

>CHAPTER 5

Unlike yesterday's sunny piano welcome, Peter this time arrived home to a cacophony of shouts of laughter, and what sounded like a robot reciting the alphabet. The combination had a dreadful effect on his already foul mood.

Charging to the back of the house he found Ivy sitting cross-legged on the floor. Eyelids drooping, long hair askew, she inhaled deeply from a fat joint. It took her a few moments to notice him. The room was a mess, littered with beer cans and junk-food packages, an empty wine bottle.

Two other young people, both men, appeared equally oblivious of Peter's arrival. The partying trio sat around a low table. On it rested an At Hand PC, connected to a monitor, cables, crude boxes, and a single microphone, into which one of the boys was speaking.

"Say cheese," the boy said.

On the monitor, a bright yellow smiley face blinked its black-dot eyes. And then spoke.

“Say cheese,” the smiley face replied in a flat, robotic voice. At the same time, the words “Say Cheese” appeared in a little balloon alongside the smiley face’s mouth. Ivy had nicknamed the program “Myna Bird.” It was a rudimentary experiment in speech recognition and synthesis that made it possible for the At Hand to “converse” in plain English. Its powers of interpretation were limited to a dictionary of several thousand common words.

The young man said more. “Goo goo.”

The smiley face blinked but did not respond.

“I said, goo goo.”

“I said . . . ,” the smiley face said, unable to complete the sentence.

“I said goo fucking goo,” the boy shouted.

“I said . . . fucking . . . ,” the smiley face replied, in deadpan monotone.

The boy laughed uproariously, but the others didn’t join him. He looked at them with a buzzed and puzzled expression. Then he saw Peter standing in the doorway. He stopped laughing.

“What the fuck is going on?” Peter shouted.

“What the fuck is going on?” the smiley face repeated, minus the anger.

The guys bowed their heads in guilt while Ivy, breaking into a fit of laughter at the mimicry, got to her feet and stumbled over to Peter.

He was not amused. “What’s so fucking funny?”

The boy with the microphone had the sense to switch it off before the smiley face could say more.

“You are,” Ivy said, laughing so hard she could barely speak. “You are, love.”

Peter looked at the scene and with a white hot fury managed the words “Get out of my house. Now.”

The other young man stood, not sure whether he should run or stand between Peter and Ivy, who stood staring at Peter in stunned silence.

“I said get out. All of you. Get the fuck out of my

house.”

The visitors quickly disconnected the gear from the At Hand and packed up their knapsacks. Ivy lowered herself to the floor, still stunned by Peter’s fierce outburst.

The young men made a wide berth around Peter and Ivy. “You can keep the beer, man,” one of the guys said as they hastily retreated. They nearly collided with Alice, who came in to see what all the shouting was about. She began picking up the empty packages and bottles.

“Leave it, Alice,” Peter said angrily. “Ivy will clean it up before she leaves.”

The housekeeper hesitated for a moment, then departed with the few things she’d already collected.

Peter moved to the other side of the room, putting space between himself and Ivy.

“Peter,” Ivy said quietly as she drew her knees to her chest. “I’m sorry, Peter. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” She began rocking in place.

“You have to go.”

“We were working on my program—”

“You’re not welcome here.”

“And I wanted to surprise you—”

“I should have never let you come here in the first place.”

“And I wanted to surprise you with this dialect module I finished this morning—”

“I won’t say it again.”

She began crying softly, but he didn’t care. He looked away. Stared at the smiley face gazing dumbly back at him. His mind was made up. No more free rides.

“But, Peter. I love you.”

He fought the urge to run to her. To take her in his arms and say he was sorry for screaming at her. To let his own tears pour out as he explained what had happened. How his company was no longer his. How his life was over now.

But Ivy wasn't the one to cry to. For the first time since he'd bolted from Via, he thought of Kate, the only person he wanted to be with right now. A wave of guilt washed over him and he pressed his hands to his temples. His head was pounding. His heart was racing. He felt like he was going to throw up. In less than twenty-four hours his whole life had come undone.

"I'm sorry, Peter, but it's true. I'm so in love with you."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am. I love you." She spoke quickly, fidgeting nervously with the laces of her sneakers. "I almost died when I heard you were giving our commencement speech. I wasn't even part of the graduating class. What do you think I was doing there? I'd snuck in. Just so I could see you in person. Meet you. Because I knew. I knew, Peter." She rose to her feet and made her way slowly across the room, speaking with conviction. "That if you met me you'd be into what I was working on. And then you went and invited me here. Because you could feel it too. The way we connected. It's true. Just admit it."

"You're crazy. You used me. You even stole my clothes."

"No, Peter. God, it's not like that. What's wrong with you?" She reached out to him.

"Please. I'm sorry. But don't touch me," he said, shaking her off. He nearly stumbled to put more space between them. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Look, you can think up whatever fantasies you want. You may even believe them. I can't give you what you want. But if you don't leave I can't be held responsible. I'm at the end of my rope here." He heard himself say these things and knew he was speaking like a crazy man, yet he couldn't help it. He had to do this, protect himself, it was all he could do.

She clasped her hands together tightly. "But last night, Peter. What about last night. What do you call that?"

“Stupid. A mistake. A truly spectacular mistake. Please, please just leave.”

She turned her gaze to the computer and shook her head sadly. “Don’t you see? Peter, I did this for you. Because I care about At Hand. And Via. And you. Why do you think I changed my studies? For this.” She waved a shaky hand at the smiley face. “Because I knew it was important. You know you care about it. You said so yesterday, when I showed you how far I’d gotten with it.”

He said nothing.

She smiled bitterly. “So that’s it? Wham, bam, fuck you ma’am?”

No response.

She nodded and wiped her nose. “All right, then. Well fuck you too, Peter Jones.” She turned and ran upstairs. He heard the sounds of drawers opening, the closet door sliding on its tracks. A few minutes later she returned but did not look at him. He turned and pretended to stare out the window as he furtively watched her in the reflection.

She crossed the room and ejected a Zip disk from the At Hand PC and tossed it into her backpack, then she collected her small duffel bag at the doorway. She paused.

“You’re gonna regret this, Peter. I promise.”

He said nothing.

And then she was gone.

He turned around and frowned at the smiley face. It stared back. Passive. Obedient. Waiting for input. Just like everyone else, he thought morosely, it wanted something from him.

Dropping down heavily onto the sofa he felt something poke his side. A wine bottle, shoved between the cushions. He lifted it. Red wine. And then it hit him. It was the bottle Kate had given him on their first date. The bottle they’d vowed to drink together when Via turned ten years old. Like him, it was nearly depleted.

He looked from the bottle to the insipid smiley face

and shook his head sadly.

He hurled the bottle at the happy face, nailing the fucker right between the eyes.

Matthew called out his wife's name as he charged up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He found her in the master bedroom, soaking in the tub.

"I did it," he said, showing her the headline in the afternoon paper he'd picked up. In just the few short hours since the showdown his attitude had already started to change, not so subtly, as though whatever remorse he felt was purging its way out of his memory. He was only vaguely aware of the change, and when he did recognize it he told himself it was a form of self-protection, a way of coping.

"Darling, hooray for you! I saw it on the five o'clock news!"

Whipping off his tie, he glanced at the reading tray Greta had set across the tub. She set down what she had been reading, the slim *At Hand* PC manual borrowed from his office shelf. "Come over here this instant." She stretched over the side of the tub and puckered her lips.

He kissed her cheek and seated himself on the closed toilet seat.

"Goodness, Matthew. You must feel like you're on top of the world."

"I mostly can't believe it. I'm relieved, that's for sure. I knew it would happen, it had to. But you just never know until it's all said and done." He studied his own photo in the paper, a stock corporate portrait, positioned beneath the huge headline: "Via Heads Change Hands."

"Oh, Matthew. I would love to have seen that little pest's face when the ax fell. Tell me. Did he cry? The little boy who broke his favorite toy? Did he, Matthew?"

"Greta, you're brutal. And yes, there were tears. It was very upsetting. He couldn't believe it at first. Then when he realized it was for real I was afraid he was

going to have a heart attack.” He left out the part about feeling like his own insides were being torn up. She wouldn’t want to hear it, and besides, he had to guard against turning sentimental.

She closed her eyes and smiled as she tried to picture the confrontation in her head.

He studied her with secret fascination. Her right hand lay across the side of the tub, bare, exposed, lovely, while the left lay hidden in the sudsy water.

She opened her eyes and let out a satisfied sigh. “Darling, be a dear and pass me that oil,” she said, pointing to the nearby shelf.

He handed her the bottle and she held it between her knees, so that she could unscrew the cap with her right hand. She dropped the cap on the floor and squeezed a long stream of the rose-scented red oil into the tub.

Matthew momentarily lost track of his thoughts, mesmerized by how the color bled into the water. She handed the bottle back to him and closed her eyes. She settled deeper into the water and gently oscillated her shoulders and hips, mixing up the oil and water. His memory flew back in time, the scene flashing vividly in his mind. The International Foods yacht party thrown for him to celebrate the success of Orange Fresh. One minute laughter, cheers. The next, horror, shouts. Her scream. The water, frothy with blood. The splashing in his face—

He gave a start when he realized that she was flicking bathwater at him, bringing him back to the present.

“Greta, my shirt. You’re staining it.”

“Oh, shush. The water’s perfect, darling. Come on, dive in.”

He absently wiped at the pink dots on his shirt as he rose to his feet and formulated an excuse. “Honey, I can’t. I have to go check and see if William Harrell got my E-mail message.”

“Oh, come on. I’m sure he’s following the news. Take a breather, for crying out loud. Please, Matthew. Just

this once.”

He briefly considered how she must see things. When he had doubted the viability of his plan, she was there for him. Encouraging him. Saying all the right things. Her unflagging confidence in him had helped him through the moments of doubt. Until finally he too fully believed it would work. And that, he understood now, was when it must have happened. When his love for her had slipped completely from his grasp.

It had started to recede after the accident. They’d struggled to act normally. But over time they quit pretending. Stopped making excuses, and making love. And settled into a companionable life together. He focused on his work, she on her things. The house. The garden. Parties. And on him, supporting him in his career. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d made love, not in the real sense.

And now? He knew what she was thinking. Hoping. That things would suddenly be different between them. Better. Closer. Stronger. But in his heart he knew nothing would change.

He remembered the object, which he kept hidden in his briefcase. That was precisely how he thought of it, as the object of his lost affection. He could not bring himself to destroy it. Or to reveal it to her, even though it rightly belonged to her. It was his secret, all that remained to remind him that he had once loved this woman completely.

Thumbing his wedding band on his ring finger, he turned the conversation back to her. “So did you do it, darling? Sit down with the computer?” He alternated his attention between his wife and the newspaper story.

Rising above her disappointment, she smiled with evident pride. “Matthew, I couldn’t believe it. It was so easy. I did not one but two, two letters. I went online. Browsed some boutiques. And had my first brush with a hacker or online fiend or whatever you call them.”

“Really, a hacker?” He was only half listening.

“Well, a rude person. A Mr. or Mrs. Cooper. They never said either way, now that I think about it. Anyway, this he or she called me all sorts of dirty names. And then it occurred to me. That they thought they were talking to you!”

“Hmm. An angry Via purist, I bet. I get those sometimes, E-mails mostly. Know-it-all kids or engineers who want to tell me everything I’m doing wrong with the company, and how I can save it if I’d just listen to them. It’s nothing.”

“Maybe not to you, but I was shocked, Matthew. So I created my own identity. ‘The Gret One.’ After some great hockey player. At least that’s what this Cooper person said. Do you like it?”

“That’s my Gret. The one and only. Have fun with it, darling. But be careful. There’re definitely crazies out there, scammers and that sort of thing.” He folded the paper under his arm. His attention had moved on to other, more pressing things. He smiled at her. “All right, then. Back to work for me. I’ll be down in my office.”

Her merriment turned to disappointment once more, and he didn’t want to leave her like this.

“Hey, how about this. You keep practicing with my computer, and when the new At Hand PC Plus is ready in three months, I’ll get you one of your very own. Sound good?”

“Sure, Matthew. That would be lovely.” She scooped up a mound of suds and blew them at him. “You sure you don’t want to come in?”

“Gret.”

“All right, all right. Go do what you have to do. I’ve got my own computer work now too.” She picked up the At Hand manual and pretended not to notice her husband’s grateful wink.

He hurried downstairs to his home office. Greta had moved the mouse to the left side. Yes, a computer of her own was exactly what she needed. He hoped she would become fully engrossed in her new hobby. It would

make things so much easier. He knew better than most how time flies when one is seated before a computer. He picked up the mouse and put it back where it belonged, on the right side. Then he restarted his At Hand.

An erotic thought occurred to him as he waited for the machine to start up. Glancing at the mouse again, he thought not of his wife's hand resting on it, but of Laurence Merrill's. He recalled yesterday's galvanizing phone conversation with her. He on his car phone, she on his office phone, patched in by his secretary. Had she touched his system, his mouse?

The computer was ready now, but he wasn't. He went to his library's toilet and closed the door. He dropped his trousers and got ahold of himself. He closed his eyes and concentrated, hardened.

He considered the act the secret of his success. He'd discovered it at the early age of ten, and it had forever altered the course of his life. His special study tool, through grade school, high school, college. Whenever girls distracted him from his studies he simply got himself off, and back on track. Of course there'd been some real contact with women, brief affairs, but none worth the time or energy for anything longer lasting. It was a small price to pay to come so far, so fast. And he'd never fully grasped its relevance until he met Greta, a woman worth marrying, with hands that were more expert than his own.

But hers were not the hands he thought of now, holding him, stroking him. These were the youthful hands of another, and moments later they worked their magic.

He'd been lying in bed for hours, staring at the ceiling. Time didn't matter anymore. Every now and then he took a gulp of Scotch from the bottle he had opened after Ivy left. He never drank hard liquor, but today seemed like a good time to start, the most natural thing in the world. He needed help, something to let him escape his

own mind and force him to sleep. Or unconsciousness. Right now, that was the most appealing option. It was too soon to try and think things through.

Through? How, he wondered, does one think through being through? With each swallow of the burning spirit the questions grew more complicated, more impossible to answer.

What he wondered most was what they would do for the future. What would Via do? His instinctive reaction to anything that threatened Via—in this case, his own ejection from the company—never failed to force him into action. But this time he was unable to intervene.

Almost ten years, he mused. All spent on Via, where everything began. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

He drifted.

He'd always been an oddball student, unable to fit in with the jocks or pot heads or other groups. He was an orphan most of his life, given up as an infant by a poor unwed mother he never knew. He grew up in San Jose, raised in an orphanage governed by an elderly couple, Clayton and Clara Dodson.

He was used to spending time alone, reading or going for walks in the nearby wooded hills. He pretended he was Henry David Thoreau, observing nature, lost in his own thoughts, comfortable with his life of solitude.

When forced to spend a few trial days with potential foster parents he turned sullen and despondent. He always waited until the last day with the hopeful parents to throw a tantrum. It never failed to turn them away. He needed no one, nothing—except maybe his collection of science fiction novels.

Eventually the Dodsons stopped sending him off to potential families. He made no trouble, and helped out where he could around the orphanage. With Clayton's encouragement, Peter was granted a scholarship to Cal Poly. He won the award not because of his grades,

which were below average, but because of a heartfelt essay on the value of the home computer as a companion. He described a device that was easy to use and small enough to take with you wherever you went. Yet it was powerful enough to do everything a big computer could do. Its interface, he imagined, would be unlike anything anyone had ever seen. It would learn from its owner, pay attention to his likes and dislikes, anticipate his needs. The more it learned about its holder and the world around it, the more loyal and dependable a friend it would become.

How exactly this computer worked, what technologies it used, was not of interest to Peter. It was of interest, however, to the review board that had granted the scholarship. The school was in fact researching many of the concepts the then eighteen-year-old had described.

He failed miserably as a student. He skipped classes to pursue his own interests in the library or labs, ingratiating himself with seniors and faculty. By the third quarter he had made friends with two bright engineering students, John Dulin and Rick Caruso. He described his dream machine to them one night over beers and pizza. They discussed the feasibility of a computer like the one he imagined, and decided that only its most basic features could be brought together for a price that would be attractive to consumers. Then let's build it, Peter suggested. The boys laughed at him. He told them he was serious and wagered that if they would help him put together a prototype, he would find the funding necessary to turn the idea into a reality.

Luck was on his side. By the end of the school year the boys had created a working version, code-named Mate. It was smaller than any portable computer on the market, and featured an integrated contacts and schedule organizer, word processor, and communications program dubbed Easy Does It.

Of course none of it actually worked, but the concepts were there, just waiting for the capital. Peter

packed his prototype into a cardboard box, grabbed the next bus to Sunnyvale, and paid an unannounced visit to a man named Hank Towers, whose company was the world's leading maker of electronic display panels used in a variety of devices, from submarine instrumentation to medical monitors to gauges on the space shuttle.

Politely informed that Mr. Towers was unavailable, Peter thanked the secretary, then took a seat on the comfortable sofa in the reception area and waited. By the end of the day Mr. Towers was still unavailable to see him. And so the next day he returned, asked to see Mr. Towers, and was told the same thing. He parked himself in the lobby and waited another full day, to no avail. He waited the next day, and the next, until finally Hank Towers had to see for himself this kid who would not go away.

The rest was history, the stuff Silicon Valley legends were made of.

Were, Peter thought hazily. Were made of. He drifted in and out of sleep, drunk, disoriented.

The phone's relentless high-pitched warble forced him awake. He squinted at the late-afternoon sun cutting into his bedroom. Reaching out blindly for the handset, he knocked over the bottle of Scotch, spilling it onto the hardwood floor.

He lifted the handset to his ear, but before he could say anything an anxious voice said his name. A woman's voice. It was her.

"Kate." It came out as a moan.

"Peter, I heard. My God, I don't know what to say. Are you all right?"

He was unable to speak. He pressed his fingers to his eyes, said her name again.

She spoke very fast. "I caught the tail end of it on CNN. A reorganization. I called your office. Ben said you took off. He was so upset. Peter, what the hell is going on?"

"It's over." His words slurred together.

“What do you mean ‘over’? How?”

“Me. Via. Everything.”

“Petey, talk to me. Are you drunk?”

“Mmm.”

“Talk to me, Petey. What exactly happened?”

“I was fired. Sort of. From my own company.”

“I can hardly hear you. What do you mean ‘fired’? How can that be?”

“Fired!” he shouted, and immediately regretted it. The sting in his head diverged, spread. His heart did a strange jig. Somehow the word “mate” punched its way into his head. Mate. It was what they’d called their first computer. And it was what Kate had become, his soul mate. Wasn’t she, he reflected, behind his inspiration for the At Hand PC? Wasn’t their nomadic relationship what had inspired him to design the world’s most truly portable computer companion?

And now it was being taken away from him. How long, he wondered, before Kate was gone too? The more aware he was of this feeling, of losing everything close to his heart, the more he wanted to tell her what had happened last night. He had to tell her. But not like this. Not over the phone. He would wait until he saw her in person.

Kate asked him to explain what had happened at Via.

“Matthew’s in control. They want me to sit in an office. Be a thinker. Isn’t that funny? A thinker.”

“Then you’re not fired, Peter, right? You’re not really fired?”

“Good as. Nothing left for me to do there. They’ve taken all my power.” For some reason this sounded funny to him, and he laughed.

“Baby, listen to me. I’m in LA at the studio. I’m leaving right now. I’ll be on the next plane up there, as fast as I can. Hang in there, okay? I’ll be there before you know it.”

“Okay.”

“I love you, Petey.”

“You too,” he said, sounding horrible to himself. He hung up the phone and picked up the Scotch. “It was the Scotch,” he said to the empty room, then uttered a broken chuckle that bordered on hysteria. He had to get a grip.

He searched for the bottle’s cap, but then saw that he wouldn’t need it. It was all gone.

And so was his life, he thought, rolling the bottle away. Via. And maybe Kate, too. These things come only once in a lifetime. And had become his lifetime. Once you’ve lost them, he reckoned as he began to drift off to sleep, you never again get, or deserve, anything as good.

Teetering on the edge of consciousness, he struggled to recall the lyrics of an old song he used to love. Something about you can’t always get what you want, but if you cry sometimes, you get what you need.

He knew he was off, but it was close enough.
And so he cried.