

22.

Mike smiled as he drove his Pontiac out of Silicon Valley. This time, he wasn't running away. He was only taking a short vacation. In the six and a half months since Christmas, an explosion in Galadriel's sales had caused RollTop's payroll to grow from thirty-seven to slightly over one hundred people. The company had moved from its crowded suite of offices to their own building.

Managing RollTop's growth had strained Mike, but he'd grown into the job. He learned valuable lessons by studying his staff, his customers, and his competitors. He watched RollTop grow with the nervous happiness of a farmer blessed with perfect summer weather. The plants were growing nicely in the field, but he still had to wait till fall to harvest his crop.

RollTop's harmonious prosperity was disturbed when Lloyd signed up to go a trade show without Mike's approval. Mike called Lloyd into his office, and calmly asked Lloyd why he hadn't gotten approval. Lloyd responded that "the trade show was an obvious marketing necessity" and he "saw no need to discuss the matter further." Lloyd's arrogance was too much for Mike. He lost it. He screamed at Lloyd. Paige took Mike aside and told him that Lloyd was on the verge of quitting. Mike then proceeded to yell at Paige. Mike stormed back to his office furious at both of them. He was not going to be bullied into a decision in his own company.

Mike was initially perfectly willing to let Lloyd go. But as Mike's anger cooled, he realized that Lloyd's departure under these circumstances would damage the cohesion of his staff that he'd worked so hard to build. Mike apologized to Lloyd for publicly humiliating him, but Mike also put Lloyd on probation. An uneasy peace returned to his staff, but Mike knew the incident was a sign that he was beginning to lose his grip on himself.

He knew he needed to get away and regain his perspective. Henry offered Mike box seats to a Giants baseball game or any other form of entertainment event he wanted. Mike had learned to convincingly pretend to enjoy the evenings he spent entertaining clients with Henry, but Mike certainly didn't want to do that stuff on his own time. When Mike refused Henry's suggestions, Henry lowered his voice and offered him an evening with a call girl. The idea was much more tempting than a baseball game, but Mike still declined. He needed time to think and that meant time alone.

Mike decided to go camping in Yosemite National Park, about a hundred and fifty miles east of Silicon Valley. He tried not to think about the previous two times he'd driven through the Sierras, but scenes of his emigration to California and the disastrous flight in the Ferrari flashed through his mind. Antonia was certainly right about one thing, the California gold rush experience was not as simple as just finding gold.

Now, he was considering extracting more gold than he had ever conceived of finding. He was thinking of taking RollTop public. Although RollTop had been in business only

two years, it had always made money. The surprisingly strong recovery of the Macintosh's sales had spurred RollTop's current profits to phenomenal levels. Sometimes as he watched RollTop's employees at work, he could hardly believe that such a substantial company had come from just a computer and an idea. Even more incredible was that RollTop was now growing faster than ever.

With Apple again becoming a fashionable stock on Wall Street, the time was right for new technology companies to cash in on the incredible five-year boom in the stock market. RollTop was easily worth fifty million dollars on the public market. At this valuation, Mike's share was worth in the neighborhood of thirty million dollars, but large amounts of money no longer dazzled Mike. Going public meant issuing more stock, which meant that Mike would no longer have majority ownership. Although he had changed the by-laws at the previous stockholders' meeting, Mike was still uneasy. He did not trust Omar or, for that matter, Paige. If he ever had to fight either one of them for control of the company, he seriously doubted if he had the skill or cunning to win.

He wondered if control of RollTop was worth fighting for. Whatever happened, he had his stock so it certainly wasn't the money. Were drive, determination, and most of all power, as addictive and destructive as alcohol? Even if he grew the perfect start-up and maintained control, what would happen to RollTop after he died?

The thought of death made Mike think of his future. He thought, "Do I want to spend the rest of my life being president of RollTop?" He was proud of what he'd created. RollTop was feeding a lot of families, and if went public, it would make a lot of people rich. His job was demanding, but he enjoyed it, and unlike love, it was reliable.

Although he was afraid of falling in love again, he could no longer suppress his desire for female companionship. His dreams had become porno movies and he found himself fantasizing about almost every woman he saw. He'd even found himself wondering what Paige looked like under her business suits. Besides being horny, he was just plain old tired of being alone. But Mike was still superstitiously frightened of breaking his promise by becoming involved with a woman while he was building RollTop.

He reached Yosemite just after noon. The Yosemite Valley floor, which is at the center of the park, was filled with tourists. The huge granite rock formations and the towering waterfalls were breathtaking, but the crush of people left him feeling too close to civilization.

He drove toward the south entrance of the park, and got a wilderness permit at the Wawona Ranger Station. He hiked into the backcountry and camped alone for three days. He loved being alone among the huge sequoia trees. He was fascinated to learn that the trees needed to be burnt to reproduce, and they had almost died out when the Park Service put out the naturally occurring forest fires that were started by lightning. Maybe pain and loss were a necessary part of life after all.

After the first day, Mike was amazed that his muscles could feel so sore and that freeze-dried food could taste so good. He loved the woods at night. He had never seen so many stars. During the day, his own footsteps were usually the loudest sound he heard. At night the forest came alive with deer and other mysterious creatures that walked around his tent. He was careful to follow the instructions about keeping his food suspended from a tree to prevent trouble with bears. The thought of bears kept him from making investigative forays to discover the identity of his nocturnal visitors.

During the next two days, he tried to focus his mind on going public, but he found himself too fascinated by his surroundings to concentrate on anything. Three days later, Mike emerged from the woods. He knew he was filthy, but he didn't care. The dirt and sweat were like a second skin, but he felt clean on the inside for the first time in years. The familiar front seat of the Pontiac met him with the embrace of a familiar lover, calling him back to civilization. He decided to drive back to the Yosemite Valley Floor and spend the night in the lodge before returning home. The lodge was full, but he found accommodations in the park's canvas "cabins." He took a shower in the public shower room and went to eat dinner in the cafeteria. As he stood in line waiting for his dinner, he noticed two young pretty women giggling at him.

The women's laughter embarrassed him. He took his tray to an empty table in the back of the dining room.

"Mind if we join you?" a voice said from behind him.

He turned to see the women who had been laughing at him.

"Uh, no," he said sheepishly, "I've been camping for the last three days in the back country. I'm afraid I still haven't gotten used to people again."

"That's O.K. We came to see nature," the shorter of the two women, a perky redhead said.

"O.K.," Mike said. "I mean, please sit down."

"My name's Betsy," the woman said, "and this is my friend Tabitha," she said referring to her companion, a long-limbed woman with dark brown hair.

Conversation was not a problem since Tabitha was easily coaxed into describing her life in Southern California with Betsy editing her monologue at appropriate points. Mike found he couldn't help himself from laughing at Tabitha's jokes. When the two women invited him to attend the nature program given by the park rangers he happily accepted.

During the presentation Tabitha took his hand and whispered in his right ear, "Let's take a walk."

When they went out for a walk, Mike fumbled for words, but she said,

“You don't have to talk,” she said. “Let's just go back to your tent.”

Mike remembered his promise, but the warmth of Tabitha's body was too strong to resist. He rationalized to himself that he was on vacation. The hike had taken him away from the Valley, but the tightly coiled spring of his own inner tension still remained. He took her hand and led her to his tent. Once inside, they began kissing almost immediately. They had sex that night passionately and repeatedly.

When he awoke the next morning, Tabitha was still asleep. His body had thoroughly enjoyed the evening, but the rest of him was too nervous to be happy. He studied Tabitha's softly breathing body. He didn't want to hurt her feelings. He still felt guilty about his one-night stand with Linda. Certainly, she turned him on and she seemed nice, but he didn't even know who she really was, much less what she would expect from him. He knew there was no way to answer those questions until she woke up. As he closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep, she snuggled up close to him. He wished it didn't feel so good.

Mike and Tabitha rejoined Betsy for breakfast. Most of the conversation took place between the two women.

After breakfast, Mike and Tabitha went for a walk. He had to say something.

“Tabitha, I like you very much, but I'm not ready to,” he paused, “um, get involved. It's not you. It's just that I'm not ready.”

She looked disappointed for a moment. Then she laughed, “Are you married or something?”

“No,” he said indignantly.

“Well,” she said. “I am. I mean almost. I'm engaged. Betsy took me down here for a final getaway with the girls. I'm glad it wasn't just with the girls.”

She enjoyed watching the shock on his face.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” she said.

She kissed his cheek and was gone.

Smiling and shaking his head in amazement, Mike headed back to Palo Alto. He felt happy and confident for the first time in years. He decided he was ready to take RollTop public.

When Rosetta had gone public, it had seemed like a pleasant formality, but now that Mike was centrally involved in the process, going public strongly resembled a painful and humiliating medical examination.

The first requirement of going public was to recruit an underwriter. The function of an underwriter is to hold a company's stock between the time when the shares are issued and the time when they are sold to the public. The brokerage house that does the underwriting receives a multi-million dollar commission for this service.

Several Wall Street brokerage houses gave detailed presentations about why they were the ideal organization to underwrite RollTop's public offering. The oldest and most respected houses initially refused to compete because RollTop was not old enough. The company would only be three years old on the day of the public offering, and four years was the unofficial "age of consent" for a company to go public. Mike wanted to tell the brokerage houses to go fuck themselves, but he knew the more prestigious the brokerage house, the more per share RollTop would get for its stock.

Reluctantly, Mike turned to Omar for advice. Having taken Rosetta public, Omar was proving to be both a sympathetic and knowledgeable counselor on the mechanics of going public. Omar called the brokerage houses that had turned them down, and got Hastings-Belmont, one of the more prestigious brokerage houses in New York to underwrite the deal. The choice of Hastings-Belmont was ironic. Hastings Belmont was formed as the result of the merger of two established Wall Street firms, Hastings Brothers and Parker-Belmont, the brokerage house that Mike had once hoped would take Kube public.

Once the underwriter was selected, a team from Hasting - Belmont moved into RollTop to prepare for the offering. Mike was surprised at how hard Hasting-Belmont's people worked and how thorough they were. They ordered an audit that was so complete that it found three floppy disks that Mike had thought he'd lost in his condo when he was developing the first version of Galadriel.

The centerpiece of the public offering process is writing a prospectus, a thirty-page document that describes the company to potential investors. The prospectus has two completely opposite functions. The first purpose of the prospectus is to be a high-class advertisement to attract potential investors. The prospectus's second function is to provide the basis of a legal defense in case the price of RollTop's stock went bungee jumping without a cord and some disgruntled investors decided to sue.

It was the defensive function of the prospectus that made Mike angry. Everything from Mike's current salary to his lack of a college degree was included. Bringing out all the company's weaknesses in the prospectus was balanced by delivering a well-prepared sales pitch during the "road show."

Prior to going public, Mike, Paige, and the underwriters would go on a whirlwind tour of the United States and a few selected European countries to make presentations to investors. The primary purpose of the tour, called the road show, was to make sure

that there were buyers for the stock before the company actually went public. If the road show failed to fill the underwriter's order book, the underwriter would not run the risk of holding the stock and the company would not go public.

Preparing for the road show was grueling. The underwriters worked hard to finding the chinks in Mike's emotional armor by pelting him with questions. "What about the future? What about Kube? Rosetta? What about the competition? What about the market's acceptance of your E-mail package? What about lack of management experience? What about your dropping out of Stanford?"

Mike initially went along with the treatment, but after the first few sessions, the interrogation began to seem silly. RollTop was an excellent company. People would either buy the stock or they wouldn't, that was the underwriter's problem. The long-term performance of the company was far more important to him than the success of the initial offering.

While Mike was coming to some inner peace about going public, his staff was becoming increasingly nervous. Henry and his salespeople, whose income depended more on commissions than stock options, were concerned that pressure from RollTop's new stockholders would alter their generous commission structure.

Lloyd was enjoying the attention from the press, but he wasn't allowed to say anything about going public. The Securities and Exchange Commission, the branch of the federal government that controls the stock market, imposes a "quiet period" on all companies that are about to go public. During the quiet period, if any news about the company appeared in the press that might affect the price of the company's stock, the government would refuse to let RollTop go public. Lloyd was forced to sit on the biggest story of his career.

As chief financial officer, Paige was more involved in the mechanics of going public than anyone else. The stress of the process was taking its toll. She'd broken up with her boyfriend and was smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Mike remembered only too well the deadly emotional cocktail that was one part overwork and one part heartbreak with a twist of chemical abuse. Mike sympathized with Paige's situation, but he also worried about how the pressure would affect her ability to help the company go public.

Roger also worried about his role in going public, but he was determined not to let his stress show. He was grateful for Mike's help on getting the latest version of Galadriel out the door, but he was determined not to need any help on PostBox. Because of the quiet period, PostBox could not be formally announced until after the company went public. But Roger lived day and night with the knowledge that the long-term success of the company was riding on PostBox and therefore on him.

Even though Roger avoided asking Mike for help, Mike appreciated Roger's emotional predicament as well as the importance of his work. So when a meeting with the underwriters started becoming routine, Mike left the meeting to see how

Roger was doing with PostBox. On the way to the computer lab, Mike realized he'd forgotten a file in the boardroom and went back to get it. He was about to enter the boardroom when he overheard his name. He stopped for a moment to listen before walking in. Mike recognized the voice as belonging to Duane Christie, the leader of the Hastings-Belmont team.

"Paige, RollTop is a great company," Duane said. "The balance sheet looks great. You've got a good product, and this looks like it going to be the best year for the stock market on record. The only problem I see is Mike. He's just not chief executive officer material. When we take him on that road show in a couple of weeks, he'd better not walk out on those investors the way he just walked out on us, or we won't go public."

"The board is aware of Mike's shortcomings," Paige said, "and we're considering alternatives, but please keep in the mind that this company would not exist without Mike."

Mike decided to leave his folder in the boardroom and go back to his office to study his presentation for the road show.

He confronted Paige the following morning.

"What do you mean about being aware of my shortcomings?" Mike demanded. "Are you conspiring with Omar?"

"No, I'm not," Paige said. "I'm trying to protect you, but I'm doing it in my own way."

"You mean you're not sticking the knife in yourself, only watching," he said.

She looked at him. He was a good man. A little pigheaded, but honest. She didn't feel particularly proud of her actions, but she knew she'd done the best she could under the circumstances.

"Have it your way Mike," she said in an exasperated tone. "You see people as good or evil, one or zero, and I guess I'm just a zero. I'm getting tired of trying to save you from yourself, but I'll try one more time. You have to be nice to those people. I keep trying to tell you that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

"If you really want to catch flies, use bullshit, that's the food they really like best," Mike said. "One year from now, those Wall Street bastards won't care what happens to us, but we'll still be here. Whether we'll be heroes or goats depends on the product, not the prospectus. Look at what happened to Rosetta or a dozen other start-ups that didn't have a follow up product after going public. No one except a couple of burnt out nerds and angry investors remembers them. Is that what you want?"

“Obviously not,” she said coolly, “but it's time you realized that there's more to the success of this company than just product. I'm no good with technology and I know RollTop wouldn't exist without you, but it wouldn't exist without me either.”

“I appreciate your contribution,” Mike said, “but for all your business skills Paige, there are some things that you don't understand. Software is a different business from making hamburgers or even building computer hardware. It's like making a movie. Unless you get a good script, talented stars, and a good director to bring it together, you'll wind up with a flop instead of a blockbuster. I'm trying to make an Oscar winner, and I can't do that with people interrupting me with bureaucratic bullshit or trying to stab me in the back.”

“Fine,” Paige said. “If you don't want to deal with the bureaucracy, then bring in a professional manager to be president. If you're worried about losing control, keep your position as chairman of the board.”

He shook his head in disgust. ““Sometimes I think ambition is a bigger plague than AIDS,” he said. “You want to be president, don't you?”

Paige drew a deep breath to control her anger.

“That's not it. I don't care if I'm president or janitor if it makes the company successful. But if you don't believe me, get somebody else to be president. Maybe they'll fire me and I'll just have my stock without having to vest it-“

“The sarcasm isn't necessary,” he said.

“I'm sorry,” she said, “but I'm not bucking for a promotion. I'm trying to get rid of my headache, not make it bigger. I'm working fifteen hours a day as it is. I only suggested getting somebody else because you seem so unhappy.”

He didn't believe her. He knew she wanted to be president. “I'm unhappy because you and Omar are trying to shaft me,” Mike said.

“I'm not shafting you,” Paige said beseechingly. “I'm trying to act for the good of the company.”

The phrase “good of the company” struck a nerve. It was the same phrase that William had used at Kube.

“You're starting to believe your own bullshit, Paige, but I'm not buying it,” Mike said.

Paige turned to him. Her patience was exhausted. Her face darkened with anger and indignation, “You want to cut through the bullshit. You're a flake. You've been pampered by the world because you're a young, rich, good-looking man. You just go through life absorbed in whatever interests you at the time and leave everyone else to pick up after you. That's probably why your ex-wife got sick of you.”



The comment stung, but he suppressed the instinct to react. He'd been in business long enough to know that people used words to manipulate as well as to express themselves. He had no interest in playing that game.

"This conversation is over," Mike said. "If you'll excuse me I have work to do."

Paige stared at him. She returned to her office shaking with rage. She tried to forget the argument, but she couldn't concentrate on her work. She kept telling herself that she'd done the right thing for the company, but she didn't feel right. She went back to her office and pounded her desk in frustration.

Roger heard the noise as he walked by Paige's office. He walked in and smiled at her.

"Whatever bug is making you crazy, don't get so mad," Roger said. "We'll fix it in the next version."

"I'm mad at your best friend," she said. "He was born with an iron pole up his ass."

"It supports that unique brain of his," Roger said.

Paige smiled involuntarily.

"I know how bright he is and I'm grateful," she said. "It's just that flexibility and finesse are important in a chief executive."

"Give him a chance to grow into it before you reach a conclusion," Roger said, immediately picking up on Paige's line of thinking.

"It's not me who's come to a conclusion. It's the underwriters. They want to dump him," she said.

Roger wasn't sure where the conversation was going and didn't want to betray Mike, intentionally or unintentionally.

"He's my friend," Roger said. "You know I can't do anything except stand behind him."

Paige nodded sympathetically, "I agree. He's my friend too. At least I like to think he is, but this has got to stop," she said, looking Roger in the eyes.

Roger averted his eyes.

"What do you want me to say?" he said uncomfortably.

"Talk to him Roger. He'll listen to you. Tell him to go along more with the underwriters. For all of our sakes, please."

"I'll try," Roger said. "That's all I can promise."

Roger kept his promise. He went to Mike's office and did his best to convince Mike to change his attitude about dealing with the underwriters. Mike initially wondered if Omar was manipulating Roger, but after a few minutes, Mike decided that he was being paranoid.

"I understand how you feel about those assholes," Roger said, "but it's like at St. Luke's. If you didn't wear a suit and answer Father Murphy's questions the right way in religion class, they made you suffer. You could have made a big fuss about that too, but if you had, they never would have let you play with the computer."

"I know you're right," Mike said. "I just thought I'd left that kind of bullshit behind me."

"The world and its rules existed a long time before we were born," Roger said. "Nobody ever fully escapes society's restrictions. But the richer you are, the less often they bother you and you're going to be a lot richer after we go public. Just put up with the banker bullshit for another month and you won't have to worry about it again. Most people are never lucky enough to have those kind of problems."

Mike nodded. His friend was right. After that conversation, Mike prepared for the road show with a more cooperative attitude.

Mike studied up on the language of investment presentations, got suits made by an exclusive tailor, and learned to affect a look of self-confidence and deep concern when listening to other people.

Mike hated putting up this front. He decided that the current preference for style over content in American management was one of the major reasons why America was losing markets to Japan and other countries in the Far East. Nevertheless, everybody seemed happier with his new chief executive act. But there were things he would not concede to his new persona. The first was taking the time to make sure that PostBox was being developed properly. The second was taking the time to see Brad.

His resolution was put to the test the Friday before the road show was to begin.

They were beginning the final practice session when Mike's secretary told him that Jennifer was on the line and it was urgent.

Paige, Omar, and the bankers gave him looks of severe disapproval.

"Mike the market's down almost a hundred points today. It's going to be a goddamn jungle out there on Monday. We can't afford to make any mistakes," Duane said.

Mike thought to himself, "Don't worry Duane. I won't make any mistakes, like putting your financial interests ahead of my responsibilities to my company." He smelled fear in the room. The summer stock market rally was fizzling badly and he knew they needed him more than he needed them. He decided he'd had enough.

"We won't make any mistakes," Mike said aloud with a cold smile, "we're professionals."

Mike left the boardroom and went back to his office.

"I'm afraid something's happening to Brad," she said when Mike picked up the phone. He could tell from her voice alone that Brad must be in really bad shape. "I know you're busy, but come to the hospital as soon as you can. Oh Mike," she broke down, unable to finish her sentence.

He told his secretary to make his apologies and rushed to San Francisco General Hospital. He found Alex and Jennifer drinking coffee in a little waiting room whose bright Formica furniture could not overcome the atmosphere of misery.

"How is he?" Mike asked Jennifer, noticing her chalky complexion and haggard eyes.

"They don't expect him to last the night," Alex said looking up with forced dignity.

Mike got permission to go into see Brad. Brad's ribs protruded. His arms and legs were like sticks covered with blotchy skin and his hair was white. Mike had watched these changes take place and they no longer bothered him, but a new, invisible affliction had attacked Brad that was more horrible than all the rest. Toxoplasmosis, an infection that strikes nerve cells, had attacked Brad's optic nerves and blinded him.

Brad's eyes stared into space unblinking and uncomprehending. Even worse, morphine no longer calmed Brad. He screamed incoherently. His hands groped for something. Without knowing why, Mike grabbed one of Brad's hands. It was surprisingly soft. Brad's hand curled around Mike's and he was suddenly quiet. Mike held Brad's hand for a few minutes. Suddenly Brad's hand grabbed Mike's in an iron grip and then went limp. The nurse arrived, barking orders. She pushed Mike away and an orderly cleared him from the ward. A few minutes later, a doctor came out and gently informed them that Brad was dead. Alex broke down, went to a corner of the waiting room and cried. Jennifer went into another corner and banged her fist on the wall. Mike dropped into a chair like a zombie. Mike's mind was still digesting the fact that Brad had died holding his hand.

Jennifer walked to the table. "Do want some coffee?" Jennifer asked in the same voice she used to talk to her four-year-old son.

Mike just nodded.

Tears rolled down Jennifer's face as she watched Mike gaze catatonically into space.

"Everybody has to die sooner or later," she volunteered cautiously.

"I know," Mike said. "It's just like nothing lasts. I remember that first night I had dinner at the Li River with all you guys and Brad made fun of me. I never would have believed that he would die holding my hand."

Jennifer saw that Alex was on the verge of falling apart. "Look at us," she said. "If Brad were here, he'd tell us we were acting like three old ladies."

Her comment forced Alex to smile. They had some more coffee and talked about Brad, sharing stories of him as if he were still alive. Each of them tried to be upbeat for the sake of the other two. Finally, they got up and hugged each other goodbye. Mike could feel from the thinness of Alex's body that he must be getting sick too.

When Mike walked to his car, he was surprised to find that it was almost midnight. He felt like he'd only been in the hospital for two hours instead of eight. In the stock market or the computer business, fractions of a second were vitally important. In this hospital, where life and death was the institution's daily business, time seemed to be irrelevant.

Mike was extremely glad that he'd left the meeting to be at Brad's side. They were probably planning some boardroom maneuver to get rid of him, but he didn't really care. Still he felt obliged to check in at RollTop on the way home. Nobody was there. He went home. Reflexively he opened the mailbox and grabbed the mail.

Most of the mail was bills or junk, but one envelope had an expensive gold engraved return address. It was an invitation to Antonia's wedding. Inside the invitation was a handwritten message that said, "Thanks for being there when I needed you. Please call, Antonia."

Mike sighed heavily. The thought of losing Antonia forever to another man made all old the wounds throb with pain.

He wanted a drink, but he knew it was putting the past behind him that had allowed to him to build a new life. Mike thought of Alex's bravery in the face of Brad's death and he banished the thought of a drink from his mind.

Since the next day was Saturday, he was free to devote the entire day to preparing for the road show. Mike was actually beginning to look forward to the road show. He hoped that leaving Silicon Valley for a while would get his mind off his past. After all, making thirty million dollars was something to look forward to.

The first stop on the road show was San Francisco. He and Paige had agreed to meet at RollTop's offices at seven o'clock Monday morning and drive to the City together. Mike walked in to the office smiling, shaven, and ready.

“C'mon Paige, you've got hear this. I sound like a real yuppie executive,” he said teasingly when he met her.

“You haven't listened to the radio or talked to anybody this morning, have you?” she asked in an anxious voice.

“No. I just got in. what's up?” he said. There was no longer any humor in his voice.

“The stock market lost two hundred points at the opening bell and it's still falling,” she said. “A couple of companies were supposed to go public this week. Their offerings have been suspended indefinitely. I just got a call from the investment bankers. The road show has been cancelled. Mind if I smoke in your office?”

“No. If it gets much worse, I might have one myself,” he said.

It did get worse, much worse. By the end of the day, which was to go down in Wall Street history as Black Monday, the market had dropped over five hundred points. The total value of stocks on the New York Stock Exchange had declined by over five hundred billion dollars, almost a quarter of their value, in a single day.

Mike called a company-wide meeting and explained the situation to the nervous employees. Paige gave her speech first, which was tough but optimistic. Mike thought about giving the kind of brutally honest address he'd given at Kube, but the problems at RollTop were external not internal. He decided to give a pep talk that he ended with a promise to his employees that RollTop would go public when the market was right.

His composure cracked when he got in his car to go home. Brad's death, Antonia's engagement, and now the stock market crash were all too much for him. The world seemed to be falling apart. Worst of all, he had no one to go home to. Getting off 101 on the way home, he passed a liquor store.

“What the hell,” he said to himself. “There's no point in trying. The world always fucks you over. It's AIDS or the stock market or God only knows what. Why not just drink myself to death and get it over with?”

He expected his inner voice to contradict him, but all he heard was silence. He went in and bought a pint of scotch. He threw the unopened bottle on the back seat and drove home.

He stood outside the doorway of his condo, broke the seal on the bottle, and took a long swig. The liquor burned at first, but then it warmed him like an old friend. He fumbled for the key and opened the door. He walked in and took another drink from the bottle. When he tilted the bottle down, he became conscious of three pairs of eyes looking at him. The eyes belonged to Jennifer, Roger, and most unexpectedly of all, William.

At first he was embarrassed, but then he became enraged because they had invaded his privacy. "How did you get in?" he bellowed staring from one face to the other. No one spoke.

"I let them in," Roger said. "I still have the key."

"Give it back!" Mike demanded.

"Sure thing," Roger said. Roger slid the key back smugly. "I don't think I'll be needing it anymore."

Mike now focused his eyes and his rage on William.

"Well, well if it isn't that old corporate executive scumbag William Shoesmith," he said. "You've got a lot of nerve being here. I have a chief financial officer like you, Paige Braddock. She's another one of you goddamn executives who stabs their partner in the back for the good of the company."

Mike took a swig and waited for William's comeback.

"What I did at Kube was wrong," William said. "I regret what I did. I came here to apologize."

Mike was surprised. This was the William he'd known at Rosetta, not the William he'd known at Kube, but Mike was not ready to believe the change in William's attitude.

"If you knew what you did was wrong, then why did you do it?" Mike demanded.

"I was desperate," William said plaintively. "I felt like I was drowning and my life would be ruined if I failed at Kube. In a way I was more right than I knew," William said, looking at Jennifer. "Don't let the pressure get to you. It doesn't help. Believe me I know."

"Why are you telling me this now?" Mike asked.

"Because I asked him to," Jennifer said, answering for her ex-husband. "More than anybody else we both know, William has been where you are. I have my problems with William, but he's the father of my child, and to the extent I've let him, he's tried to his duty."

"Give me a break, Jennifer," Mike said. "I know what William did to you."

"I can take of myself," Jennifer said. "I came here to take care of you. I know how rotten you must be feeling. I know how hard you worked to get back on your feet. I thought you might want to be with your friends."

“Friends?” Mike laughed, “You're my friends? Jesus! It's no wonder I'm drinking. This bottle is my best friend.”

“You're a goddamn jerk if I've ever met one, and I've met a lot of them!” Jennifer exploded. “I've been living with a child, my own flesh and blood, with a hole in his heart, knowing that he could die any day. How did that happen? Because the water of Silicon Valley was poisoned by entrepreneurial pirates who are too self-absorbed to notice anything but themselves.”

Mike looked at her, and then looked at the bottle. He took another drink. He looked at her defiantly. She rose to leave. As she put on her coat, she turned on him, her eyes narrow with anger.

“You look around this room and ask if we're your friends,” she yelled. “You're a young millionaire with no responsibilities and all you can do is feel sorry for yourself. Roger called me because he knows how hard you take defeats. He could have called a headhunter and gotten a job at any of a dozen other big successful public companies in a heartbeat. William came here to apologize to you after all these years because he knows he fucked up and he feels responsible. I love you and I thought that the sight of people who love would cheer you up, but I guess I was wrong. C'mon people let's get out of here. Let's leave Mike with his best friend,” she said, casting a disparaging glance at the bottle.

“I'm sorry,” Mike said. “Please stay. Thank you for coming, all of you. I'm really glad you're here.”

He sat on the couch and fought back tears. One by one they all put their arms around him and hugged him.

“I love you man,” Roger said as he hugged Mike.

“I love you too,” Mike said. It was the first time he'd said those words to anybody except Antonia. It felt funny, but it felt good.

Mike emptied the bottle into the sink. He ordered pizza and they spent the evening sitting around and talking. About ten thirty, he could tell that his friends were starting to get tired. After they left, he faced the empty apartment. He was still scared, but the hopelessness was gone.

The rest of the week went better. On Tuesday the stock market posted the largest one-day gain in its history, reclaiming over one third of Monday's decline. RollTop closed the third quarter with record sales and profits. If the stock market continued to improve, RollTop would certainly have other chances to go public.

By the end of the week, Mike felt emotionally prepared to have lunch with Antonia. She had invited him to lunch when he'd called to accept her wedding invitation.

“Thanks for saying you'll be at the wedding,” she said as they took their seats in a trendy restaurant on Union Street in San Francisco.

“I'll be there,” Mike nodded with his lips pursed, trying not to notice that she wasn't wearing a bra under her oversized T-shirt.

“I'm sorry it's so painful for you,” she said.

“It's not that painful,” he said. “I accepted that it was over between us a long time ago. I admit it still makes me a little wistful, but it doesn't make me crazy. I wish you luck. I really do.”

“Thank you for saying that,” she said, looking down to avoid meeting his eyes.

“Hey. I really believe it,” he said. “If there's one thing I've learned from my experiences in the Valley, it's that things rarely affect you the way you think they will. I started Kube to make an easy fortune. I started RollTop to keep my mind off you and the bottle. Brad and I hated each other when we first met each other, but he died holding my hand. I'm just glad I don't feel about you the way Brad felt about his ex-wife, so when I say I wish you luck, I really mean it.”

Antonia nodded, but he could tell that she was only half listening. Something he'd said had unintentionally hurt her, and he had no idea what it was.

“What's wrong?” he said.

She hesitated a moment. “I'm not sure if I want to get married.”

“Did you feel that way before we got married?” he asked, not sure if he wanted to know.

“Yes,” she said, keeping her eyes downcast, “but I just dismissed them as silly doubts. The truth is I don't know if I want to marry anyone. Marriage can be so limiting.”

“I know what you mean,” Mike nodded. It felt funny to be talking to Antonia about her relationship with another man. “I felt that way about you.”

“I know,” she said. “Now that I have a career I love, I understand what it must have been like for you. I'm sorry I didn't understand then.”

Years ago, those words would have changed his life, now it was like being pardoned for a crime for which he had already served his sentence. Nevertheless, it felt good to hear them.



"Thank you for saying that," he said. "So why are you getting married if you don't want to?"

"Sort of the same reason I married you. Klaus loves me and he's very romantic. He proposed to me by taking me out to one of the most expensive restaurants in San Francisco. When dessert arrived, it was decorated with a diamond engagement ring that he had made for me at Cartier's. I was too overwhelmed to say anything but yes."

Mike nodded again. The thought of Klaus's proposal aroused residual feelings of jealousy. He easily suppressed these feelings, but he thought it would be a good idea to shift the conversation to safer ground.

"What does Shevaun say?" he asked.

Antonia smiled. "Shevaun says I should do whatever I want, but I know what she really thinks. She thinks I should keep my freedom, especially since she thinks you were a better man than Klaus."

Mike smiled at the unexpected complement, "Shevaun never ceases to amaze me. Is she still selling real estate?"

"Yes," Antonia said, "but she's thinking about going back to school. She says I inspire to do something more with her life besides smile at people and sell them things."

"Good for her," Mike said.

"Klaus doesn't like Shevaun," Antonia said. "Klaus and I went to Italy again. She asked me to call her when we got to the hotel. Klaus said I should have bought an extra plane ticket if I had decided to take Shevaun with me. Before I knew it, we are in the middle of our first real fight."

Mike laughed, "Your men don't like to share you with Shevaun and she doesn't like to share you with your men."

"I guess you're right." Antonia admitted. "But let's talk about something besides my troubles. I guess you have troubles of your own with the stock market being the way it is."

They continued talking. After lunch they walked down Union Street looking in the windows of the boutiques and other small shops. When they got to her car, he was sorry that she had to go.

"I had a great time," he said.

"So did I," she said. Then, she stood on her toes and kissed him.

Although his body tingled with desire, he did not return the kiss. She was going to marry another man. He had to respect that for the sake of his own sanity if nothing else. He gently pushed her away.

“I don't know why I did that,” she said sheepishly. “I just wanted you to know how much you mean to me. If you ever need anything or just want to talk, call me O.K?”

He nodded his assent and watched her car until it disappeared into the traffic. God, how he hated to see her leave.