

17.

Mike had been partying for three days. He'd been sleeping in cheap motels throughout the Bay Area because he didn't want to go home. On the morning of the fourth day, he woke up in a motel in Downtown San Jose, not knowing how he got there. He had not changed his clothes since he'd left Palo Alto. When he looked in the mirror, he was shocked by what he saw.

He looked and smelled like a panhandler, not a millionaire. He found a department store and bought new clothes. He went back to the motel, showered, shaved, and put on his new clothes. His old clothes were so disgusting that he threw them in the trash. New clothes stopped him from looking like a bum; they didn't make him stop feeling like one. That problem was harder to fix.

After leaving the motel, he went for a drive on 280. He instinctively took the southbound direction away from Los Altos Hills, Palo Alto, and San Francisco. He knew that if he stayed on this road that it would eventually connect to Interstate 80, the road he'd taken when he'd moved to California from the Bronx. He decided that Silicon Valley itself was the chain that bound him to the pain of his past. He'd gotten everything he had dreamed of on that trip, and now it was gone, probably forever.

"Maybe I should just go back East and start over again," An inner voice suggested. "I've still got quite a bit of money left. I might as well quit while I'm ahead."

"That's just running away," a second voice said. "Do a few setbacks justify taking the easy way out?"

"I'm tired of being tough," the first voice responded. "If I'd just been content with what I had, I wouldn't have lost so much."

"If I'd just been content with what I had, I never would have gotten so much in the first place," the second voice shot back.

"Ah, shut up," the first voice said. He turned up the radio and pushed his foot on the accelerator.

He stopped near Davis to get gas and buy a six-pack of beer, but the beer made him sick to his stomach. He decided that alcohol was not what he really wanted. He wanted women. He remembered the prostitutes on the floor of the Nevada casinos that he'd seen on his trip out. He hadn't had the funds or the courage to approach them then. He had both now. He popped a beer and drove on. He wound the Ferrari up to ninety-five and turned the radar detector on. Ten miles later, the radar detector beeped and he dropped his speed to fifty-five.

He went past the cop smugly. He had nothing to fear. He was a millionaire, not some kid being pulled over by a Wyoming cop. He didn't need to be scared.

Then he remembered the beer. They might arrest him for that. Getting arrested would be a bad way to start his trip. He decided not to have another beer until he got to Nevada.

Deciding that Lake Tahoe was closer than Reno, he turned off Interstate 80 onto US-50. The road began to curve as it climbed into the Sierras. As he swished through the curves, the centrifugal force pressed on his body. Racing through the Sierras briefly exhilarated him, but depressing thoughts about Kube and Stanford soon regained control of his mind. He started to think about Antonia and his depression turned to despair. He looked at the steep drop-offs at the side of the road and wondered if he'd be better off dead.

As he prepared to pass a big motor home parked by the side of the road, he saw a large golden retriever dart out from behind the motor home followed by a boy of seven or eight. He knew he was going too fast to stop. He saw a car coming in the opposite direction. He knew his only chance was to accelerate ahead of the car and attempt to miss the head-on collision. He turned the wheel hard left. He missed the dog and the boy by inches. His hands flailed the steering wheel as he struggled to miss the oncoming car. He managed to get the car back to his side of the road just in time to avoid an accident, but he had pushed the car's steering beyond even its considerable capabilities. The car fishtailed out of control. He slammed on the car's powerful brakes, but it was too late.

He heard tires screech and he felt a large bump as the car went off the road. He covered his face with his hands in anticipation of impact, but nothing happened. With a sigh of tremendous relief, he realized that the back wheels were still on the road. Mike cautiously peered over the hood and saw that the drop was at least two hundred feet. At that moment, he knew he wanted to live.

But the movement of his body had upset the delicate balance that kept the car on the road. He felt the car beginning its fatal slide over the edge. He knew he had only one chance to save himself. He opened the door and jumped out of the car. He missed the ledge by two feet and started to roll down the steep embankment. His body bounced off the rocks like a ping-pong ball. He grabbed a tree trunk and held on with all his strength. He turned his head and watched the car roll several hundred feet down the canyon, crushing the passenger compartment like an aluminum can. He'd expected it to explode like in the movies, but it just laid at the bottom of the gulch, a steaming, useless hunk of metal.

In pain and shock he pulled on the tree root and tried to climb back to the narrow shoulder of the highway. Every movement was painful. His left arm was useless. He realized it was probably broken. He finally reached the road. His vision began to swim as he and tried to stand. He groaned and passed out.

Mike awoke in the hospital. The doctor informed Mike that his injuries were serious, but there was little risk of permanent damage. The list of what he'd broken was impressive. In addition to a collection of nasty scrapes and bruises, he had broken

his left arm and two of his ribs. The concussion accounted for his repeatedly throwing up for the first two hours after regaining consciousness.

"You're pretty lucky," the doctor said. "The police found beer in your car, but fortunately for you, no measurable amount of alcohol in your blood."

Mike blanched at the mention of the police.

"Well you shouldn't have been probably driving so fast, but other than that I'd say you were a goddamn hero. So there won't be any charges," the doctor said.

Mike smiled wanly. Every time he moved, his side hurt, "When can I get out of here?"

"Tomorrow, if we don't see any complications," the doctor said. "Are you in a rush to get somewhere?"

"Not really," Mike said. He didn't want to tell the doctor that all he could think about was going home, having a drink, and feeling better.

After he was discharged from the hospital, Mike took a Greyhound bus back to Palo Alto. When he opened the condo's front door, the stench of garbage assaulted him. He saw the familiar half-gallon of Dewars' on the kitchen counter. Seeing the bottle made him realize that it was almost a week since he'd had a drink. The accident kept flashing through his mind. He wondered what would have happened if he'd been drunk. "What the hell? I wasn't and I survived," he said to himself. He tilted the bottle to his lips and drank.

It was not until he put the bottle down that he realized that he hadn't eaten all day. He rushed to the bathroom, knelt over the toilet bowl and vomited. His body shook. He stayed frozen over the sink for ten minutes. Finally he turned on the faucet and splashed water on his face. He looked up and he didn't like what he saw in the mirror. His shirt was stained, his hair was scraggly, and his face was drawn. He looked a lot older than twenty-six. His Ferrari had joined his other dreams on the junk heap of his life, and there was no reason to think that things were likely to improve.

"Why did you do this to me? Why?" he screamed to God, himself, and no one in particular. At first his screams were defiant, but they soon turned to whimpers. He buried his head in the cushions of the couch and sobbed. Then a voice inside his head, quieter, but deeper than the usual voices said, "You got yourself into this mess. Now stop feeling sorry for yourself and clean it up."

"I can't. I just want to die," he said out loud, still sobbing.

"It doesn't matter," the inner voice said, "You're still alive and you've got to try."

He exhaled sharply, focused his eyes and cleared his mind. The room seemed unnaturally quiet. The apartment looked dirty, dingy, and neglected, but not as

frightening as it had when he'd first come back. He made up his mind not to go back East, but to stay and fight instead. If the inner voice were right, it did not matter where he was, he would have to face himself. The cast on his arm prevented him from taking a shower. He shaved, gave himself a sponge bath, but even after he'd washed himself three times his skin still did not feel completely clean. He rubbed himself dry with a small hand towel, which was one of the few clean things in the apartment. Shivering, he got under the comforter to warm up. After a few minutes he fell asleep.

He awoke at four o'clock in the morning. The quiet in the dark room closed in on him. He felt an overpowering desire to have a drink, but then he remembered the near miss with the child.

He knew he had to stop drinking. He knew that he "should" get help, but he felt that relying on others would mean giving up being different, but as much as he wanted to do it alone, he didn't know if he could.

The reality of not drinking was much harder than making the decision to give it up. Time dragged. He turned on the TV, but there was nothing on. He turned it off and the darkness returned. He tossed and turned, but he could not fall asleep. The sickly light of dawn slowly illuminated the apartment.

Everywhere he looked, there was a mess. The mess in the kitchen was the worst because of its stench. He forced himself to get out of bed and start to clean the kitchen. Even when he'd cleaned the dishes, the counters and floors were still mottled with food stains. He got out a sponge and cleanser and scoured until his right arm hurt. He had never realized how useful his left arm was until he couldn't use it. After he was done scrubbing the floor, he looked up and noticed the light streaming in around the sallow curtain had become the clear sunlight of a California spring day. He went to bed feeling exhausted but victorious.

He woke up in the late afternoon to find his left arm and ribs hurting and his brain starving for alcohol. Trying the method that had worked so well the night before, he scrubbed the bathroom. He took pride in making every surface sparkle. By midnight, the bedroom, as well as the bathroom and kitchen were spotless, but he felt hyper and thirsty for anything with alcohol in it. He went back to cleaning and by two o'clock in the morning, there was only one area of his apartment remaining to be cleaned, his desk. The desk looked like his Ferrari after it had gone over the cliff. He turned to his inner voice for guidance, but it was silent.

He knew the next thing he should clean was the desk, but it was not a simple physical task like washing the dishes or scrubbing the toilet. The desk was a minefield of pain. Piles of papers three layers thick obscured the surface of the desk. Scanning the clutter, he saw his divorce papers were joined to an overdue credit card bill by a sticky stain from a glass of scotch. Just thinking about what might be underneath those papers made him cringe. But the most painful of all the items on the desk was the computer, which was covered by a solid layer of dust.

He sat down. He looked through the memos, documents, and programs left over from Kube. Kube could not be cleaned up. It was dead. He put the papers in a cardboard box and wiped the surface of the desk clean.

He wondered if life would ever be fun again. He looked at his P.C. Once it had been a marvel, a boyhood fantasy made real. Now, the P.C. was just another appliance, not even as desirable as a VCR or microwave. He thought about how his feelings had changed about both computers and women. Why was it that the unattainable, once attained, became the source of so much pain?

He wiped off the computer and booted it up, but none of the software, including the games, excited him. Even playing Adventure was boring. Suddenly, he was not an all-powerful magician fighting dragons and balrogs; he was just a lonely man typing on a keyboard.

When he was at Kube, he'd resented Antonia for stopping him from spending as much time with the computer as he needed to. Now that she was gone and there was nothing to stop him, he had no desire to even turn the computer on. Thinking about Antonia made him want a drink. He considered throwing out everything in his apartment that reminded him of Antonia, but he could not bring himself to do it.

He got up from the computer and turned on the TV. There was nothing on, but he watched it anyway. The only things that had any interest for him were the scantily clad female models that were used to sell everything from perfume to real estate.

William had once compared Silicon Valley to Hollywood. Then, the comment had made Silicon Valley sound glamorous. Now, the comparison made the Valley seem dangerous. He had wondered from time to time how Marilyn Monroe and other beautiful actresses could have been depressed enough to commit suicide. Now, he thought he understood. In Hollywood, they used the bodies of beautiful young women. In Silicon Valley, they used the brains of mathematically gifted young men. In both cases, the person's marketable talents became the sole measure of their value. If a person's marketability faltered, they were casually disposed of and replaced by fresh meat. The human being behind the talent was ignored during the whole process. It was little wonder that a person felt worthless at the end of such a process. But although his analysis sounded good, he still wondered if his criticism of the Valley was just a way of rationalizing his own inability to succeed.

He got up and looked up in the mirror. He noticed the beginnings of crow's feet around his clear blue eyes. He also noticed the beginnings of a slight paunch on his spare frame. He did not need a mirror to show him the saddest truth of all, that he was completely alone and nobody really loved him. He realized the only person he could count on for love was himself. He could not give himself the romantic, erotic, and fulfilling love that Antonia had given him, but he could himself the unconditional and accepting love that a parent has for a child who has just pissed in its pants. He

didn't know exactly how loving himself would help, but it definitely made him feel better.

He turned on the TV, but he still felt awful. The smiling faces on TV didn't love him. They didn't even know he was alive. If he was going to love himself, he was going to have start fulfilling his own dreams, not the dreams other people fed him. He turned the TV off. He sat in the silence. It was uncomfortable, but no longer painful. He shaved, put on clean clothes and went for a walk. The sidewalks were crowded with groups of people, who made him painfully aware of his loneliness, but for the first time in his life he was no longer ashamed of it.

When he got back to his condo, he found a message from Jennifer on his answering machine. After his last encounter with Jennifer, he wasn't sure what to say to her. He hesitated for a moment before returning her call.

He called Jennifer and immediately apologized for his behavior on his last visit. She accepted his apology without hesitation. She asked him why she hadn't seen him on campus. He told her about his grades, his drunken depression, his accident, and his vow to stop drinking. After he finished his story, he expected her to give him some sort of speech, anything from a pep talk to a lecture. But to his surprise, all she said was "I'd like to come right over if that's O.K.?"

He happily agreed.

When she came over, he apologized again for his drunken advances at their last meeting.

"I accept your apology," she said. "You didn't try to touch me when I said no and that's what counts."

"Thanks, Jen," he said. "I really am sorry."

"Fine. Then let's not talk about it anymore," she said firmly. "The past, for better and worse, is over. You can't change the past. You can only change the future."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"I'm not just reciting platitudes," she said, responding to the expression on his face. "I have to face the past every time I have to give Ian his medicine, take him to the doctor, or even watch him get out of breath. The worst thing about the past is that it blinds you to the possibilities of the future. You've got to look at the past, learn what you can from it, and bury it."

"So exactly how does one go about burying the past?" he asked.

Her eyes scanned the room.

“You want some practical help?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

She got up and toured the condo. He followed her, not knowing what to expect. She stopped when entered his study.

“What's in those?” she said, pointing to a stack of cardboard boxes next to the desk.

“Those boxes. Not that!” Mike’s voice was tinged with hysteria. “Please Jen! Looking through those boxes would be torture. You said you were going to help me.”

“I am helping you. Now, what's in those boxes?” she repeated firmly, but quietly.

“Papers from my desk at Kube and from the house in Los Altos Hills,” he answered testily.

“Why are you keeping them?” she asked. The sharpness in her voice matched his.

“There are some useful things in there,” he said.

“Like what?” she asked, knowing he wasn't telling her the whole truth.

“I told you already, useful things!” Now there was panic in his voice.

“Mike, I am trying to help you. If you want practical help instead of platitudes, then take it, otherwise we'll chat like old friends and I'll leave,” she said tightly.

He looked at her with a mixture of hysteria and defiance.

“I'm sorry if I'm being sharp,” she said, “It's only because I know how hard it is to change.”

Mike sighed deeply, “I know you're right. I'll get started right after you leave. Go home and take care of Ian. Give him a hug for me.”

“Mike, are you sure?” she asked.

He pursed his lips tightly and nodded, “Yeah, I'm sure.”

He walked her to the door.

“Thanks Jen,” he said. “I owe you one.”

She smiled. “Hey, I still owe you ten thousand bucks.”

After she left, he was overcome by the realization that he was alone again. He sighed and approached the desk. He lifted a box from the top of the stack and put it on the floor. He opened the lid. It was like opening a coffin. Each sheet of paper brought back painful memories, a late project, an intermittent bug, or a memo from a person he never wanted to see again.

By the time he'd gotten half way through the box, he was emotionally exhausted. He sat at his desk and groaned. Five hours later, when he had examined and filed the last piece paper from the last box, he was filled with a sense of relief that not even drinking had ever given him.