

18.

Two weeks after Mike cleaned his desk, abstaining from alcohol was getting harder, not easier. Not drinking was a requirement for staying alive, but it didn't provide a reason for living. Mike felt loneliness and boredom steadily eroding his will power. He knew that as long as his days had no structure, he would eventually fall back into a cycle of depression, self-pity, self-hate, and drunkenness.

He made two lists. One list itemized what he wanted to do and the other list itemized the things he was good at. Drinking and getting Antonia back headed the list of his desires. Computer programming headed the list of his talents. He wanted to be good at something besides programming, but he was barely even sure if he was still a good programmer.

During his year at Stanford, Mike had lost touch with the latest ideas and trends in the computer industry. When he was working at Rosetta and Kube, he'd had daily conversations with other programmers about the latest advances in computer technology. He missed being in touch with his community, even if it was just a community of computer nerds. As a first step toward rejoining the world of computers, he walked over to a bookstore on University Avenue to read the latest computer magazines.

The current editions of the computer magazines were more professionally produced than the magazines he'd read on the subway, but they lacked the raw energy and excitement of those earlier editions. He wondered why the magic of the personal computer revolution had faded. Personal computers had been more commercially successful than the most optimistic predictions of its early pioneers, but somehow the promise that personal computers would change people's daily lives still hadn't come true.

The magazines were hyping a new computer called the Apple Macintosh. The Mac, as the Macintosh was called, looked different from other personal computers. Unlike most personal computers, which evolved from a typewriter attached to a TV set, the Mac used a mouse and high-resolution graphics as the primary way of selecting and executing commands.

The magazines predicted that the Mac's high-resolution graphics would create a new market for "desktop publishing systems," which was exactly the type of product that he proposed when he and the Li River gang had fought their final battle with Hilton. The articles on desktop publishing showed that his predictions about the future of word processing had been right. Desktop publishing was the technology that would eventually replace word processing. But the articles also bothered him because he had known what was going to happen and hadn't done anything about it.

Still, reading the articles made him curious to see what an actual desktop publishing system looked like. He left the store and drove to Sunflower Computers in Mountain View to test drive an actual Macintosh. The store was decorated with promotional

materials extolling the Macintosh, but seeing the actual computer disappointed Mike. Apple's new computer was smaller and more expensive than the generation of personal computers Mike had used at Kube. Since the Macintosh didn't have a hard disk, the user was continually required to change floppy disks, which made using the computer slow and awkward. The Mac's high-resolution graphics were displayed on a screen smaller than on any other personal computer.

The Mac came with a simple word processor and a computer graphics program but almost no other software was available for it. The Mac's word processor was as primitive as the first version of ThinkWrite that Mike had used in Atlantic City. "Desktop publishing" seemed like just hype.

Despite its shortcomings, Mike liked the Mac. The Mac was a start-up machine. The names of the engineers and programmers who had designed the computer were embossed inside its plastic housing. The mouse encouraged playing with the computer, not just programming it.

Mike played with the Mac while he considered buying the machine. The Mac was expensive and he was feeling poor. The destruction of the Ferrari had been another financial setback. The insurance company had only reimbursed him for a third of the car's replacement value. He didn't want to buy another new car. He didn't feel he deserved a nice one, and he knew buying a cheap one would depress him so he put the insurance money into restoring the Pontiac instead. The old car was one of the few things Mike still believed in.

Mike decided to go home without buying a Mac, but he spent most of the next few days reconsidering his decision. It seemed ridiculous to dip into his Rosetta money to buy another computer when he owned two of them already. Part of him wanted to be done with computers forever. But despite his best efforts, he still couldn't think of anything else he really wanted to do. An inner voice kept suggesting that a drink would free his imagination, but another voice begged for mercy.

"I'll let you buy a new computer if you don't have a drink tonight," the voice pleaded.

"Fuck the computer, let's get blitzed," the other voice answered.

He grabbed his wallet and keys and got in the car. As he approached the liquor store, his desire to have a drink diminished. He was ashamed that he was giving up so easily. He sighed and turned the car back toward the computer store.

Looking at the Mac a second time didn't make him any more excited about buying one. There weren't even any good computer games for it. He played with the machine, idly clicking the mouse and watching windows open and close on the screen.

A saleswoman approached him.

"I remember you from a few days ago. Are there any questions I can answer?" she asked pleasantly.

"Where are the desktop publishing systems?" Mike said, without taking his eyes off the screen.

"On that shelf there," she said, "right between love affairs without pain and politicians who don't lie."

The directness of the saleswoman's comment made Mike notice her. She was a slim woman in her early thirties. Her granny glasses and an old flowing peasant dress accentuated the thinness of her face and figure. Her outfit was fashionable for teenagers ten years ago, but nobody seemed to have told her that times had changed. Her face and body reminded him of Jennifer. Her sarcastic comments reminded him of Brad, but her expression had a basic warmth that Mike had never seen Brad exhibit.

"I guess you mean that the desktop publishing systems don't exist," he said smiling back at her.

"You got it," she said, "but I guess I should have told you that after you bought the machine."

"Don't worry, I'll buy the machine anyway," Mike said. "I'm just a burnt out engineer who used to code word processors. Now, programming is just something I do to keep me out of trouble."

"Which word processor did you work on?" she asked, with apparently sincere interest.

"ThinkWrite," he said. Actually, I did the first version of Real Rosetta."

"Real Rosetta!" she said. "That was the first word processor I ever used. It was a good product."

Mike smiled, "Thank you. I got lucky. After Rosetta I went to a place called Kube."

"I'm sorry, I never heard of that company," she said.

"That was just the problem. Nobody did," he said. "It's part of Tidal Computers now. Sometimes I wish I hadn't heard of Kube either. I started the company with a good friend of mine; at least he was at the time. The company didn't work out. I got some of my original investment back, but it cost me my pride, my self-confidence, my marriage, and almost my life," Mike's voice trailed off as he realized he was blithering to a complete stranger.

She smiled sympathetically and told him about some of the communes she'd lived on when she was a young woman in the early 1970s and about the early "computer cooperatives" that had sprung out of them. They continued talking as she boxed up the Mac. Mike was impressed by her knowledge of the history of the personal computer industry. She seemed genuinely excited by computers. It was the first enjoyable conversation he'd had about computers in a long time.

But Mike was also aware that she used her personality to sell computers. Her selling style reminded him of Omar, but her casual clothes and honest comments made her seem more trustworthy. Mike's experiences during the eight years since he'd first met Omar in Atlantic City had made him extremely suspicious of his first impressions of intelligent business people.

When the Mac had been packed up and paid for, they shook hands and took the computer out to his car. He was glad that she was diplomatic enough to help him load the computer into his car without asking him how he broke his arm.

"Well if there's anything else you need let me know. My name's Paige Braddock," she said, handing him a card. "I own the store. Even if you don't want to buy anything else, come back in a few weeks and tell me how you like the Mac. I'd be interested in your opinion."

Mike went home and set up the Mac. Mike found that the materials required to program the machine were only available directly from Apple. To avoid the delay of doing business by mail, he drove to Apple's headquarters in Cupertino to pick up the manuals and floppy disks required to write programs for the Mac. Programming the Mac was like programming the early personal computers. Since there were almost no programming tools, the work was slow and hard. Mike didn't mind. By keeping his mind off drinking and feeling sorry for himself, the Mac achieved its primary objective. He was so absorbed in his work that when the phone rang, it took him several seconds to realize what the sound was.

"Hello," he said gruffly.

"Hello, Mike," Antonia said.

He was glad she'd called. Over the last several weeks he'd felt increasingly aware of the mistakes he'd made during their marriage. He wished he'd been more sensitive to Antonia's feelings about decorating the house. He not only regretted founding Kube in the first place, but also for sticking with it after he realized that it was poisoning their relationship. Although he was still angry and hurt because she'd left him, he needed to tell her he was sorry.

"I'm glad you called," he said, replacing his earlier gruffness with gentleness. "Are you calling about the divorce? Is there something wrong?"

“No,” she said. “Everything's fine. I was just thinking about you and I decided to call. What's up?”

He told her about leaving school, the accident, and giving up drinking.

“I'm sorry,” she said, biting her lip to keep herself from crying. “Is there anything I can do?”

He wanted to ask her to come back, but he knew it was futile, so he said, “No. I'm handling it. What's happening in your life?”

“I'm in New York for a few days trying to sell my paintings,” she said. “Doris, the owner of the gallery where I had my first show, says I'm improving. She says that I might even be a really great artist someday. She got a friend of hers to put one of my paintings in a restaurant in SoHo. I don't think you ever saw that particular painting. It's a picture of a trash can full of computers.”

The vision of a computer in a garbage can hit a raw nerve. He decided to change the subject.

“I'm glad your paintings are starting to be successful,” he said after a moment's silence. “Where are you staying in New York?” he asked.

Now it was Antonia's turn to hesitate. She didn't want to tell Mike that she was staying in Klaus's loft, much less sleeping in Klaus's bed. She didn't feel comfortable telling Mike how much she liked the loft with its paintings, sculptures, art books, antique toys, old props from Broadway plays, and other wonderful knickknacks.

The loft's vast interior reminded her of the house in Los Altos Hills. Her mind recalled the magnificent vistas, stormy arguments, and romantic nights that would forever be associated with that part of her life. Since she'd been living on her own, she'd realized how hard Mike tried to make her happy and how much she'd hurt him by leaving. She didn't want to hurt him more by telling him what she had been unable to tell anyone else including herself, that she was falling in love with Klaus.

“I'm staying with a friend,” she said.

“Is your friend a man?” Mike asked. He knew he shouldn't have asked the question, but it had slipped out before he could stop himself.

“I don't want to talk about that,” she said.

“Sure. I understand,” he said tightly.

Neither of them could think of anything else to say. After a period of uncomfortable silence, they exchanged goodbyes.

The conversation revived Mike's feeling of failure. He hadn't even gotten a chance to talk to her about the mistakes he'd made during their marriage. Jealousy had overpowered him before he'd even figured out how to bring up the subject. He'd wanted to try to build some sort of friendship with her and once again he had only succeeded in pushing her farther away than ever.

He booted up the Mac, which was the only company he could count on to take him through the long sober night. He brushed a small tear from the corner of his eye as he loaded a game into the computer. In his despair, his recovery from alcoholism also seemed like little more than a game. He wanted to spend his life accomplishing something, not just avoiding fermented plants. He compared his life to Antonia's. Her life seemed full of hope, while his seemed to have no future.

As he waited for the computer to make its next move, his depression exploded into anger. He banged the keyboard and swore at the Mac, "I don't know why I bought this stupid computer. There isn't even any good software for it."

He was starting to go over to his other computer to play Adventure when he realized the implication of his words. Suddenly he felt frustration and anger being rinsed out of his mind by the calming logic of an important insight.

He slowly repeated his words aloud, "I don't know why I bought this stupid computer. There isn't even any good software for it." Desktop publishing was being sold as one of the primary applications for the Mac, yet there weren't any desktop publishing systems actually on the market. Mike had initially supposed that the lack of software was caused by the usual delays involved in producing software. But now that he had actually programmed the Mac, he knew the delays were going to be even longer than usual.

Fitting a desktop publishing system on the Mac was at least as big a challenge as fitting word processors like ThinkWrite on the early P.C.s. The handful of programmers who knew how to develop desktop publishing systems were used to working with far much more powerful computers than the Mac. These programmers would take a long time to get adjusted to a small underpowered computer like the Mac. On the other hand, people who were used to hacking personal computers probably didn't know much about desktop publishing systems, which were developed in the cloistered world of corporate research. Mike realized that he was probably one of the few people in the world who had experience in both desktop publishing and hacking small computers.

He thought that numbering himself as "one of the few people in the world" might be an egotistical exaggeration. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized that it might actually be true. Mike was also inspired by Brad's motto that success was just a matter of being in the right place at the right time. But while he had developed considerable respect for Brad's cynical opinions, Mike knew that being in the right place in the right time was not the whole story.

These thoughts had an almost inescapable conclusion, starting his own desktop publishing company. Mike approached founding a company like a shell-shocked veteran considering reenlistment. Yet, as he looked at the Mac, it seemed to radiate opportunity. The conflicting voices started.

“Am I fucking crazy? How can I even think about doing a start-up after Kube?” the voice of reason said.

“This one will be different, I feel it,” the other whispered.

“That's what all miserable gamblers say. I knew enough to walk out of the casinos when I was eighteen, am I getting dumber?” the first voice said angrily.

“No, I'm getting smarter,” the other voice replied. “I'm learning to tell the winners from the losers.” He wished he knew which voice to believe.

The arguments raging in his mind prevented him from sleeping well that night, but he woke up the next morning with a compromise. He decided to develop a desktop publishing system without forming a company. If he could sell his software to local computer stores, then, and only then, he would consider formally going into business. If nobody were interested in buying his software, he would go no further and avoid the agony of starting an unsuccessful company. The key feature of this plan was that he was only gambling his time, which he could afford to lose because he wasn't doing much else anyway. The more he thought about programming again, the more excited he got. He was happier than he'd been in over a year, not just drunk, or just glad to be alive, but deeply and intensely happy.

That night, he started designing his desktop publishing system. He named the system Galadriel, after the queen in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* who provided a magic light as a tool for journeying safely through Mordor, Tolkien's version of hell.

He worked on Galadriel for ten weeks, working an average of fourteen hours a day. The skin of his left arm had begun to itch under the cast and was starting to drive him crazy, but this was a minor irritation compared to the satisfaction of watching Galadriel come to life. Tommy had once told him that the third version of any program was usually the best. The first version contained all the beginner's mistakes. The second version had every possible feature and was usually too unwieldy to use. The third version included all of the useful features and none of the beginner's mistakes. The third version was when a programmer got it right. Galadriel was Mike's third word processor. As Galadriel came to life, Mike saw the truth of Tommy's proverb.

Working on Galadriel made not drinking much easier. The only two things that made him want a drink were getting stuck on a bad bug or thinking about Antonia being with another man.

By the time he got the cast off his broken arm, Mike had developed Galadriel as much as he could without buying a laser printer. The dot matrix printer made Galadriel's output look so coarse and ugly that it made a joke out of the phrase "desktop publishing." He'd read about the new Apple laser printers that produced extremely high quality documents, but a laser printer cost five thousand bucks and money was tight.

He went back to Sunflower Computers to see if he could get a discount on a laser printer.

He offered Paige thirty-five hundred dollars for the laser printer, but she just laughed and said, "No way."

"How many of these are you selling if you can't even sell the Macs?" he said.

"Not many," she laughed again, but this time more self-consciously.

"Any new software for the Mac?" Mike asked.

"These Apple salesmen keep telling me there will be lots of new software soon," she shrugged. She wasn't being charming now. She was being a tough businessperson.

"You and I know both what the promises of a software salesman are worth if the product isn't ready," he said.

She smiled, but it was not her charming smile. It was an involuntary admission that he was right.

"How do I you're just not another software salesman?" she said.

"Because I have a demonstrable product," he said.

He smiled and produced three floppy disks.

"It had better be pretty slick," she said with her arms folded over her thin chest.

"It is." He smiled and began to demo Galadriel.

The demo impressed Paige. She invited Mike to her house in Mountain View on the following Sunday to discuss buying the software.

When Mike arrived, he found Paige on the lawn doing what looked karate in slow-motion.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Tai Chi," she said. "It's an ancient Chinese form of exercise. It relaxes me."



Mike didn't say anything, but the strangeness of Tai Chi made him uncomfortable about the prospect of doing business with her. Paige Braddock's "house" was actually a small cottage that was built before World War II. The rooms were small and irregular, but her casual style of decorating gave the place a homey aspect.

The only thing that didn't fit in with Paige's neat, feminine style was a pair of jeans thrown casually over the back of a chair. The legs of the jeans were much too long to belong to Paige. When Paige saw Mike looking at the jeans, she blushed and quickly put them in her bedroom. From her reaction, Mike thought the jeans must belong to her boyfriend, but Mike couldn't have cared less. He'd come to talk about selling his product, not to seduce her. After exchanging pleasantries, he offered her the software for fifty dollars a copy.

She said nothing. She looked at him in the silence across the brim of her steaming teacup.

The silence began to annoy him.

The sight of Paige sipping her tea made him long for a scotch. He wondered if he was going to be able to keep sober if he had to exchange the company of computers for the company of business people.

"What's wrong?" Mike demanded impatiently. "I know we haven't worked out the details, but I think it's basically a good deal. Do you want to buy my software or not?"

"Yes I think your desktop publishing software is great," she said, "but no I don't want to buy it. Yet. You haven't thought out the business side well enough. I can't let myself do business with somebody who isn't going to be able to provide the support I need."

"Fine. I'll go somewhere else," Mike said and got up to leave.

He was not about to compromise himself. He'd heard enough lectures from his colleagues at Kube about "the way business was done." He had a product that was worth more than the business bullshit.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Please sit down. I really think your software's great. I just want your company to be around to support my customers. The questions that I'm asking are the same ones that any computer storeowner who's going to pay his or her bills is going to ask you. You might as well go through them with me first. Then you can ask seventy-five dollars a copy from your next customer."

He sat back down. Her last comment was a little too slick, but it had a ring of truth. He decided to hear her out, but he promised himself that he would not take any of her advice unless he slept on it for at least two days.

“Do you have a business plan?” she asked.

“No, and I don't want one,” he said. “I wrote one with my old partner, but that's exactly when our relationship and our company turned into bullshit and bureaucrats. The plan encouraged delusions of grandeur that eventually forced me to ship our product before it was ready.”

“That wasn't the plan's fault,” she said quietly. “It was the author's fault and possibly your partner's. I hate bullshit and bureaucrats at least as much as you do, but you have to think about a business before you set it up. You wouldn't write a program without thinking about it first, would you?”

“No,” he laughed, “but a business isn't a program. A business doesn't always follow the plan.”

“Nor does a program,” she said.

“What difference does it make to you whether I'm successful or not?” he said, trying to put the conversation back on his terms.

“Because if I'm selling your product, my success depends on your success and I want to be successful,” she said.

He didn't quite believe her answer, but he decided not to pursue it. He'd come for a business negotiation, not for a philosophical debate. Mike shifted the conversation back to practical business issues.

When the discussion was almost over, Paige asked, “Do you still want the laser printer?”

“Not for more than thirty-five hundred dollars,” he said. “I'm a registered software developer at Apple. They'll probably give me a direct discount.”

He wasn't going to start his business by giving anything away. She agreed to his price.

Mike went home to digest the conversation. He realized he was at a true crossroads. He could either abandon Galadriel or found a start-up. He had promised himself that he wouldn't start a business unless he had proven there was demand for the product, but Paige's reaction was ambiguous. He would have to wait until the product was complete for a definitive answer.

He spent the next four weeks finishing the laser printer interface and producing a simple manual. Since he had painstakingly designed Galadriel from the beginning with the laser printer in mind, the laser printer interface was not too hard. When the interface was finished, he took Galadriel around to a selection of Macintosh dealers in the Bay Area. Even at a price of a hundred and twenty-five dollars per copy, they

were definitely interested. They almost all asked the questions that Paige had asked, but they didn't seem as concerned about the answers as she was. One of the stores wanted to place an order for twenty copies on the spot. Mike practically had to force the owner to keep his money.

Galadriel had passed its initial test. Now he was faced with the serious prospect of starting a business. He had bought the Mac as part of a way of putting his life back together. Running a business was a potential enemy to his newly won peace of mind. He considered walking away from Galadriel, but he thought, "Am I going to let my life be so dominated by my past that in the end I'll wish that even the good parts hadn't happened?"

Galadriel seemed like an excellent opportunity for a new beginning. He promised himself to make preservation of his sanity the guiding principle in building his business. But even as he made this vow, he wondered if philosophy, attitude, or even product really had anything to do with success or if they were just part of the superstitious folklore of people who'd made it to the top for other reasons.

He decided to look at the problem of success scientifically, by drawing his conclusions from his experience. When he compared Rosetta's history with Kube's, he reached the obvious, but powerful, conclusion that success was less stressful than failure. Running any business, successful or not, was hard enough. But running an unsuccessful business meant shouldering the burden of failure as well as the burden of hard work.

He felt the best way to succeed was totally dedicate himself to the business. He also knew that if he wanted to succeed in business, he could not afford to be caught in the no win situation that had existed when Antonia and Kube were vying for his soul. The battle had nearly destroyed him and in the end he had lost them both. Life without a woman seemed difficult and unnatural, but his mind provided logical reasons to support it, "Last time I chose love over computers and I lost. Maybe it's worth gambling on computers this time. Anyway, money lasts longer than love," he thought ruefully. He felt a part of himself cringe at the thought, but he also knew it was a part of growing up like becoming too old to believe in Santa Claus.

Celibacy was only one condition for success. Money was another. He had almost one and half million dollars in various bank accounts and investments. If managed it well, he could live on it for a long time without working, but a business could consume that amount in no time. If he gambled his money and lost, he would be left with only a high school diploma to show for his life's work. He didn't want his remaining fortune to end up like his Ferrari.

The thought of his Ferrari started a forest fire of hysteria in his brain. He checked his frustration with cold logic. Emotional outbursts were a luxury he couldn't afford. He decided to write a business plan, not one based on wishes, fears, or tradition, but on logic.

He decided to use a spreadsheet program to find out exactly what had to be done to make a profit. Since there was no spreadsheet software for the Mac, he had to go over to his other personal computer. He realized that the Mac and the laser printer were largely useless without a software package like Galadriel to take advantage of it. He thought, "If the laser printer listed for five thousand dollars, why should my software sell for less than two hundred dollars retail of which I'll only see ninety?" He decided to set Galadriel's retail price of at five hundred and ninety-nine dollars a copy. He set the wholesale price at two hundred and seventy dollars a copy. The new prices were high, but since he had the only product on the market, he could name his price.

Since each copy of Galadriel only cost him twenty dollars to make, he would make a net profit of slightly over two hundred and fifty dollars on every copy he sold. If he sold three hundred copies a year, which was only six copies a week, he would make a profit of seventy-five thousand dollars a year. While it was not a fortune, it was certainly enough to live on comfortably. He fantasized about selling two thousand copies a month and entered it into the spreadsheet.

When Mike changed the projected sales figures to twenty-five thousand copies a year, the spreadsheet showed an annual profit of over six million dollars. While the projected profits looked enticing, bitter experience had taught him that a spreadsheet was more than just a collection of random numbers. He forced himself to quickly erase his fantasy spreadsheet. His experiences in Silicon Valley had taught him that dreaming of millions was not always the best way to make them.

Besides, he knew if he wanted to make millions, he would need to invest a sizeable amount of money, either his own or a venture capitalist's. While the financial rewards of a larger company might be greater, the risks associated with both these sources of capital were unacceptable. He remembered that Omar, after raising the initial money for developing ThinkWrite, had built Rosetta completely on profits. He decided it was a good example to follow.

For the first time since he'd left Rosetta, he felt like was really back on the road to success. All he had to do was focus himself. The potency of the start-up was in the clarity of its vision. A thousand monks in a monastery couldn't get pregnant, no matter how much sexual activity they engaged in. But the last five years had taught him that building a successful company required was as much about corporate politics as well as doing it right. He decided that if sliming around the boardroom were a requirement for success then he would just have to learn how.

But his conscience ambushed his plans. He knew it was this substitution of sleaze for skill that caused so many successful companies in the Valley to burn out so quickly. When he reached the point where he couldn't handle it, he promised himself that would get out, no matter how tempting it was to retain control. But until that day, it would be his company and he would keep on top of everything. He began by making a list of the promises he'd made.

1. Not to betray his friends or his future.
2. To do his best to be successful.
3. To avoid sexual relationships.
4. To live on profits.
5. To learn the skills of business.
6. To quit when the job got too big.

Looking at the list of these six promises made Mike feel like he was doing things right, but he laughed at himself when he realized that he hadn't even named the company. He decided to avoid the legal expense of formal incorporation and simply registered RollTop Software as a sole proprietorship, the cheapest and simplest way of starting a business in California. He chose a name from a comment someone had made during a demo. "All those little boxes look like an old rolltop desk." RollTop Software was officially founded two weeks later.

His first official act as RollTop's proprietor was to go to the software stores and test his new pricing. The trip was a mixed success. Many of the storeowners who were eager to buy his software on his first visit now gave him a chilly reception. None of the stores were willing to buy anything at the new price, but every store he visited wanted him to leave one demonstration copy and one copy on consignment. By the end of the week, five of the stores including Paige's had sold at least one copy and were reordering. In his first week in business, he had sold eleven copies and had made a profit of over three thousand dollars. The storeowners asked for more features and told him rumors about when his competitors were scheduled to bring out their products. They also talked about promotional campaigns, credit policies, and other terms he only partially understood. He stopped at the bookstore on the way home to read up on these concepts.

Although Mike was pleased with RollTop's sales, he realized he had done very little programming in the last three weeks. If he were really going to stay on top of the business, he would need somebody to help him technically. His experience with Jurgen had made him want to hire somebody he'd already worked with and therefore he knew he could trust.

He went down the list of trustworthy and competent people he'd worked with. Paul was in Taiwan. Brad was brilliant but too difficult. He called Tommy, but he was busy on another job. There was nobody left on the list. He decided to call Roger and find out if any of Roger's friends from M.I.T. had moved to Silicon Valley. A friend of Roger's was more likely to be competent and trustworthy than a total stranger.

Mike had apologized to Roger for the phone call he'd made shortly before his accident, but relations between them were still stiff. Roger's life was centered on planning his upcoming wedding. Mike still couldn't think about marriage without pain, so he found it difficult to be genuinely enthusiastic. He practiced congratulatory lines and dialed Roger's number.

Instead of being in his usually upbeat mood, Roger was depressed.

"I got denied a promotion at work," Roger said. "Those slimy bastards told me I had it. First, they told me it was just a matter of paperwork. Then, it was just procedural delays. Today, they introduced me to my new boss. I came home and had this huge fight with Kirsten. Now the wedding's off."

"That sucks," Mike said. "I'm sure you can make up with Kirsten."

"I'm not even sure I want to," Roger said. "When I was waiting for the train home tonight, I sat in the station looking at the faces of the commuters rushing by. None of them looked happy. I started to wonder why all these people settle for a paycheck and a roll in the hay with the same partner every two weeks. My parents settled for that and they don't look too happy. I want to be something more than a big fat sheep who's let out to graze so the Internal Revenue Service can shear his wool every April fifteenth."

Mike had made similar observations himself, but he felt that it was far more important to make his friend feel better than to celebrate the victory of own philosophy.

"Hey, you're not like that," Mike said. "You have a master's from M.I.T.!"

"So do thousands of other people," Roger said. "Most of them work in dead end jobs like me. Remember that night on the roof before you left for California? I wish I'd gone with you."

"Look what happened to me out here," Mike said.

Roger laughed. "You got to drive a Ferrari and live in a mansion with an extremely beautiful woman. You still have enough money so that you don't have to work. You pulled yourself back from the brink of alcoholism and a nervous breakdown. You've worked on products that people pay to use. Now, you're starting your own company. I don't think that's such a bad record."

"I guess that's true," Mike said. "I just I never think about it that way, but I didn't call about me. I called you about my company. I'm looking for a programmer. I was wondering if you could recommend any of your former classmates."

"How about me?" Roger asked.

“Roger!” Mike said. “California is the land of the earthquake. I have no guarantee this company is going to work out. Even if they denied you a promotion at the lab, you still have a nice stable job.”

“Compared to AIDS, nuclear war, and the other risks of modern life, losing my job is a risk I'm willing to live with,” Roger said. “If RollTop doesn't work out. I'll find another job out there. I feel like I need a new start and I'm asking you as a friend to help me.”

“Look what working together did to my friendship with William,” Mike said.

“I have faith that our friendship is stronger than that,” Roger countered.

Mike stopped to think. His friend was serious. Mike remembered how Roger was always telling him to follow society's rules. He hated that sermon. Now that the situations were reversed, he didn't want to be a hypocrite and give Roger that same sermon. Roger met all the criteria for the job. He could even live in the spare bedroom of the condo. It might even be fun.

“If you really want to work for me, then you've got a job,” Mike said.

They discussed salary and the mechanics of moving. Mike was half hoping that something insurmountable obstacle would come up during the negotiation, but Roger remained reasonable and enthusiastic.

“O.K., we've got a deal,” Mike said after they'd settled the terms of Roger's employment. “When can you be out here?”

Six weeks later, Mike was at San Francisco Airport waiting to meet Roger's plane. As the passengers walked up the jetway, Mike scanned the crowd for Roger, but to Mike's surprise, he saw Antonia instead. She was wearing a flowing cotton dress with her hair tied back with a ribbon. She was beautiful. He was suddenly conscious of how he must look in his stained T-shirt and ragged blue jeans. Mike also became aware that Antonia was traveling with someone, a tall, lean, stylishly dressed man in his mid-thirties.

“Mike!” Antonia's said with friendly, but reserved, surprise.

Mike was still in shock and looking at her companion.

“Mike, this is Klaus,” she said slowly, trying to defuse the awkwardness of the situation.

Out of politeness and respect for Antonia, Mike offered his hand to Klaus.

Klaus returned the gesture with a dint of a smirk.

“How are you doing?” Antonia said.

“Fine,” Mike said. “I’m starting a little company.”

“That’s great,” she said. She didn’t know what else to say.

Mike saw Klaus tugging at Antonia’s hand.

“I’ve got to go,” Antonia said. “It’s been great to see you. Call me when you get a chance.”

She smiled, waved, and walked away. As his eyes followed her walk through the terminal, he knew he had never wanted anyone or anything as much as he wanted her. He felt the pain that was failure, the pain of losing everything start to fill his body all over again.

“Well, don’t roll out the red carpet on my account,” Roger said, catching Mike off guard.

Mike’s unexpected encounter with Antonia had made him momentarily forget that he was at the airport to meet his friend.

“I’m sorry,” Mike said, blushing with embarrassment. “Welcome to Silicon Valley. I just unexpectedly ran into Antonia, and it sort of knocked the wind out of me.”

Roger smiled brightly and put an arm around Mike’s shoulder. He said, “Cheer up. We’re in California and we’re going to have a great time.”

“Yeah,” Mike said absently, his gaze still tracking Antonia’s departing figure. “What else could possibly happen?”