

23.

Mike was reading his electronic mail when he was distracted by the smell of food. He turned around and saw Roger carrying a pizza and two bottles into his office.

"I thought you were on a diet," Mike said.

"Being on a diet is different from giving up drinking," Roger said. "You can survive without a drink, but if you don't eat, you starve to death."

"But that doesn't mean eating fattening food," Mike said.

"I've been on a diet all my life," Roger said. "Tonight, my diet is suspended. I'm celebrating. I didn't think that Beta test would ever end."

Mike nodded. The Beta test had been painful for him too. PostBox, unlike Galadriel, had to work with computers other than the Macintosh. Mike understood that the time required for real research and development could only be estimated, not scheduled as tightly as an assembly line. So when Henry and Lloyd had started to attack Roger, Mike had staunchly defended him. Now, six months behind schedule, PostBox was finally ready to ship.

Mike's friendship with Roger had survived the test that had destroyed his relationship with William. But the relationship between the two high school friends had been transformed from a relationship between equals to a relationship between protector and protected.

"To the end of a successful Beta test," Mike said, clinking his bottle of mineral water with Roger's beer bottle.

"Every time we toast each other, something happens," Mike continued.

"What do you mean?" Roger asked.

"Going to California or going public. We never toast to anything trivial," Mike said.

Roger's face became grave. "Speaking of going public, what's happening?"

Mike shrugged, "We're doing well. The market's recovered most of the ground that it lost on Black Monday. There are even some Silicon Valley start-ups that are going public. I've even gotten a few calls from investment bankers who want to do the deal, but I'm in no rush."

"Why?" Roger said.

"Right now, we've got plenty of cash in the bank and there's no need to go public," Mike said sharply. "Omar's partners at Avignon Ventures are pressuring me to go

public because they need to show a profit or they'll be in trouble with their investors, but that's their problem. Besides, when we go public, I'll lose my majority control and Omar will use Paige to get rid of me.”

Roger nodded his head, considering his words. “Don't you think you might be a bit paranoid about Paige?”

Mike looked thoughtfully into his mineral water. As much as the stress of PostBox being late, a philosophical difference about management was driving a wedge between Mike and Roger. When Mike had mentioned recently that he wished people were more like computers, Roger said he didn't feel that way anymore. Ever since then, Mike had chosen his words carefully when discussing management issues with Roger.

“Once I would have agreed with you about being paranoid,” Mike said, “but now I know Silicon Valley too well. Maybe our friendship will transcend our working together, but my friendship with Paige has no history outside of RollTop. If she thinks Omar will give her my job, then she'll get rid of me.”

“I still say Paige is more loyal than you think,” Roger said, “but even if it's true and you do get forced out, your stock will be worth thirty million dollars from going public and you'll be free to do anything you want.”

“I didn't found this company just to make a quick buck,” Mike said. “I built this company on the principle that I would do things right, no matter what. I'm not going to take this company public and have it ruined by a bunch of investment bankers with a ninety day attention span.”

Roger looked his friend directly in the eye, “For you this is a holy quest, but for most of us, this is our shot at the everyday dreams that you achieved years ago, a house, a car, a child's education, or just getting out of debt. Three of my engineers came to see me today. They reminded me that you'd promised that we'd go public someday in that speech you gave on Black Monday. I told them you were a man of your word and they had nothing to worry about. Should I have told them something else?”

Mike's resolve was blunted by the power of his friend's words. He felt like shit. He'd done his best to be vigilant against the creeping corruption of power, but he realized his reasons for not going public were as bad as any of the most self-serving “for the good of the company” speeches he'd heard since coming to the Valley.

Mike looked at Roger. He saw fear in Roger's face.

“Don't worry,” Mike said. “You told them the right thing. You told me the right thing too. Thanks.”

After dinner, Mike went back to the office, looked at the phone, swore, jerked the receiver from the cradle and called Duane Christie at home.

“Mike, good to hear from you,” Duane said.

“I've decided to take RollTop public,” Mike said. “You interested?”

“We'll have to look at the numbers, but of course we're interested,” Duane said.

“Our revenues are up a hundred and fifteen percent and profits are up ninety percent,” Mike said, “unlike your firm, which posted a record loss last quarter.”

“But Mike,” Duane said, “you have to understand.”

“No, you understand,” Mike said. “I'll give you the deal, but at two-thirds of the normal commission and if I hear one rumor of you undermining me, the deal's off. I'll just walk right across the street to Morgan Stanley or Merrill Lynch. Capisce?”

“Don't be so hasty,” Duane said. “I'm sure those conditions will be fine.”

“Good ' “ Mike said and hung up. He never imagined making so much money could be so distasteful.

Since the prospectus didn't need to be written from scratch, only updated, preparing for the second attempt to go public was much easier than the first, but the burden of the road show was even heavier.

In the wake of Black Monday, Wall Street's mood had gone from euphoria to suspicion. Investors were particularly wary of technology stocks, which had suffered badly since the crash. Mike and the underwriters were forced to price RollTop's stock at nine dollars a share, which was definitely a conservative appraisal of the company's value. Duane warned Mike that even an attractively priced company like RollTop was likely to find a chilly reception in the financial community. Duane also reminded Mike that they could not go public without a full order book.

Mike was undaunted by the pessimism of the investment community. He approached the road show with grim determination and a steely smile, dispatching questions confidently and quickly. Silicon Valley start-ups were his territory and he knew it. If a person proved to be an unconvertible heckler, Mike just moved on to the next questioner. Mike took satisfaction in watching the attitude of Duane's team turn from condescension to respect.

The constant traveling exhausted the rest of the team. But years of late night programming sessions years of late night programming sessions had conditioned Mike to go for weeks on very little sleep. Each morning he appeared at breakfast, smiling, pressed, and ready for battle. Mike's confidence was supported by the results. Despite the generally bad market for initial public offerings, the order book was filling up nicely.

The final test came in New York. If the road show did badly on Wall Street, then the order book probably could not be filled. Mike turned on all his charm and determination. He had fought too hard to lose in his hometown.

On their final night in New York, the team ate dinner at the same restaurant where Mike had taken Mary Liz on their last date. Mary Liz had once told him he was crazy to dream of being rich. He realized that nobody told him that in a long time. It was the first time he'd genuinely relaxed since the road show began.

The order book was overflowing, so Mike felt free to leave dinner early. He drove out to Hempstead to spend a few hours with his family. His parents only vaguely understood the stock market and he was too tired to explain it to them. He made small talk for a couple of hours and then drove back to Manhattan.

When he arrived back at the Pierre, it was one o'clock in the morning. The message light on his phone was blinking. He swore. Then, he dialed the phone and picked up his messages. The last message said "call me when you get in, no matter what time. Paige."

He felt his pulse quicken as he imagined a list of last minute things that could prevent RollTop from going public.

"I just wanted to talk to you for a minute," Paige said when she answered.

"O.K., I'm listening," he said.

"I'd like to talk to you in person," she said.

He didn't want to leave his view of Central Park for the problems of business. He had thought about asking her to come to his room, but he quickly decided against it. Things could become ambiguous between a man and a woman looking out on such a beautiful view at one o'clock in the morning.

"I'll meet you downstairs at the bar," he said.

When he got downstairs, she was sitting at a table, looking small and vulnerable.

"What's the big mystery?" Mike asked.

"I wanted to have a chance to thank you privately for letting me be involved with RollTop. If anybody had told me that you were handing me my dreams on that day you walked into my shop, I would have said they were crazy, but that's what you were doing."

He loosened his tie.

"You're welcome," Mike said, surprised and relieved. "You certainly did your part in making this happen."

"Everyone was impressed with your performance," Paige said. "You've got it down, from the attitude to the clothes. That particular suit looks really good on you."

Mike looked down at the custom tailored suit that he'd had made for the road show. He hated it, but Paige's compliment made him look at it slightly more favorably.

"Thank you," he said stiffly. "I bought it because I wanted to look like all the other boys, which is what everybody's always seemed to want of me."

"Being a woman, I can't look like all the other boys," she said. "I spent a good part of my life marching around yelling at them to let me join their club. Today, they finally let me in. It's a good feeling."

She took a long drink of her wine.

"I can't believe we're actually going public," she said, closing her eyes and throwing her head back. "I feel like I'm eighteen instead of thirty-five."

He watched her, noticing the unmistakable signs of mild intoxication on her face. He wished he could trust himself to drink in moderation.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," he said. "I wish I could, but I can't. I know what's coming and it's going to be a 'real challenge' as they say in business-speak. We're going to have to be more careful than ever and yet we have to be at least as successful. It's doubly hard to be successful if we can't take chances."

"I know, I know," Paige said. "Those analysts are going to tell me how much profit we should make every quarter. Then if we don't make as much as they tell us, even if we do really well, they're going to take a dump on the stock. So I'm going to have to be a bitch and ride Henry and Roger to make sure they keep on schedule, but right now I'm just plain old happy."

Mike raised the left side of his mouth in a half smile; "I try not to let circumstances affect me anymore. It seems that no matter where I am in life there are always a few things that make me happy and a few things that get on my nerves. After Black Monday and this road show, I've learned not to get too emotional about anything. The more I can detach myself from things and understand other people's emotions the more effective I am at controlling the situation."

"That's cold," Paige said.

Mike laughed again, "I learned it from you as much as from anybody else."

She finished her drink and motioned for another one, "I wanted us to be successful not turn you into a robot. Being wound too tight also can make a person crazy. You've got to let go every once in a while," Paige said.

"Letting go in a start-up is a dangerous thing. Start-ups always have all sorts of unintended consequences," he said. "My last start-up cost me my wife."

"You never talk about your divorce. Have you given up on women?" Paige asked. The comment made Mike think about Paige as a woman. The tailored wool suit and silk blouse, which had become her new uniform, flattered her slim figure and her small firm breasts. He thought about ending the conversation, but he was enjoying it too much. Unlike Roger, Mike could talk to Paige about business without having to spell everything out. She was not his clone, but she was his equal.

He shrugged, "I suppose it was an ordinary divorce. I put too much of myself into my work and didn't pay enough attention to her. After I quit, I tried to put things back together, but I didn't know how. I started to cling to her but she needed her strength so she left me."

"And you blame yourself?" Paige said.

Mike shrugged, "I guess."

"Sounds to me like it was her fault too," Paige said. "She could have helped you get back on your feet."

"No, it was my fault," Mike said, but he was secretly glad to be somewhat vindicated, especially by another woman.

"What about your love life? Whatever happened to you and Ed?" he asked.

"Same thing that happened to you and Antonia," Paige said, "Only I'm not really sorry that he's gone. I'm not sure if I ever was in love with him. I suppose that's why I stayed with him. I was in love once, but never again."

"What happened?" Mike asked.

"I lived with this guy, Arthur, for a couple of years," Paige said, wincing at the memory. "I wanted to get married, he didn't. I accepted that. I just wanted to be with him. Then one day I came home and found him in bed with my best friend. I spent the better part of a year trying to get my life back together. I guess I just don't trust men anymore."

Mike nodded, "I can understand that. There are very few people of either sex that I trust."

"I hope I'm one of them," she said.

He didn't feel he could trust her, but he didn't want to hurt her. He said nothing.

"I'm sorry I'm not," she said lowering her eyes. "I hope you change your mind. You've given me more than anyone in my adult life. I want you to know that whatever happens I'll stand by you. You have my word."

"Thank you for saying that," Mike said. He was not sure whether to believe her or not. He was uncomfortable. "We've got an early flight tomorrow. I think I'd better say good night."

Three days later, RollTop actually went public. The stock opened the day at nine and closed at ten and a quarter. Mike sold one hundred and twenty thousand shares, which guaranteed that he'd make a million dollars on RollTop, but he was certainly in a position to make a lot more. The four and half million shares he still owned were now worth forty-five million dollars.

Each member of the executive staff had their own way of celebrating. Henry was pouring champagne for anybody who walked into his office. Lloyd had a small buffet of Brie, strawberries, and white wine. Roger, whose options were worth slightly more than two million dollars, was sitting in his office, handing out gifts like an Italian Santa Claus. Paige was touring the building shaking hands and giving hugs. Mike walked through halls filled with happy people. Employees with only five hundred shares were partying like they'd won the lottery. Mike smiled and congratulated people, but inside he felt numb. He wondered if there was something wrong with him.

He wanted to be happy. He wanted to share this moment with somebody, but he didn't know whom. On impulse he went back to his office and called Antonia.

"Congratulations, Mike. Today was the big day. You finally made it," Antonia said, "but you don't sound so happy."

"I expected to feel fulfilled," he said. "Like the ultimate orgasm. Not like cheap sex."

"Well, give it time. It might get better," she said encouragingly. "Even it doesn't get better for you, think of all the people you made happy. Think of yourself as the big cave man hunter who killed the mammoth that will feed his tribe for the winter."

Mike smiled, "I guess. I wanted one of those people to be you."

"It's O.K.," she said. "I'm just happy to be free. For me at least, work has brought more satisfaction than love. My mother used to watch those old movies where the woman dies for the man. I think I'd rather die for art than for love."

"You sound rather down on love," he said.

“I broke up with Klaus.”

Although he felt a momentary rush of happiness, he said, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“You’re not really,” she said, reading him perfectly, “but thanks for saying so. I’m sad, but I know it was the right thing to do. I guess I just wasn’t cut out to be a wife. Maybe I’ll just stop trying.”

A bittersweet smile crossed Mike’s face when he hung up. He’d built RollTop as a way of getting over Antonia. Now that RollTop become so successful that it had been accepted to the exclusive club of public companies, Antonia was one the few people he could share his victory with. Their common dedication to their work proved to be a more durable bond between them than romantic love. Mike knew that there must be something more than work in life. He just wasn’t sure what it was.

RollTop boomed over the next year and a half. Revenues doubled, and the stock price tripled. Now that the quiet period was over, Lloyd aggressively courted the press again. Since RollTop was successful, the press was eager to cover the company. Mike found himself quoted as an industry leader in the major computer magazines. The crowning moment of Mike’s business celebrity was when the Wall Street Journal called him for an interview, but Mike had seen too much for his fame to inflate his ego. While the attention of the press did not impress Mike, it definitely impressed Wall Street. RollTop became one of the hottest stocks on the market.

Mike was handsomely rewarded for keeping RollTop successful. With its recent rise in RollTop’s stock, Mike’s net worth now exceeded one hundred and thirty million dollars. Despite RollTop’s financial success, Mike was worried. PostBox was not producing the amount of revenue required to give the company a new, highly profitable, product line. Fortunately, the success of the Macintosh was driving Galadriel’s sales up by over fifty percent per quarter, but Mike knew that even if sales continued to grow, increasing competition would inevitably force profits down. Mike knew that the effect of competition on income was often the first symptom of the economic cancer that destroyed most start-ups.

He knew that this was not a problem that could be solved by working harder or hiring more people. Roger was interested in developing a version of Galadriel for Microsoft Windows because he was convinced that despite its initial failures and delays, Microsoft Windows was going to be a hit. Mike thought Roger was probably right and he’d authorized Roger to start the project. But even if Roger were right, all of RollTop’s competitors would also be moving their products to Windows too. The best solution was for RollTop to develop a product that was so innovative that RollTop’s competitors would need years to catch up. Finding one of these products required time to think creatively and that meant being alone.

He knew the best way to find another virgin market was to get back to his roots. He wanted to recapture the wonder and inspiration that he’d had when he’d read his computer magazines on the subway. But he knew that if he tried to stay at home and



do computer research, the inevitable interruptions from the office would make it impossible to concentrate.

His mother had been after him to visit. He knew his parents' house would provide neither peace nor inspiration, but it gave him an idea. He could rent a house in one of the summer resort towns on the far eastern tip of Long Island, which were virtually abandoned during the off-season. He would be free to spend his days researching the latest advances in computer technology. By staying in place that was two hours away from his family, he could visit them without being disturbed by them. He called Carl and asked him to make arrangements.

Mike told his staff that he was going away for a month and assigned Paige the role of acting president. On the night before he was scheduled to leave, he stayed at the office until eleven o'clock making sure that everything was in order. By the time he left, the only other people left in the office were the security guards, which was a sure sign that RollTop had completed the transition from a start-up to a public company. He remembered how he used to leave early to go on dates with Antonia after Rosetta had gone public. He smiled and forgave his absent employees. He got up from his desk, stretched, and went home to pack.

Packing took another two hours. He was just getting ready to go to bed when the doorbell rang. He wondered who would visit at one o'clock in the morning. He looked through the front door and saw Paige.

"Hi," she said when he opened the door. "Did I disturb you?"

"No, no," Mike said. "But what made you come over here?"

"I went by work, but you weren't there," Paige said. "The security guard said you'd just left, so I took a chance and dropped by. I hope I'm not imposing."

"No, it's fine," he said, but the expression on his face contradicted his words.

"I figured I say goodbye before you leave tomorrow," she said. "By the way, how do I get in touch with you if something happens?"

"Call my parents," he said. "They'll know where I am, but don't try to get in touch with me unless it's absolutely essential because if I don't find a new line of business for us, we'll really be in trouble. I've made you acting president because I trust your judgment and I trust that you won't allow any hanky-panky on the board," he said, looking at her sternly.

"I gave you my word," she said, just as sternly. "There's no need to be condescending. Besides, I'm sorry that you're going. I'll miss you."

He looked at her carefully as he considered the implications of her words. He was sure that she had spoken these words as a woman, not as a colleague. He had tried

to ignore the steadily increasing undercurrent of mutual attraction between them, but lately it was becoming hard to deny.

He could certainly find many more reasons for suppressing his desire than for encouraging it. Although he had technically violated his vow of celibacy with Tabitha, sleeping with Paige would be a violation of the spirit, not just the letter, of his oath.

If he were going to become involved with a woman, Paige was certainly not the best candidate. Mike's attraction to Paige had grown out the shared intimacy of building a company, not from a strong physical desire. William and Jennifer's relationship stood as a warning of how love affairs that began as work friendships could end. Despite these misgivings, the intimacy of building RollTop meant that he'd shared more of his life with Paige than anyone else in the last four years. The temptation to increase that intimacy was undeniably appealing, but he knew resisting the temptation was the wisest course.

"I'll miss you too," he said noncommittally.

"Will you really?" she asked.

"I just said I would." His voice had more than a touch of irritation. He wanted to steer the conversation back to comfortable formality.

"Then there's something I'd like you to do for me before you go," she said.

The softness of her eyes touched him. She was embarrassed. Over the past four years, he'd seen her be charming, proud, angry, disappointed, even sad, but never embarrassed.

"What is it?" he said softly.

"Please make love to me before you go back East," she said.

He'd known what she was going to say before she'd said it, but when she actually spoke the words he couldn't believe he'd heard them. He waited for her to take back or words or turn them into a joke, but she said nothing. She just simply stared into his eyes. Her lips formed a smile that was both an invitation and a mask to cover the pain of a potential rejection.

He got up from the desk and walked over to her. He took his shoulders in his hands.

"Paige," he said. "I'm... "

But he never finished his sentence. She gently put her index finger to his lips to silence him. She slowly moved her face to his. He felt the old familiar instinct take over. His inner voices screamed in protest, but one rose above all the others and said, "Shut up, I'm enjoying myself."

He closed his eyes and moved his face toward hers. When their lips touched, he felt the wonderful sensation of warm lips caressing his. The sensation was so intense, yet so intensely physical, like having a high fever, that once it was over it was incapable of being fully remembered.

Her kisses were surprisingly reticent. He had expected her to attack him the way she attacked a problem, but her lips shyly explored and caressed, seeming to want to please him more than her. He removed his lips from hers and began to kiss her face. Her cheeks were pleasantly warm. As he slowly worked his way down from her face to her neck, he felt her body begin to move in an unmistakably erotic rhythm.

He cleared off the kitchen table. She unbuttoned her silk blouse and hung it over the back of a chair. The sound of her unzipping her wool skirt made his penis swell. He followed her lead. He kicked off his shoes, and quickly shed his shirt, pants, and socks. As he undressed, he looked at Paige standing in her chemise and panty hose and wondered what sex with her would be like.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said. "I've wanted you for so long."

He moved to kiss her, but she held him at arms length.

"Let me just look at you," she said. "I know I'm not as pretty as your ex-wife but I'll try to make it up to you."

He did not know what to say. He kissed her instead.

She disentangled herself and whispered, "Lie down on the table."

He stripped off his underwear and complied. The table was cold and hard, but the sight of her stepping out of her panty hose distracted him.

"God I hate wearing these," she said.

Still wearing her chemise and panties, she straddled him, leaned down, and gave him a long wet kiss. For a moment, he had a strange sensation of viewing himself as if he were a third party, but as her tongue explored the interior of his mouth, his mind surrendered to physical pleasure.

He slipped the straps of her chemise off her shoulders revealing her small firm breasts. He liked the firmness of her small breasts, especially in his mouth. She moaned and he felt her moistness seep through her panties and she pushed her crotch against his.

She panted, "Yes. Oh yes. Mike, yes."

He sucked harder and he heard her panting deepen into moaning. Eager to explore the bounds of this dimension of intimacy, he moved his mouth from her right breast to her left. As he continued to excite her nipples, he felt the demands of her building, grinding, rhythm. As his tongue and fingers moved with even greater urgency, she shrieked and pushed herself convulsively against him.

“Did you come?” he asked, not believing that it was possible from touching her breasts and nothing else.

“Yes,” she panted. He could tell she was blushing.

The sensation of a woman so excited without genital contact was new in his sexual experience. He was unsure what to do.

“Don't stop,” she said with a huskiness that was unexpectedly compelling.

He reached into a nearby drawer and got a condom.

“Do you usually have sex in the kitchen?” she asked sharply.

“No. Brad told me to keep them there. He said you never know where you can get AIDS.”

Her desire was momentarily stifled by the thought of AIDS, but it was easily revived by a kiss.

Paige sat on the edge of the table and waited as Mike awkwardly tore open the condom package and hurriedly unrolled the condom on his penis. When he was finished putting on the condom, he walked to the edge of the table, slid her panties off, and gently probed her moist folds.

He started to make her lie down on the table, but she whispered “No.”

He stopped, bewildered and disappointed.

“Lie down,” she said softly.

He haltingly complied, not sure what she had in mind.

She straddled him again, slowly settling herself on top of him. They each savored every inch of penetration, which produced a chorus of delicious pleasure from both of them. When they were fully joined, they stopped moving and began to talk, recalling incidents from the last four years. But the demands of physical passion slowly overpowered conversation. Their tempo increased until Mike could restrain himself no longer. He turned her over on her back and thrust into her with long, piercing strokes.

Waves of pleasure covered Paige as she surrendered herself to the experience. She thrashed her head from side to side and called his name as a device for absorbing the almost intolerable ecstasy. He seemed to grow inside her, and with her final strength, she wrapped her arms tightly around him and they expired together. He knew it was the best sex he'd ever had.

After a few minutes, Mike lay down on the table and held her close. She snuggled next to him, and felt tears moisten his shoulder.

He held her closer and kissed her forehead.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess it's because you're leaving tomorrow."

He felt his body stiffen. He was disappointed that it had only taken a few minutes for the old conflict between love and work to start back up again.

"I wasn't planning on this happening," he said, forcing his voice to be both firm and gentle. "I'm sorry I have to go, but this retreat is critical to the future of the business. We built this business together. It would be tragic if we destroyed it by sleeping together."

"I know you have to go," she said, trying to control the emotion in her voice. "I want you to go. I'm not only crying because I'll miss you, I'm crying because I'm scared. I appreciate your putting me in charge while you're gone, but filling your shoes is a big responsibility, even temporarily."

He relaxed, ashamed at himself for doubting her motives.

"You'll do fine," he said. "Now why don't we forget about business for a few hours. Let's go to bed and get a good night's sleep."

They went to bed, but they did not get any sleep. They stayed up all night making love.

The cross-country flight was the most comfortable Mike had ever had. He decided to treat himself to a first class ticket. He didn't do it to impress anybody. He did it to prolong the wonderful feeling that suffused his body. He stretched his long legs in the spacious first class and smiled. He didn't mind refusing the free drinks at all. He took a happy nap and woke up fifteen minutes before landing.

Carl met Mike at the airport. For a second, Mike didn't recognize his brother. Carl's rich brown hair was now flecked with gray. Carl's frame, always large, seemed at once larger and less powerful. Since Carl was only two years older than Mike was, he figured that these changes were soon going to be happening to him.

“By the way, thanks for making all the arrangements and driving me all the way out to Riverhead,” Mike said as they drove out of the airport parking lot.

“Anything for my little brother the tycoon,” Carl said. “Besides, I'm only working part-time these days. I wish I could work full-time, but with the construction industry the way it is, I'm lucky to be working at all.”

“If you need money Carl,” Mike said.

“I'll drive a cab,” Carl said, finishing Mike's sentence. “We're fine. We didn't get in over our heads like a lot of our friends, so we've got money put aside. The only thing that I worry about is the cost of the girls' education.”

“But Ashley's only four years old,” Mike said.

“Nowadays preschool costs as much as college did when we were growing up. I don't want your money, but I'd be a liar if I said I didn't appreciate those five thousand shares of stock you gave me. We put that in a trust fund to pay for the girls, college education and believe me those girls are going to college, not like us,” Carl said resolutely. “I love those kids. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't stay married. Like I always say, the world is full of women.”

Mike nodded, envying Carl for the first time since high school. “Is it worth being monogamous to have kids?”

“Who said anything about being monogamous?” Carl said. “I just said I wouldn't stay married.”

Mike was somewhat shocked by his brother's brazen infidelity.

“Does having all those women make you happy?” Mike asked.

“It does when I'm fucking them,” Carl smiled.

“No, seriously. Does it?” Mike said putting his feet up on the dashboard of Carl's minivan.

“Sure, it does,” Carl said, “but don't put your feet on the dashboard or Suzanne will have my nuts.”

Mike smiled. For all Carl's conquests, Carl was not a free man.

The next day, Mike rented a car in Riverhead and drove to the house that his brother had rented for him at Orient Point at the far eastern tip of Long Island. The house was small and expensive, but it was perfect. It was completely isolated. The next morning Mike dutifully began his research, but in the back of his mind he wondered whether his effort was futile.

Although Mike was reasonably sure that he could identify new technologies, he didn't feel confident that he knew how to create innovative products within the structure of an existing company, even his own. He thought about selling his stake in RollTop and just starting another company. But even through the nostalgic haze of success, he clearly remembered the anxiety and doubt that accompanied the growth of a start-up.

He sighed. He knew his best course was to make RollTop grow within its existing structure, but he didn't know if he could. Few Silicon Valley start-ups maintained their success and even fewer companies succeeded with their founders still in charge. He remembered Omar's proverb, "you have to grow as your company grows." Mike added a corollary to Omar's adage, "If you don't grow, your company will die."

Mike was not only afraid that he might not be able to grow with the company, he was also afraid that he might. He realized that the manipulative instincts and self-serving optimism that characterized big-company executives were not evil. They were characteristics of the species like the stinger on a bee. If they were not evil, what was wrong with being one of them? His mind couldn't provide a logical answer, but his body cringed at the thought of really becoming one of them.

If corruption and failure were his only two choices, maybe stepping aside was the right thing to do. Mike decided if he could find a competent successor, it might even be a good thing. He'd learned to give up programming and he certainly enjoyed that more than he'd ever enjoyed management.

Mike could certainly envision RollTop surviving without him. His executive staff were not simply subordinates, they had constituencies of their own. Lloyd had his contacts in the press. Henry had his relationship with the customers. Roger had the solid loyalty of his engineering team and Paige had her relationship with the Wall Street analysts.

As usual, Mike's thoughts stopped when they turned to Paige. Paige had been his customer, his adviser, his partner, and even a potential rival. Now she was his lover. The transition made him uncomfortable. He thought, "Why did she seduce me? To manipulate me? Is she in love with me? Am I in love with her?"

Although Mike wanted to deny it, he knew he had all the symptoms of love. He thought about her all the time. Songs on the radio reminded him of her. He wanted to call her, but he felt he owed it to the company to keep his promise of isolating himself from RollTop's daily activity, and that meant Paige. He tried to make up for not calling her by writing her long romantic letters.

After three weeks of solitude, none of the sketchy programs or business plans had the solid feel that separated good ideas from the handful of finely honed inspirations that became new industries. Mike guessed that making a choice from among

unsatisfactory alternatives was how William must have conceived the idea for Kube. Multi-million dollar ideas might sound crazy, but they were not half-baked.

Rather than sitting around waiting for a miraculous flash of inspiration, Mike decided to spend his last few days in the East visiting his family. He began by taking his nieces for a Saturday shopping spree in Manhattan. When Mike stopped by his brother's house to collect Ashley and Tracy, Suzanne asked him into the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

"Where's Carl?" Mike asked.

"He's out shopping," Suzanne said.

Mike nodded, wondering if Carl was really out shopping or on a date.

Suzanne seemed to read Mike's thoughts.

"Marriage isn't always easy," Suzanne said. "Sometimes I think I got the wrong brother."

"Me?" Mike said, made uncomfortable by the comment. "Why? Because I'm rich. It's certainly not because I'm good with women."

"Don't be insulting," Suzanne said. "I wasn't talking about your money or even your brains, but about your capacity to love. Antonia was a nice girl, but she was too selfish to appreciate your love. When you find someone who will, she'll be a very lucky woman."

Before Mike could respond, his nieces came tearing into the kitchen, yelling "Uncle Mike! Uncle Mike!"

Mike and his nieces took a tour of the expensive stores on Fifth Avenue, buying gifts for people in California and for his family in New York. Ashley was too young to enjoy some of the stores, but Tracy loved them all. He ended the tour by taking the girls for a shopping spree at F.A.O. Schwarz's toy store.

After buying his nieces lunch at the Plaza, he took them to the Central Park Zoo and the Museum of Natural History. As he walked through the museum, the level of his nieces' scientific knowledge impressed him. Carl might not be true to his wife, but he was true to his word about providing for his children's education.

After dropping off his exhausted, but smiling, nieces, Mike drove to his parents' house for dinner. It was one of the few times he'd had dinner alone with his parents since high school. The quiet ordinariness of a simple dinner made his parents seem old, small, and fragile. Mike was filled with a protective love that he'd never imagined he'd feel toward his parents.



The family ate quietly. After dinner his father went into the living room to watch a baseball game on TV.

Mike stayed in the kitchen and helped his mother clean up.

“You don't have to do that,” his mother said as Mike started to scrub a frying pan.

“Mom, who do you think does the dishes in California? I live by myself,” he said.

“I may be an old lady, but surely you must have some girlfriends that stay over,” she said.

“I didn't for a long time,” Mike said, “but then I ended up sleeping with one of my executives on the night before I came back here.”

He hadn't told anybody about what had happened with Paige. His conservative Catholic mother was the last person who would understand. His mother's long silence made Mike wince.

His mother's reaction made Mike sorry he'd said anything. “I know you must think it's wrong,” Mike said wanting to end the discussion before it went any further.

His mother smiled. “I've made too many judgments about your life. You've been away so long, I don't feel I know you anymore. That hurts me more than what you do or don't do. I'm grateful that you told me. It gives me a chance to get to know you again.”

Mike was truly touched by his mother's quiet love. He explained who Paige was and how he had fallen in love with her.

“From what you've told me, she sounds like quite a girl,” his mother said. “If she loves you as much you love her, I think you'll both be very happy together.”

Mike smiled wryly. He appreciated his mother's supportive words, but he did not share her confidence in the future.

“Thanks Mom,” he said.

“Thank you, son,” she said, and walked over and kissed him. “Now, go in and see your father. I'm sure he wants to see YOU too.”

Mike wasn't sure if his father really wanted to see him, but he walked into the living room anyway. He observed his father's absorption in the game.

“Who's winning?” Mike asked.

“Not New York,” his father said. “They never do anymore. I'll tell you I don't know what this world's coming to.”

It was his father's favorite complaint, but as Mike looked at him, his father was not the bellowing tyrant that he'd grown up with. He was just an old man watching TV. Mike wondered if his frequent complaints about the corruption of the business world would sound just as bitter one day. He wondered if he did already. He figured if he were going to make a change that now was a real good time to start.

“Well dad, I guess it's up to my generation to fix things,” he said.

“If more of them had your balls I wouldn't worry,” his father said. “You know, I really didn't expect you to make it out there in California. I always thought you were a little sissy for not playing football, but when you made a success of yourself after the way you got the kicked the shit out of you, I was impressed. Getting back up after being knocked down is the mark of the true champion. I could never do that. I'm glad you can.”

Mike was even more grateful for his father's complement than by his mother's acceptance. Although his father's words touched Mike deeply, Mike knew that he could not express his feelings because an emotional display would only embarrass his father. Mike also knew his father that was doing more than telling him he loved him. He was commissioning Mike as head of the family.

Mike felt proud, but it was new territory. He wondered if he was up to the task.

“All champions lose eventually,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” his father said, “but it isn't your time to lose yet, not unless you want it to be.”

Mike nodded and took a swig of his Diet Coke, and for the first time since he'd given up drinking, he did not wish it were beer.

On the final day of his trip, Mike parked his car in Queens and rode the subway back to his old neighborhood in the Bronx. Everybody in California treated New York like a disease. They imagined the subways were like seventh circle of hell. Mike noticed that the subway cars were cleaner than they when he was a teenager, but the neighborhood scared him in a way it never had before. He wondered if the neighborhood had gotten worse, or he had just gotten older, richer, and softer.

He visited St. Luke's. Its entire Gothic facade was shielded by tight wire mesh. Even from the outside, the school no longer looked like a castle, but a maximum-security prison. In front of the school, a group of teenagers were listening to rap music on a boom box.

Most of his friends in California hated rap music, but Mike knew that rap music and hip-hop culture had started in the social clubs of Bronx. He realized that the Bronx was the Silicon Valley of rap.

The insight made him smile. The neighborhood no longer looked so alien. Even more, looking at St. Luke's and the surrounding neighborhood didn't make him angry. His life had progressed beyond the petty injustices of high school society. The battles of his adolescence were over, and if the best revenge was living well, he had certainly won. There was no point in carrying a grudge with a collection of streets and buildings. He looked at the school again and exhaled deeply. He felt like a splinter had been removed from his soul. The splinter that had been there so long, he felt like he'd been born with it.

Mike was glad that coming back East had produced the unexpected result of resolving his past, but he had failed to come up with the "miracle" product to save the company. He was happy with the research he'd done, but he knew he needed more time. If he let Paige continue to run day-to-day operations, then he would then be free to lead a small group that would develop and test market new products. The new organization would combine the best of a start-up with the advantages of a mature company. The prospect of giving up control hurt more than he'd planned, but he knew it was for the good of the company, and this time it really was.

Then plan also meant promoting Paige to the presidency of RollTop. The idea of making Paige president had hung in the air even longer than their lovemaking. The biggest obstacle had always been his lingering doubts about her loyalty. Leaving her in charge for the last three weeks had provided a final test, but he was sure that she had passed it. Now the only remaining obstacle was the flack he would take for "promoting his girlfriend," but if she were doing a good job, he would do it anyway.

The flight from New York was pleasant, but the inner peace that he'd achieved in Long Island instantly vanished the moment the plane touched down in California. He didn't know exactly what had changed or why, but the feeling was undeniable.