ordered another scotch. He felt rotten. He finished the drink and started to leave. As he got up from his bar stool, he felt a tap

on his shoulder. He turned around to see a moderately attractive shorthaired blonde girl, who was moving to the music.

“Wanna dance?” she asked brightly.

Mike happily said yes. Her name was Linda. She was in his chemistry class. He didn't remember her but she had remembered him. After they danced for another two songs, she said she was getting tired. Mike asked if he could buy her a drink. He had two more. She said that she had to get back to her dorm. He offered to drive her home. When they got to her dorm room, she invited him in.

Within fifteen minutes they were kissing heavily. When he ran his hands inside her shirt, the unfamiliarity of her body made him hesitate, but the liquor and novelty of conquest inspired him to passion. He was glad that he had given himself the reward of going out. After all, he deserved it.

The morning light was hard on everything, especially his eyes. Her naked body did not look as good as it had the night before. The unfamiliarity of her dorm room felt wrong. He felt hung over and sorry. He wanted to sleep in his own bed, but he felt it would be wrong to leave. He drifted in and out of sleep waiting for Linda to get up. He took her to breakfast. She seemed very happy to be with him, which made him feel guilty for not feeling the same way about her. He didn't know what to do. He left after breakfast without responding to her eager, “Call me.”

When he got home, he instinctively opened his mailbox. As soon as he did it, he knew it was a mistake. Inside were two envelopes from the University. Wide awake now, he opened the door and tore open the first envelope. It contained his grades, a 'D' in history, down from the 'C+' from the previous quarter. The other letter contained “his grades. He was disappointed but not really surprised.

He went to the kitchen and poured himself a strong drink. He closed his eyes and swallowed. He opened his eyes with renewed courage. He looked at his grades again. He decided leaving Stanford was the best thing to do. He thought he'd probably never go back, but his adviser encouraged him to leave the door open by taking a leave of absence instead of dropping out. For the next several weeks, he stared at the passing traffic through the window. His depression became a physical pain that only scotch had the power to relieve.

Three weeks after Mike dropped out of school, he received a letter from Antonia with an Italian stamp and no return address. Mike was not aware that she'd even planned to go to Italy. The letter described her impressions of Rome, Florence, and the smaller cities of northern Italy, but gave no news of her personal life. He was glad for the letter, but he wondered if she was in Italy with a man. The letter didn't say. Memories of making love in Paris came unbidden into his mind. He poured a drink so the memories wouldn't hurt anymore.

He tried not to drink before noon, but he usually did. He rubbed his brow in an attempt to make himself forget the memories of failure that filled him with self-loathing. His ability to calculate remained cruelly unaffected by his drinking. He brooded over the money he had lost by investing in Kube. Inspired by the memory of buying put options at Rosetta, he played the options market, but he lost money at that too.

Sometimes he thought about trying to program again, but even looking at the computer was painful. Once, it had been the symbol of his dreams. Now, those dreams mocked him with the same intensity with which they had once beckoned him. The computer seemed to say to him, "What makes you think you can program? You couldn't even write 'just one program' at Kube."

One morning he awoke with a particularly nasty hangover and found that he'd finished every drop of alcohol in the house the night before. The day was bright and he dreaded going out in the sunlight, even to go to the liquor store. He stumbled around the house, cursing and throwing empty bottles against the wall. He put on his pants, found his wallet, and drove to the liquor store.

His favorite liquor store had become the one at the far end of University Avenue in East Palo Alto. The alcoholics who hung out in front of the liquor store initially frightened him, but now their presence comforted him. They provided a community in which he didn't need to feel ashamed of being dirty or talking to himself out loud.

He decided not to make the mistake of letting himself run out of scotch again, so he bought two half-gallon bottles of Dewars' White Label with easy pour handles. Mike was working on the second bottle when Roger called.

"I just got engaged," Roger said. "I wanted you to be the first to congratulate me."

There was an undercurrent of smugness in Roger's voice that set Mike on edge.

"Congratulations. I hope your marriage works out better for you than for me," Mike said thickly.

"Maybe I should call back another time," Roger said carefully.

"Now's as good a time as any," Mike said. "What's wrong with now?"

"You sound a little drunk," Roger said.

"What are you getting so huffy about?" Mike responded. "We used to drink together. You used to get us scotch when we were both underage."

"We didn't drink in the middle of the day," Roger said primly.

"So what," Mike said. "I'm tired of people telling me what I should do."



“What's that supposed to mean?” Roger said.

“People are always telling me what to do and then I get in trouble for it,” Mike said, with a drunken challenge in his voice. “Omar told me 'you have a future with this company'. He fired me. William said 'go into business, we'll be rich.' Kube failed. Antonia said 'go have fun.' She left me. You told me 'go to school, it can't hurt.' Now I've practically failed out and I'm more miserable than ever. I'm not listening to people's advice anymore. I'm going to do what I want.”

Roger laughed.

“What's so funny?” Mike asked.

“Hey don't get mad,” Roger said. “I'm just trying to inject some humor and some perspective into the conversation.”

“I said, what's so funny?” Mike repeated defiantly.

“You saying that you're going to do what you want from now on, that's what so funny,” Roger said, but there was no longer any humor in his voice. “You always do what you want. Maybe that's what gets you in trouble.”

“Well at least I had the guts to go out and experience life, instead of being so afraid that I only did what my parents told me,” Mike said.

“I think we'd better end this conversation,” Roger said. “We've been friends for a long time and I'd like to keep it that way.”

“Whatever you say,” Mike said. “You're the M.I.T. graduate.”

“Goodbye Mike,” Roger said, in a tone that implied that he might be ending more than just the conversation.

After Roger hung up, Mike sat in silence. The walls seemed to close in around him. He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. There was nothing on but old movies and reruns. Disgustedly, he hit the power button on the remote control. The silence was horrible.

As daylight faded, the room seemed more and more like a prison. He grabbed his wallet and keys and bolted out of the condo. In his rush to leave, he fell down the stairs to the garage. After a cursory self-inspection revealed that nothing was broken, he decided that his fall was just another sign of his bad luck. He decided that a change of scenery might change that luck. He didn't know where he wanted to go, but he had the necessary ingredients for getting there, lots of money and a fast car.

He got into his Ferrari and turned the key. The engine fired up reassuringly. He put a tape on and happily sang out of key with his favorite driving song. He jammed the car into gear without waiting for the engine to warm up. This was going to be a party.