

Heart for Ramona

[From CUT, © 2008 by Russell David Harper; this draft posted January 16, 2007.]

I'm sitting here waiting for Tina to arrive. I want to write down the episode from the law firm, the flirting I did at that Microsoft Word class. Now why should Rusty need to be in a Microsoft Word class? This was 1995, December, you must understand, and the law firm was making a switch from text-only DOS to Windows, which uses icons. People don't like to communicate on a totally orthographic level with anything if they can just point to what they want. So I was in a Word class, in a training room in a Loop office building older than the 1983 skyscraper where we worked (the one that Ferris Bueller's dad was shown to work in). Me and some other secretaries. I was hungover that day. It was a one-day class. I was hungover but I was well-enough dressed and on the verge of quite fit again after nine months of running along Lake Michigan. One eighty-five at the most. Ramona Rothmel was in my class. I didn't know that until I got to the room. I sat down near the front of the class and she was near the back. Seats were two-by-two, two monitors to a desk. I waved to her and said —Why don't you sit here? I was bold this morning. Ramona and I had talked before. She was in accounting. At the law firm I sat near the kitchen and lots of people passed by my desk. The twenty-seventh floor was in the shape of an ellipse. The lawyers had the outside offices, with doors and with views of downtown Chicago—the lucky ones saw the lake or the river or right into the canyon of the central Loop, some practically eye-to-eye with the Sears Tower. The less lucky ones got to see the blighted West or Southwest Side. The hallway was the next ring inside the ellipse. On the inside of this ring were the secretaries, sitting at open desks. Cubicles, but without walls. Each of our desks was in the shape of a \supset lying flat on the floor and “pointing” in the same direction as the hallway; one side of the \supset was built against the inner wall. Next within the ellipse were walls on the other side of which were the kitchen and mailroom, which communicated with each other, and the library and workout room, which didn't communicate with anything but the hall. None of this is all that important. Just imagine Ramona standing on the other side of the \supset and me sitting inside it and talking to her, over my computer monitor. Sometimes I was interrupted by the phone. I'd

talk to a client in serious mode while making absurd faces to Ramona. She was born in 1963, I learned. She had a boyfriend, a fat beerdrinking Mexican, as she said with respect. She had a dog and she acted in local plays. She was Jewish and vegetarian. Both her parents were vegetarian. Despite that rigor, she was entirely unpretentious and wore, over her neat figure, inexpensive clothes, clothes you'd see repeated on a roughly weekly cycle. She liked to complement her wardrobe with button-down sweaters worn open. She had black shoulder-length hair and very white skin and dark eyes and black eyebrows and freckles. She had an Oriental smile—her eyes slanted and nearly closed when she smiled.

Class had started. We were working with Microsoft Word version 7, the precursor to Word '97, Word 2000, and Word XP, in case you care. I'd worked on a Macintosh since 1985 and with word processors or phototypesetting applications since then also. This was a PC, the progeny of IBM. The PC copied everything that the Mac had done with picture-based applications then added every additional keyboard shortcut or macro or other trick and convenience that a group of young programmers and MBA consultants could think of, making the PC finally better than the Mac. 1995 was the first year that it became better. I didn't care about that. I did the best with whatever was put before me. The instructor was teaching us about customizing Word. We did some exercises. One of them I'll never forget. Make your own button and assign it to a particular command. I chose a variety of block protection called "Keep with next." That's when you tell a paragraph (typically a short "paragraph" like a subhead) that it must not be stranded at the very bottom of a page, that it must jump over to the next page to stay grouped with the paragraph that follows. Not only did I assign a button for that, I made a custom button image too. This was in the days when monitor resolution and default settings meant that the buttons were a bit larger than they are typically today. I had room to draw, in outline, a red heart, and place within that heart, stacked on three lines, RR + RH. The instructor walked down the aisle, asking each pair about their buttons, helping those who hadn't figured it out, praising those who had. She came to me and Ramona. They looked at my monitor first. —What do we have here? she asked —Hey, how did you do that? It's so neat. You must have a steady hand, she said. —No, it's on a grid, there's no need for a steady hand, though I thought, Yes, I do have a lot of experience mousing around. —But why a heart? asked Ramona. —And wait a minute, those are our initials, she said,

blushing furiously. —Yes. You see, this button is for block protection. Put your cursor in a paragraph, click on the button, and that paragraph will never get separated from the one next to it. Ramona's smiley eyes were filled with tears and I think I've never been a better lover before or since.