

20.

Mike sat in his car fingering the invitation to Antonia's opening. The invitation's frayed edges were the physical testimony to the number of times he'd changed his mind in the four weeks since he'd received it. Now, sitting in his car across the street from the San Francisco art gallery where the opening was being held, he was still thinking of reasons not to go in.

He told himself that since Antonia hadn't provided the support he'd needed at Kube, he wasn't obliged to support her now. But he knew this argument was just petty bullshit. The real reason was that he didn't want to see her because he was still in love with her. He knew that seeing her and not being able to have her would only open the old wounds again. But he knew he loved her more than he wanted her, which meant that he had to be there for her, even if it hurt. He inhaled deeply and got out of the car.

The art gallery was located in a converted warehouse in San Francisco's industrial area south of Market Street. The warehouse's large interior had been crudely partitioned into several large rooms. Mike entered the gallery and looked around the first room. Antonia was not there.

He looked over the paintings hanging on the walls. They obviously belonged to one of the artists in the show. He did not know much about art, but the quality of the paintings revealed that their creators were in the netherworld between amateur and professional.

A woman in her late forties came up to Mike.

"What do you think?" the woman asked.

"I don't know much about art," Mike said. "I'm here because my ex-wife is showing her paintings."

The woman's face brightened.

"You must be Mike Danzig," she said.

Mike nodded.

"Antonia speaks very highly of you. I'm Doris Kaplan. Antonia had a sketch in a group show in my gallery in New York. I don't know if you remember."

Mike nodded again. He didn't really want to talk to Doris, especially about that period in his life. On the other hand, talking to somebody made him feel less out of place.

"Do you think Antonia has talent?" Mike asked Doris.

“Talent,” Doris chuckled, “is not the issue. So many people have talent, but very few people ever really make it, especially women. The art establishment finds it hard to take women seriously.”

“So what does it take to really make it?” Mike asked, wanting to keep the discussion on neutral territory.

“It depends on how you want to make it. You can make it by going to the right parties and knowing the right people, but these things change and artists that make it this way usually don't last. But lots of artists still use the old-fashioned route to success. An artist has a flash of inspiration. The artist then spends hours alone in a studio devoted to bringing that inspiration to life.”

“It sounds like the computer business,” Mike said. “Do you think Antonia is one of the great ones?”

“Maybe,” she said. “It's still too early to tell-“

Doris's comment made him think about RollTop's fate. The conversation was becoming uncomfortable. He smiled at Doris and excused himself.

Mike walked into the next room. He saw Antonia standing with Klaus and Shevaun in front of a large painting. Mike had an instinctive desire to retreat into the previous room, but he summoned his courage and approached Antonia and her friends. As he got closer, he regretted his decision. He could tell by the way Antonia and Klaus stood together that they were enjoying each other in bed.

Antonia had never looked more beautiful. Mike wondered if he would ever be able to love another woman. He'd hoped that sobering up would diminish the pain of seeing her, but instead it made him remember why he'd started drinking. He looked at the large bottle of wine on the table and thought about having a glass. The temptation was cut short when Antonia spotted him.

“Mike!” Antonia exclaimed happily. “I'm so glad you came.”

“Hello, Antonia,” Mike said stiffly.

Mike exchanged stiff greetings with Klaus and Shevaun, who in spite of their casual clothes, managed to look elegant. Mike felt out of place, but he tried not to let it show.

Antonia sensed Mike's discomfort and led him away from Klaus and Shevaun.

“Thank you for coming,” Antonia said. “I didn't know if you would.”

“I thought about not showing up,” he said, “but I wanted to make sure you had as much support as possible.”

"I appreciate that," she said. "I was pretty worried about the opening, but Klaus told me I was being silly. He said nobody's career was ruined by a bad opening, particularly at a group show."

Mike winced at the mention of Klaus's name. "He's pretty famous, so I'd guess he would know, but I'd be nervous if I were in your shoes. I'm sure even Klaus was nervous at his first opening?"

Antonia laughed, "He says he's never nervous at openings because he knows his stuff is good."

"That sounds pretty arrogant, even by Silicon Valley standards," Mike said, glad to be able to have a chance to get a dig in on Klaus.

Antonia wanted to tell Mike that she appreciated Klaus's confidence. She liked the way Klaus took care of her. It was a nice change from the way she'd babied Mike toward the end of their marriage. Klaus's self-confidence was not the only thing she liked about him. Klaus's intimate knowledge of art and the art world had been invaluable in putting her show together. Best of all, when Klaus made love to her, she felt like every cell in her body was suffused with peaceful satisfaction.

Shevaun had urged Antonia not to get involved with Klaus so soon after leaving Mike. Antonia knew her friend was right, but she had allowed herself to fall completely in love with Klaus anyway. Antonia looked at Mike. He looked like he was getting back on his feet and she didn't want to hurt him, so she changed the subject.

"Do you get to San Francisco much?" she asked.

"No," Mike said glumly. He knew she was avoiding the subject of her involvement with Klaus and he knew why.

"AIDS has really changed the whole scene since we used to go the JetAge," she said. "People seemed to have split into two camps, the safe and the reckless. The safe camp seems to be gaining ground fast. People are afraid of casual sex and they're turning back to romance as an alternative. I see it reflected in women's fashions. Evening dresses and lace are replacing leather and safety pins."

"Sex always involves risk, whether its casual or not," he said. "The safest sex is no sex. I'm involved with my new company and I'm not going to get involved with anyone. Business and love don't mix."

"You need love," Antonia said with an expression of concern. "Don't give up on it just because it didn't work out between us."

Mike shrugged. He didn't want to talk about it.

"I'm serious," she said, pressing her point.

Now it was his turn to change the subject.

"How's Shevaun?" he asked.

"Pretty good," Antonia said, exhaling deeply. "Richard's business isn't doing so well though. He built a bunch of office parks in the Valley and now he can't rent them."

Mike nodded. "The computer business isn't so great either," he said. "That's probably why Richard can't rent his buildings. I'm glad to see you're doing well. I'm sorry I didn't give you more support when we were married. I was too ignorant and too buried in my own life to know any better." He looked at her with eyes that brimmed with difficult emotion. "I hope Klaus is more supportive than I was."

Antonia knew the last sentence was a signal that Mike was getting ready to leave. She took his hand. The touch aroused him. He fought back the feeling.

"I guess I'll get going," he said. "Well, I just wanted to drop by and make sure that you knew that there are lots of people out there rooting for you."

"Thanks," she said. She stood there and watched him leave. Then she walked back to her guests who were formed in a knot around Klaus.

The workday fell into a regular rhythm at RollTop. Mike found a competent young woman to answer the phone and give the basic sales pitch to perspective customers. Roger handled most of the customers' technical questions. When Roger was not on the phone, he was fixing bugs and adding features, but the investment they'd made in Galadriel's quality meant that Roger was free to concentrate his efforts on improving the product, not fixing it.

Paige's system for processing orders cleaned up the mess and prevented it from growing back, which left Mike free to spend his days talking to his customers. Through these conversations, Mike got to know his customers and began to like talking to them. Although business was steady, it was no longer growing. He had reserved an evening of Paige's time to discuss ways of increasing business.

Paige came in for her shift carrying two bags of groceries.

"What's that?" Mike said peevishly, secretly wishing Paige had bought a six-pack of beer.

"Dinner. If you collapse from malnutrition, I'll lose my night job."

Mike groaned and returned to work.

"I didn't know you were diversifying into biotechnology," she said as she started throwing away mold-caked pieces of cheese and rotten heads of lettuce from Mike's refrigerator.

"Get to the point Paige," Mike said.

"Wait for me to finish cooking dinner. You'll need a full stomach when you hear what I've got to say."

On that ominous note, Paige rifled through Mike's kitchen for a frying pan, and started stir-frying some vegetables while Mike fidgeted anxiously. Fifteen minutes later, Paige sat down with three plates of hot food.

Roger emerged from his bedroom, and the three of them sat around the kitchen table eating and joking. Mike noticed for the first time that Paige had a pretty smile. He pushed the thought out of his mind by remembering Antonia and why he'd made his vow of celibacy.

"Roger, could you give me a few minutes alone with Mike?" Paige said, when they were finished eating.

Mike and Roger exchanged glances.

"I guess I could use the exercise," Roger said. He left the condo in a minor sulk.

"O.K. What's up with all the cloak and dagger stuff?" Mike demanded.

"The Mac market is collapsing," Paige said. "I've got a friend at Apple. He says Mac sales are going down every month. There's a political war going on in the executive suite and there are rumors about layoffs and worse."

"So what," Mike said. "I've got orders for four hundred copies."

"How much do people owe you for orders that you've already shipped? You'd better figure that some of those orders will never be paid for."

"O.K., but with my profit margins I can afford to take a hit/" he said.

"The decline of the Mac is only one problem. The other problem is new competition," she said. "Three new companies came to see me with desktop publishing products. Their list prices were about the same as Galadriel's, but they offered me better discount and credit terms. Plus, they had lots of money for advertising, free technical support, and slick promotional campaigns. In short, they're gathering resources to fight a war with you as their target."

"Galadriel's gotten great reviews," Mike interrupted. "In this business, product is more important than advertising. I think I can fend off the competition."

Even as the words left his mouth, Mike remembered that Hilton had said almost exactly the same thing about Rosetta's competitors. If he let the pattern repeat itself, RollTop would fail for the same reasons that Rosetta had, without even enjoying Rosetta's intermediate success. Mike knew if wanted to keep history from repeating itself, he would have to change.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," Mike said. "Please continue."

"Even if you get another review like AppleSeed's," Paige said, "it won't have the same kind of impact. The only way you're going to be able to fight back is by investing money in promoting Galadriel, which means quite a bit of investment up front."

Mike considered what Paige was saying. He'd been thinking about the necessity of expanding. Growth was also pushing the limits of space in Mike's apartment. He had rented the apartment for himself, not for Roger along with a thousand floppy disks, three hundred binders, four computers, and a receptionist. Still, he didn't want to gamble the rest of his capital.

"Can't I use the orders as collateral for bank loans?" he said.

"It's difficult," she said. "First, since RollTop hasn't been in business for two years, most banks won't even talk to you. Second, lots of your orders are from little computer stores that most banks don't even recognize. Even if you got the loan, you'd have to pay it back, not to mention that the interest payments will cut into your profits. You might as well use your own money. At least you won't pay interest."

"What are you leading up to Paige?" Mike said.

"I recommend that you save your own money and raise venture capital," she said.

Mike was silent. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. He wanted a drink, badly. He didn't want to fund RollTop out of his own pocket, but when Paige mentioned venture capital, all he could think of was Kube.

"Venture capital warps a business," Mike said. "All those guys ever think about is 'exiting the investment', that's business-speak for selling out. An entrepreneur selling stock to a venture capitalist is like a cow applying for a job at McDonald's. It just isn't much of a future."

Paige couldn't help smiling. She knew it was going to be a tough sale, but she rose to the challenge.

"What kind of future is fighting an army with three people and consultant?" she asked. "You've got the lead on the competition now, but they have the muscle. Build strength now while RollTop is still profitable and the competition hasn't entered the market yet."

Paige seemed to intuitively understand business the way he understood the evolution of technology. He had tried to develop that understanding. While he was getting better, he also knew it would never be second nature for him. "You're right as usual," he said, "but I have another suggestion. You should work here full time."

"I already have a business," she said quietly.

"RollTop is going to need space and computers. You have both. You're breaking even on a good month. Why not sell it?" he asked.

"Thanks for the offer," she said. "I'll certainly think about it. But whatever I do, you've got a decision to make about if and how you're going to grow the business. But this is too important a decision for either of us to make now. Why don't we both think about it? I'm going home to get some sleep."

He nodded. Goddamn it, he hated when she was right.

Mike woke up with a headache the next morning. The headache intensified when two of his customers cancelled their orders. The phone rang. The receptionist hadn't come in yet. He wasn't going to even answer it, but he saw that it was his personal line, not RollTop1s. He picked up the phone, hoping it wasn't bad news. From the moment he heard the panic in Jennifer's voice he knew it was.

"What's wrong, Jennifer?" he asked.

"I took Ian to the hospital last week for some tests," she said in a voice that people use when they describe a horrible accident. "Ian's fine, but when I was there I found that Brad was in the hospital. Brad's sick Mike, really sick."

She started to cry.

"Is there anything I can do?" he said, temporarily forgetting about RollTop's problems.

"Yes," she said sniffing back to composure, "come with me to see Brad tomorrow. He needs his friends now."

Mike had learned a lot from Brad, but Mike wasn't sure if he thought of Brad as a friend. But it was Jennifer, not Brad, who had asked Mike to go so he said yes.

Mike and Jennifer visited Brad in the San Francisco General Hospital AIDS ward the next day. The ward scared Mike. Visitors were required to wear facemasks so they wouldn't infect the patients with diseases that they were no longer immune to. Men with purplish-blue patches on their wasted bodies lay in their beds surrounded by machinery that was engaged in a doomed battle to keep them alive. Brad looked like

one of the healthier patients in the ward. Mike was terrified, but he felt he owed it to Brad to be cheerful.

"I don't why they don't just let us die," was the first thing that Brad said.

"You can't die because you have to work in my new start-up," Mike said, trying to be as upbeat as possible.

Brad laughed, which made him start coughing. A tall, slender but apparently healthy man in his late twenties comforted Brad.

"Be careful," the tall man warned Mike.

"Alex," Brad said in his familiar deadpan voice. "If God had wanted you to be a nervous woman, he would have given you a pussy. Leave us alone so I can talk to my old friend."

Mike was glad to see the old Brad back in action. Mike was also pleasantly surprised that Brad called him an old friend.

"Jennifer told me about your start-up," Brad said. "I wish you luck, but I don't think I can work for you. I would have worked for you at Kube if it weren't for William. You were always naive, that's why I initially didn't like you. When I saw you had a genuine love for your work I came to respect you, but I guess was a little bit jealous too. I wanted to enjoy my work as much as you did. The only thing I could enjoy that much was men."

"The whole time we were working together I didn't even know you were gay," Mike said. There's something I'd like to ask you about being gay, if you don't mind."

Brad nodded.

"Did you really hate women that much or was it all an act to cover for being gay?" Mike said.

"No, I don't hate women," Brad said. "How could I hate someone like Jennifer? I did really hate my ex-wife though-"

"Why? Was having sex with a woman that repulsive?" Mike said, remembering how he had reacted to seeing two men kissing in Hamburger Mary's.

"I came from a religious family who lived in a small town in Arkansas," Brad said. "My ex-wife was the daughter of the richest guy in town. We went to high school together. For some reason, she was infatuated with me. Maybe it was because I was good in school."



Brad shrugged. "Whatever made her like me, I was glad to have a girlfriend, because although I was attracted to men, the thought of doing anything about it was in the same league as committing suicide. We got married right after high school. I got a job working for her father's company. Since I was the boss's son-in-law, the company sent me for computer training for a week in New Orleans. That week I found two true loves of my life, men and computers. My lover invited me to come back to San Francisco. I refused at first, but I realized this was my only chance to be happy so I decided to go."

Brad was seized by a spasm of wheezing and coughing, but after a minute Brad continued,

"My wife was furious. I told her I didn't want any of her money or anything. I pleaded with her to just let me go. She said she would give me a divorce if she could watch me make love to a man. I refused. But she told me if I didn't do it she would not only refuse to give me a divorce, she would tell also the whole town I was gay. I felt trapped so I did what she said. When I went to the office the day after she took the pictures, no one would talk me or even look at me. My wife had secretly taken pictures and mailed them to all the important people in town. Worse she had mailed them to my parents and my friends. I left the next day after receiving several threats on my life and I've never been back, not even for the divorce trial, where she asked for and was awarded an outrageous alimony."

Brad started to weep, "I spent my whole life in that town. In one day I lost my friends and my family. That's why I hate her."

Brad regained his composure.

"Thank you for coming Mike," Brad said. "I don't have much left. My lover died last month. Most of my friends are sick or dead. Many of the healthy ones are afraid to visit me. Alex is from a gay rights organization. He feels like this is his duty, but I miss my friends. Jennifer told me you settled my hospital bill. Thank you. I don't know if I'll ever be able to pay it back. I'm sorry I said all those nasty things to you. I'm sorry I can't pay you back by working at your new company."

"It's O.K.," Mike said. "I made most of my money betting that our work at Rosetta would be ruined by executive politics. I don't think I would have made that bet if I hadn't been exposed to your realistic cynicism."

"Thank you," Brad said and started to cry again.

The nurse came in. She told Mike in a stern voice that visiting hours were definitely over.