

THE PESSIMAL DESIGN

A NaNoWriMo Novel
By Darrin Snider



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CHAPTER ONE

Plants emit a chemical scream when under attack as a warning to other plants of impending danger. This bit of trivia, generously provided by the car radio, was subconsciously filed into a dark recess of Bob Chase’s brain – along with the myriad questions it suddenly suggested. What could plants actually do about impending danger once they are informed? They are plants, after all. What are they expected to do? Run away? Fight back? Pack up and move to a more expensive neighborhood and ignore the whole situation? When one thought about it, telling a plant about its own imminent peril when it is powerless to do anything about it is just needlessly cruel and unduly stressful to the plant.

Second-level thoughts consumed him. What about grocery store produce aisles? Surely those are veritable horror shows of screaming in plant languages from around the world with no one being able to understand the other. Apples and tomatoes probably have a difficult enough time talking to each other in the best of circumstances, but this was November, which means all of the tomatoes were probably South American instead of Californian. The apples probably just want to warn the tomatoes about the ludicrously-bearded millennial with the look of “give me something to dehydrate or sun dry” in his eyes, walking through the aisles haphazardly picking up individuals, fondling them, smelling them, then returning them looking for the “perfect specimen” for his experiments. Meanwhile, the tomatoes are obviously talking to themselves, only vaguely aware of the danger headed their way.

He panicked a little when he thought about what his lone, unwatered philodendron at home must be saying about him. Well, he decided, there are ways to deal with snitches.

Bob turned off the radio and joined the line of traffic pulling into the “Contractor Parking Lot,” grateful for the distraction that made the first half of his commute flash by. Raindrops hit his windshield as he entered the four-digit code to lift the gate. He coasted in silence, finally found an open spot, and pulled in. It was now time for the “other 15 minutes” of his commute, traditionally performed on foot. He extracted an over-large lime green umbrella from his hatchback – a conceit to the fact that every NICE umbrella he’d ever purchased had been unceremoniously liberated from his possession –

and sloshed through the parking lot towards “Enpact Tower,” whose gothic-inspired façade grimaced at him in the distance. At least it would be, if he could actually see the damned thing from the contractor lot. Three years, he thought. Three long years making this trek through cold, rain, unbearable heat, fog, sleet, and gale-force winds. If there had ever been a nice, pleasant day during his tenure at Enpact Software, he couldn’t remember it.

As he approached the Fifth Street underpass, he shifted his backpack from his shoulder, unzipped the lower pouch, and extracted the lukewarm Egg McMuffin that he used as a tribute to the bridge guardian who sat, ever-vigilant at the reasonably dry halfway point.

“Mornin’, Milo,” he said, half-enthusiastically. Tossing the sandwich at what to the untrained eye would have been nothing more than a pile of refuse.

“Hello, loser,” responded a ragged husk of a man, sitting in the gutter, huddled beneath a threadbare blanket emblazoned with the image of Charlie Brown and Snoopy. “King to knight 1, knight to bishop 3, king to bishop one,” he mumbled as an afterthought.

As with most mornings, there just wasn’t a witty response one could make to whatever random non-sequitur Milo spouted. “Ummmm ... Bishop takes king?” Bob chuckled and continued walking. The two said nothing more, silently acknowledging their relationship for the past 1000 days. Bob wasn’t sure what world Milo lived in, but it was definitely more interesting than his own. The week before Milo had been reciting French poetry or some such thing. Today it was chess.

Exiting from under the bridge, back into what had now become a relentless downpour, Bob repositioned his umbrella. As he rounded the corner onto Fourth Street, a familiar, shrill buzz echoed like a swarm of mutant electric bees from beneath the bridge behind him. Bob instinctively picked up his pace.

Seriously?! Today?! In this weather?!

The first scooter shot past him, its pilot misjudging the timing of his pace, the spray of water from the gutter being several feet behind him; the second got luckier with what, Bob suspected, was a discarded sack containing the three, possibly four-day-old, wet remains of someone’s lunch. The third member of the gang, slightly overweight and dragging behind his comrades by several seconds was

laughing too hard to do any further damage to Bob's ego. All things considered, he supposed it could have been worse, and in fact, it had been.

Damned scooter gangs. Sure, the city probably had the best interests of everyone and the environment in mind when they commissioned two companies to supply the city with sharable, portable, electric-powered transportation. It helped with traffic, and parking, and gave affordable transportation to underprivileged workers. In reality, however, they had simply inundated downtown streets with a fleet of rentable deathtraps, blocked nearly every service ramp and doorway, and given six martini lunch executives -- who might normally share one car -- their own personal DUI machine to wreak havoc upon pedestrians with. Worst of all, the hooligans, formerly cornered in the "bad neighborhoods" of downtown, suddenly gained a migratory ability. Truly, no one was safe.

The final six and a half minutes of his journey passed by uneventfully, and Bob entered the lobby of Enpact Tower only slightly damp and smelling of ... pastrami and mustard? At least it was probably from the good deli up the street, he decided. He mechanically swiped his access card over the turnstile's sensor and waited for the reassuring "beep" that indicated the machine, at least, recognized him as a human being. After receiving this first positive acknowledgment of the day, he walked through. A complex array of sensors scanned him for the sole purpose of making sure he was alone, and nobody was trying to sneak in behind him. Bob was fairly certain this wannabe Maschinenmensch had irradiated his genitals enough times over the past thirty-six months to the point that he had little chance of ever conceiving children with the correct number of digits and nostrils, but this was of little concern to him in his present station in life anyway, so he only flinched slightly as he passed through once again.

Bob proceeded through the lobby, past the bank of six elevators, and entered the stairwell around the corner. Bob absolutely hated elevators. It was not so much an irrational fear – he thoroughly understood the workings of the machines. He'd even gone so far as to personally view the half-dozen intricate safety mechanisms that ensured these were completely safe, as were the other billion elevators that functioned nearly every day of the year without so much as a fatality ... well, okay, there were approximately 20 deaths per year as a result of elevators, but most of those were just careless technicians who stuck their heads into the shaft at the wrong time (it's true, Google it). No, the sad fact was that Bob had determined years ago that it was just his general distaste for breathing other people's air in a confined space, combined with a few recurring nightmares about out-of-control elevators accelerating uncontrollably, swinging sideways on their cables like playground equipment, or

descending into the fiery pits of hell that made him take the stairs every day. In the end, he decided the only tradeoff was slightly stunted personal development. After all, elevators were one of the few truly social situations where one could converse with co-workers without the stigma of “why aren’t you working?” – yet hardly anybody ever spoke in elevators. Sure, the right, so-called “elevator pitch” might lead to impressing just the right guy who can get you a promotion, or at least a transfer to a more appealing department, but then that would no doubt mean relocating somewhere above the fifth floor, and 150 stairs was about all Bob could handle in a single trek. It’s not like software engineers are generally in the best of physical shape, even ones that don’t take elevators.

It was right around the 109th step when Bob heard the faint echo of steps that weren’t his own. In three years, this had only happened a handful of times, but every time it was the same person. Bob winced and pleaded with the unseen forces that coordinated his daily humiliations. Why today? Could it be any day other than today? He was tired. He was drenched. He smelled faintly like the contents of a dumpster behind an ethnic restaurant. Could there possibly be a worse morning for this?

It was too late, however. As he hit the landing, he caught sight of her rounding the stairs above him.

Now, when classifying females, there were, as all guys knew, eight well-defined categories of attractiveness into which all specimens could be sorted. These were, of course, derived from the eight vertices formed by the four permutations of the immutable pillars of cuteness, sexiness, personability, and femininity, which yielded the major categories of “girl next door,” “one of the guys,” “hot geek girl,” “Victoria Secret model,” “French maid,” “Hollywood starlet,” and “rocker chick.” Paula, however, somehow defied all of these labels – like some sort of supremely bred female who could be on many vertices at once. She was the French maid next door who liked baseball; a glamorous movie star who collected bootlegs from independent artists; the hot geek girl who dressed like a Victoria's Secret model. Worst of all, she certainly had to be aware of this, yet she was NICE about it. In Bob’s mind, this level of unattainability made her inexplicably painful to look at, even more depressing to think about, and warranted the creation of an entirely new category to properly convey the simultaneous elation, despair, and masculine insecurity she inspired.

He struggled for a moment, but the only thing that came to mind was “major-market TV weather girl.”

This of course made no sense. What would a weather girl be doing at a software company? Yet, there she was. He was quickly ashamed of making such an objectification, it was just impossible to think of her as human in many respects. He certainly couldn't picture her doing anything as woefully pedestrian as taking out the trash, putting gas in her car, or doing dishes. He suspected at her home, garbage simply walked itself to the curb, her car was powered by a team of woodland creatures running a treadmill under the hood, and when she ate, she left absolutely no crumb, scrap of food, or dollop of ketchup (no ... wait ... he was SURE she never ate ketchup either) on the plates, and simply placed them back in the cabinet after every meal.

Jet black hair, piercing brown eyes, calf-length white cotton skirt with innocent (but not too bo-peep) lace flower pattern, tasteful button-down shirt with blue vertical stripes that served to absolutely and unnecessarily exaggerate a figure that not only didn't quit but couldn't even be convinced to take a lunch hour. This girl was so perfect, so attractive, so flawlessly sexy that Bob was actually beginning to perspire, despite the fact that he was wet and freezing. He tried desperately not to look directly at her.

Of course, he was looking directly at her, and in fact, had been for the past ten seconds, he just hadn't noticed, being too wrapped up in thoughts of weather girls and fauna-powered automobiles. Now, they were about to pass mere inches from each other in a narrow stairwell – Nietzsche's Uberfrau and a wet guy who smelled faintly of rat urine and cold cuts.

There was no backing out now. Bob quickly decided he could somehow distract from his physical and olfactory appearance through the careful employment of the perfect facial expression. Pensive? Engrossed in serious thought? Maybe a slight, approachable smile today? No teeth ... don't want to be creepy. Eye contact. Definitely eye contact this time. Wait. He suddenly realized he was still staring at her. He had already coasted through the stop sign at casual eye contact, barreled straight through ogling, and was now circling predatory leering and looking for a parking spot. He decided to pretend to be engrossed in thought and completely oblivious to her presence, much less the fact that he was intently looking at her like a lonely puppy whose owner had just come home. Yeah, that would work. Sure, she probably started out thinking he was a "creepy starey guy," but now she'll just think maybe he was engrossed in thought about ... well ... whatever it is important, wistful people think about during their private moments. He went into a thousand-yard stair and tried to look through her. This was going to work. He was playing it aloof, cool, AND contemplative. He suddenly realized he probably looked a bit

like Bruce Dern in one of his more PTSD-related roles. Bruce Dern was cool though, right? Above all he was cool.

“Hey! How’ve you been?” Paula asked, enthusiastically.

Wow, she had a very sweet voice, Bob thought. He’d never actually heard it before. Three years later and the woman was still full of mystery.

Wait a minute, she had spoken to him. What’s more, her tone indicated familiarity, as if she knew, or at least recognized him. This was completely unexpected. This was a lot of information to suddenly process. Had he stared so much that she felt obligated to start a conversation out of awkwardness? Had he thought so much about her that one of his fantasies had slipped out and entered her own subconscious memory? Either way, he would certainly have to document this “Bruce Dern technique” for future reference.

Three stairs, two stairs, they were directly next to each other on the same stair when the word “question” inexplicably entered Bob’s mind. She had just asked him a question. The window of time for an aloof, cool, and contemplative response was rapidly closing. A series of potential responses formed in his mind like a pilot’s heads-up display detailing threats and responses in a dogfight. She just wants to know how he’s been. Well, probably not really. In reality, she’s probably just making polite small talk. Surely, she doesn’t want a recap of the past three months since they saw each other last. For that matter, she hadn’t asked then, so without a frame of reference, would he need to go back three years to the first time they’d passed in the stairwell? He decided to try to find a different strategy. Witty response? No, her tone was sincere, almost enthusiastic, wasn’t it? Wit would make him come off as kind of an asshole at this point. Sincerity was the best option. Indicate everything is fine, possibly showing upbeat enthusiasm for the day, but nothing too wordy. “Fine,” would be trite and cliché, but anything else risked being too wordy or boorish. Crap, this was taking too long. He had to say SOMETHING, he was now two steps past her. He’d lost his window for cool, contemplative had become dismissive, and aloof was starting to look a bit like disinterest that was rapidly approaching rude. He had to say something -- anything at this point – just to save the situation.

Fine thanks. He finally decided on the safe and non-memorable -- fine, thanks. It was good. It would work. It was just two syllables. After three years, he was about to utter two syllables, boosting

their total number of syllables by 50%. She still had the edge, with nearly twice the syllables he had, but at least he was on the board. The relationship was progressing!

At least it would have been if he had successfully gotten those syllables out. Instead, when he opened his mouth, he found that all moisture had been drained from his throat and turned into brow sweat. His tongue had temporarily fused itself to the roof of his mouth, and in the heat of the moment, he could only utter something vaguely resembling, “FnnnnGAHHH.” By the time he recovered from the brief gagging stint that followed, she had already rounded the corner on the landing and was proceeding downstairs, so he could not see if she had even heard ... well ... whatever that guttural noise he had just made was.

He decided it was also to his benefit that she also didn't see his facial expression when he caught the subtle scent of Heliconia (or possibly some sort of Orchid) that was her perfume. It was probably also helpful that she didn't see him become mildly euphoric, completely miss the non-existent step he had just attempted to climb, even though he was already on the landing. In retrospect, Bob decided she probably did hear the thud of him falling and hitting his head on the door, but most likely mistook it for the sound of the door closing. Bob was momentarily grateful those two were very similar sounds when echoing through a seventeen-story stairwell.

Like so many successful, and failed, software companies before it, Enpact Software embraced every trendy corporate philosophy, development methodology, and project management practice it could find. This, after all, gives middle managers seminars to attend, certificates to obtain, and fancy letters to put at the end of their names on business cards. For the most part, none ever lasted as long as the next manager, who was invariably forced to justify their own tenure by completely undoing their predecessor's work and employing the newest, latest trendy philosophy. As such to the outsider, the fifth floor of the seventeen-story complex resembled a cross between a hospital ward and a Japanese flower garden with rows of tables stretching from one end of the floor to the other, occasionally broken up by Zen sand pits, stacks of rocks, and knee-high bamboo fences. The fences were meant to delineate corporate departments, now called “ensembles” in the new methodology (more on that later though); the sand pits, the flow of thought and innovation; Bob had no idea what the rocks were supposed to symbolize, and he was sure asking about them would not be a career builder.

The main feature of the floor was that it was completely open. There were no cubicles, walls, offices, conference rooms, or anything of the like. Workers were free to sit anywhere in the rows of tables, the couches along the walls, the full-liquor bars by the windows, the high top café tables by the elevators, or if so inclined, recline in one of the beach chairs next to the sand pits, possibly to contemplate the rocks. As the couches were almost always taken by middle managers, the bar stools were notoriously uncomfortable, and the beach chairs were too difficult to type in, which left finding a seat at one of the long rows of cafeteria-style tables as Bob's best option. It was, of course, no mistake that this was always an awkward reenactment of every high school lunch period he'd ever endured.

He spotted the first seat three tables to his left. He walked over, carefully avoiding eye contact, so as to say, "I just need a seat, and I don't care who you are," removed his backpack, and sat it on the floor next to the chair.

"Seat's taken," said the lumpy programmer in the next chair.

"Sorry," Bob said, grabbed his backpack, and looked for his next best option.

He found another seat at the end of a table in the far corner of the room. Once again, he walked over and sat his backpack down next to it.

"Employees only. No contractors," the squeaky twenty-something intern wearing entirely too much perfume sitting across the table said.

"Ah, okay," Bob sighed and began searching for another option.

He spotted a chair almost hidden between two rather large developers. As a bonus, it even featured one of the coveted "dual monitor" setups. He moved quickly and with purpose towards the table.

"Not this one," at least two people at the table said in unison before he even reached them. Bob stopped, unsure whether the comment was being directed at him, as nobody seemed to be looking up from their screens.

"Keep moving, temp," said the one who appeared to be their leader, still not looking up from code scrolling in front of his face.

Bob started to protest that there were no other seats available on the floor when he heard what he could have sworn was the sound of a switchblade flicking open somewhere under the table.

Resigned to defeat, he sulked away towards the stairwell, attempting to be invisible, which was unsurprisingly difficult considering the complete lack of walls, cubicles, filing cabinets, or anything taller than waist high for him to hide behind. At least there was always his old standby seat, he thought. He took a quick glance around to ensure that nobody was watching him, opened the door to the janitor's closet, and stepped inside. He fumbled around in complete darkness for a moment until his hand felt the light switch. He turned it on.

Bob inhaled sharply through his teeth in surprise as he found himself face-to-face with two of his co-workers. The man he knew, at least by reputation, as one of the better salesmen in the company. He took one look at Bob, smiled confidently, and went back to fastening his belt. The girl seemed vaguely familiar; an account rep, Bob was pretty sure. She nodded in friendly recognition and continued buttoning up her shirt. Both were in their early 20s, probably a bit on the young side for their respective positions, but that's how trendy software companies worked, Bob decided.

"Sorry, we'll be out of your way in just a second," the man said as if he was getting off of a conference call that ran late, and not caught ... well ... getting off in a janitor's closet.

Any one of the three people in the closet would have felt awkward at this encounter if this wasn't completely standard for Enpact software. Every couple of days Bob would stumble across two over-empowered, ridiculously attractive twenty-somethings having sex somewhere in the office. It probably happened at most companies, but it was rampant at Enpact, where the average manager was less than 30 years of age, and the so-called "adults" spent most of their time at seminars and workshops learning the latest business process methodologies and earning their paper certificates. Bob resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the couple but stood his ground at the closet entrance. He'd finally laid claim to a workspace, and he would be damned if he was going to give it up now that he finally had the upper hand, even though the upper hand, in this case, consisted mostly of just being the only person in the room who was fully clothed. He did his best to look impatient, and it was possible he subconsciously positioned himself slightly in the way of the door so as to make the exit from the tiny room difficult for the other two. Once gone, he stacked two boxes of cleaning supplies into a makeshift chair, overturned a large plastic wastebasket to serve as a desk, and set his laptop on top of it.

He was halfway through his inbox when the door slowly opened with a long, drawn-out squeak, and the fluorescent death light of the fifth floor bled into the closet. Silhouetted in the door Bob recognized the form of Jackson Montana, his best friend.

As his name would suggest, Jackson Montana, looked more like a rugged outdoorsman than a software engineer. In fact, if girls had eight classifications for men the way men did for women, Jackson would be the epitome of “Household Product Label Guy,” or so Bob estimated. This was only made worse by the fact that, in addition to looking like he had just stepped off a roll of Paper Towels or the label of a can of baked beans, Jackson was a genuinely gifted software engineer, the nicest guy working at Enpact, and for some reason had chosen to befriend Bob, the most average nobody who technically wasn’t even a company employee.

"Mornin', Bob," the ruggedly handsome silhouette said matter-of-factly.

"Hey, Jackson," Bob said, defeated.

"Come on. We saved you a seat."

CHAPTER TWO

The seats were comfortable, as the chairs were very expensive. That was the only redeeming quality about working on the fifth floor. Bob sat down in the middle of a row of forty workstations, running side to side in two rows of twenty that faced each other like cattle in pens – exactly the kind PETA usually protested about. He was, almost literally, ass to elbows with five other co-workers, Jackson on his left, another teammate, Mary Ann O'Grady, on his right, and three people whom he didn't know from a completely different team sitting in front of him, facing him, so close that their laptop screens were touching.

Bob logged in again and began sorting through the messages in his inbox.

"Did you ever buy that Alcor stock I told you to get?" The man facing him said.

Bob looked up. The man was staring directly at him. Bob figured him to be in his mid 50's.

"The Alcor stock ... A-L-C-O-R. Did you buy it?"

"I ... I didn't know I was supposed to," Bob said, confused.

The older man squinted at him. "I know your financial advisor tells you just to buy and plan for the long haul, but you don't want to buy into mutual funds now, it's November. You'll get hit with a tax liability on capital gains distributions next month, so not only will you be paying taxes on eleven months of profit you never got, but the share price on your own holdings will also take a dip based on that amount."

"Right," Bob nodded hoping to get out of the conversation.

The man scowled this time. "Alcor is going to double in the next year. When it does, I'm buying my boat and retiring. Even if it doesn't, I'm in a position where I can retire in two years, assuming the market doesn't crash or something."

"Good for you," Bob didn't even look up from his screen this time.

The man continued talking, a bit louder than would be considered polite in a work environment, all the while without breaking eye contact. Bob was beginning to feel embarrassed that the others would think he was goading the man on. "Speaking of boat, did I tell you what my son said last weekend when we were out at the lake?"

The last thing Bob wanted was an extended conversation about people he didn't even know, with a person he didn't know, so he tried his best to dodge to avoid the conversation. "Yeah, yeah," he nodded, chuckling. "That was a great story."

The man started gesturing in complete frustration. "Hang on a minute." He pointed a finger directly at Bob, then to the tiny wireless earbud in his left ear. "Do you mind? I'm on a call here."

Bob actually felt more relief than shame, "Oh, sorry."

"Sorry, Mom. Some people just can't mind their own business around here. Anyway, where was I?"

Bob rummaged through his backpack and produced his own set of earbuds. He fumbled with the on-button for a few seconds only to discover that they were completely dead. He'd forgotten to charge them the night before. Still, he fitted one piece into each ear and began bobbing his head to the latest Twin Shadow EP, even though it was only playing from memory in his head. If nothing else, this would keep people from talking to him, even if it did nothing for drowning out the man two feet from his face that was loudly dispensing investment strategies to his mother, occasionally getting animated enough to excitedly spray Bob with spittle like some sort of cobra stock broker. Bob, did, however, write down most of what he heard, hoping to get a few good tips. What was the name he'd already heard? Alcor?

Forty-five minutes later, Bob finally finished his unread mail: Six requests for a status update, eighteen status updates from various teammates, none of which even remotely affected him, two reports from a two-year-old project that had been essentially finished, but due to some bureaucratic budgeting nightmare involving an end-of-year timeline, was still open and on the books, generating daily reports and incurring phantom development costs that no doubt some executive was getting a check for, and some department was getting billed for, even though no actual work was being done.

He leaned back in his chair in triumph and was rewarded with a soft, feminine squeal. He shot back upright, embarrassed to realize he just put his head firmly in the buttocks of a female standing directly behind him and unwittingly put himself squarely in the middle of some other team's stand-up meeting which was being held in the "open space" directly behind the row of seats he was sitting in.

"Sorry," Bob said, mostly out of reflex, though he knew nobody was really paying attention to him. Instead the gathering of six or seven, mostly high-level execs were deep in conversation about some strategic initiative that Bob was pretty sure were at least two levels above his pay grade, and quite possibly confidential, as they revolved around the sexual habits, and lack of performance, of one of the team members who was conspicuously absent from the morning's meeting.

He went back to work, pretending to be listening to music and prepping his notes for his own daily meeting when Jackson tapped him on the shoulder.

"You ready? Let's do this."

Bob had been a software developer for nearly fifteen years, mostly as a contractor. Initially, this was because, having no home life or social life of any kind, it allowed him to nearly double his income as a temporary hourly team member, compared to a salaried one. It also allowed him to get massive amounts of exposure to different systems, languages, and vertical industries, making each new contract more lucrative than the last. Sure, there were downsides as well. Health insurance, if even offered by the agency, was awful. 401K plans were becoming increasingly common but were treated like "favors" instead of pretty much standard benefits and transferring them to the plan offered by your next agency when changing employers was extremely difficult without paying for a decent financial advisor and paying withdrawal penalties. Then of course there were the usual attitudes of employers treating contractors like purchased cattle, while employees treated them like unwanted stepsiblings. Contractors had all the stress of working for fast-paced, highly competitive companies, but without the perks, like benefits, decent parking spots, office parties, and employee discounts.

In addition to all the other exciting aspects of being a contract programmer, which really didn't exist, Bob had lived through at least a dozen trendy business management practices. There was a waterfall, which got results, but was terribly inefficient. There was Six Sigma, which was so horribly

efficient that it never really produced results. Then there was Lean Six Sigma, which was Six Sigma but only the easy parts. This was followed by something called Baka-Yoke and a slew of three-letter acronyms – TQM, QIP, ISO, BPR, JIT, FDD, ASD -- that nobody understood, but which made a lot of people rich. Agile, the last big trend, focused on stifling innovation by killing lower-level workers with tiny, repetitive meetings and endless loops that were inexplicably counted as “being productive.” Naturally, this spawned a small army of so-called “experts” each responsible for a veritable Baskin Robbins of Agile flavors such as Lean Agile, Safe Agile, Agile Scrum, Agile Khanban, Agile Grande, Extreme Agile, and Extremely Lean Agile. All of these required a company the size of an aircraft carrier to get all 3000 of its employees across 100 or so departments to learn the methodology, adapt their processes in a vacuum, and turn the carrier on a dime in order to implement properly.

Enpact Software had thrown all of its efforts into the latest business management fad, a Norwegian school of thought colloquially known as “Jazz,” which claimed it worked as not only a business process model but also a culinary methodology and life coaching philosophy. In reality, Bob thought it was possibly the least-effective means of generating actual production, the third worst at enforcing accountability, and the source of at least two dozen entirely new levels of needless ritual that were previously unachievable by conventional, sane tactics. The core tenets of Jazz revolved around 1) an overly flexible approach to task definition, 2) a high degree of individual empowerment to achieve those tasks, and 3) a great degree of communication between all levels of the project at hand. In reality, like its musical namesake, this meant 1) total spontaneity and a complete lack of planning to accomplish even the simplest goals, 2) absolutely no accountability in reaching nebulous milestones on anything remotely resembling a schedule, and 3) an endless series of highly-focused meetings conveying incredible amounts of useless information and terminology that did nothing towards anyone achieving their individual goals. Also like jazz, everyone saw everyone else as “subjectively good” at their job, even if they were “objectively bad” at it. Art is everywhere, but not everybody sees it.

Jazz, itself, was so complex that Enpact Software had invested over two million dollars in hiring a team of the best Jazz consultants (colloquially known as “Band Leaders”) and assigned one to every major project team to help ensure that, while nothing was really getting done, at least it was all not getting done in a uniform manner across the company.

If all this made the Jazz methodology a vague mystery, Enpact was doubly so. The company itself had been started some twenty years prior in the mythical golden age of the dot com boom – or bubble

as so many of Enpact's early investors were soon to find out. The founders of the company, Peter M. Jameson and Jedediah Emgle were little more than 20-something wunderkinds at the time who had put together a glorified address book on a website that allowed people to do what by today's standards were relatively simple things: share contact lists with other people, make and track appointments, and generally accumulate and disseminate massive amounts of data about all of your customers. From these humble beginnings Jameson and Emgle hired more and more people to add their ideas and features to the software, purchased most of their competitors, absorbed those bits of functionality into their growing monstrosity, and finally took the company public ... allowing it to grow from a simple start-up in Jameson's garage to a major player in the industry that now encompassed seventeen floors of an ugly monstrosity of a downtown high-rise and a few hundred satellite offices in strip-malls scattered all over the world. Enpact's flagship product, ENP 14.1, was now branded as an end-to-end business management suite that ... well, frankly nobody knew everything that it did ... and like the rocks, Bob was afraid to ask after his first week working at the company for fear that he might be mistaken for some sort of corporate spy.

Bob's project team, colloquially known as the "Dominant 7," was assigned to write the back-end software that powered the registration system for the company's upcoming global convention, "Empower 2020." Having witnessed first-hand the hedonistic decadence of the corporate offices, Bob could only imagine what went on in hotel rooms and the surrounding bars at a week-long convention dedicated to celebrating the corporate culture of Enpact. This year's convention was a mere nine months away and due to take place in Las Vegas, an idyllic vacation spot in the middle of August, or so he was told. Their particular portion of the puzzle had been in the planning stages for three months, followed by the budgeting stages for six months, then the design stage for about three weeks, and finally with registration due to go online in a mere ten business days, they were finally ready to begin work. The Jazz consultants saw nothing wrong with this cadence, and often referred to it as "swingin'."

The Dominant Seven consisted primarily of Bob, as the software developer; Mary Ann, an interface designer and user experience expert; and Carl Gordon, the database administrator. Jackson Montana was also on the team as something called a "Door Man", though Bob wasn't really sure what his actual day-to-day job entailed, other than being charming and keeping people away from Joe, Mary Ann, and himself. The remaining members, Randy Lucas (Conductor) and Ned Grossman (Roadie) seemed to be mostly administrative. The all-important "seventh" on the team was hired Jazz consultant and "Band Leader," Karen Copley-Stuart, who ensured that all of the vitally important tenets of Jazz

were strictly adhered to. She led all the team meetings and kept everyone on task and in focus. Bob often felt she was merely a spiked shoe and Russian accent away from being the femme fatale villain in a James Bond film. The overtly sexual clothing, sharp glasses, and impossibly tight bun she wore her jet-black hair in did nothing to detract from this metaphor.

“Okay, people,” Karen began, “Jam Session #4. You know the routine. We’ll go around the ensemble, sixty seconds each. What did you do yesterday? What are you going to do today? List any brown notes you are encountering. We’ll start with you.” She made a gesture at Jackson with a conductor’s baton, her face remaining all business and completely expressionless.

“Well, let’s see,” Jackson took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling for a second to collect his thoughts. “Two meetings yesterday. One with Paramount Hotels to nail down the perks package for early Enpower registrants. Looks like we’re going to get dry cleaning service, extra shuttles to and from the airport, a couple of free meals, and complimentary casino chips, though the exact amount is still being worked on. I also spoke with one airline about a discount charter from here to Vegas for Enpact employees who will be attending.” There were disinterested nods from the rest of the team at this. Jackson continued, “Today I hope to lock in a deal for bonus frequent flyer miles and maybe a second bag of pretzels and a FULL can of soda for convention attendees, but they’re really playing hardball with me until we can show them some firm registration numbers, so I need you guys to be ready with some really impressive color dashboards for those as soon as the registration software is up and going.” This at least got a half-hearted thumbs-up from Carl and Randy.

“Do you hear any potential brown notes?” Karen asked, still business-like. Brown notes were the Jazz terminology for anything that might impede progress, or “ruin the song,” in Jazz terminology.

“Negative, Ghost Rider,” Jackson smiled, hoping to at least get the fine veneer of Karen’s facial expression to change. No luck.

“Very well,” said without wasting a beat, “Mr. Gordon?”

Carl sniffed confidently and crossed his arms. “I went through the database from the last convention. Some of the key data points we’re tracking are a bit outdated. We’re still tracking applicants’ MySpace pages, for example. Meanwhile, we really should be keeping up with more-modern platforms like TickTack, SnapFace and InstaSquare.”

Mary Ann cleared her throat softly. “Aren’t those mostly for teenage girls with daddy issues and low self-esteem to post slightly-suggestive pictures of themselves to get adulation from strangers?”

“Aaaand middle-aged men who find that kind of thing entertaining -- which makes up a good chunk of our potential target market. Besides, there’s a ton of localized advertising on those platforms that we could be taking advantage of,” Carl offered.

Mary Ann shrugged in defeat, “Well, it’s no problem to add a couple more fields to the profile form. Bob, can you add those and bind them to the database for Carl?”

“Should be easy. I’ll just need the original back-end code for the registration module and about half a day to add and test the new bindings.”

Carl winced slightly, “Ooh, that’s going to be tough. That’s virgin code there. I suspect it goes back to the very first Enpower Convention. Good luck getting ‘hold of that.”

“Okay,” Bob said, attempting to be helpful, “so that’s our first ... brown note.”

“Not so fast, Mr. Chase,” Karen interrupted sternly. “You’re playing over Mr. Gordon. You need to mind your part.”

“I was just trying to—”

“This is no time to take a solo. Mr. Gordon is grooving in the pocket. You need to respect that.” She turned towards Carl. “Continue, Mr. Gordon.”

“No, that was pretty much it. Bob’s absolutely right.”

Karen exhaled sharply, “Very well. Mr. Chase?”

“Well, as I said, I can get those fields added to the interface really quickly, but there’s the matter of getting hold of the legacy code, so I suggest —”

“This is a jam session, Mr. Chase. We don’t compose during a jam session,” she scowled. “We only need to identify potential brown notes in this meeting. We’ll determine how to play around them in the scoring session.”

“Wait. So, when is that one, again?”

Karen sighed impatiently. “The Coda is tomorrow, where we will analyze everything we played this week, identifying and documenting the successes and failures of the weekly session. Then on Wednesday, we’ll have the scoring session where we plan out next week’s jams, including how to deal with the brown notes.”

“So, wait, we’ve identified a problem, but we aren’t allowed to actually talk about it until tomorrow, and I can’t actually do anything about it for two days? You realize we only have ten days until—”

“Your solo is running a bit long, mister!” Karen scolded, thumping her watch for added effect.

Bob flinched, though secretly felt triumphant in getting the ice queen’s cool exterior to crack a little.

Karen visibility recomposed herself. “There is a proper way of planning, tracking, and performing work under the Jazz methodology,” she said calmly. “It’s my job to conduct this ensemble, and I was hired to do so in accordance with accepted processes. I assure you, if this project isn’t completed on time, then it will be because you didn’t play your parts correctly, and not the fault of the process or my ability to keep you in adherence to it.”

"Well, I'll be damned if I'm going to let some trendy consultant who doesn't know the first thing about software development dictate how I do my job. If they want this system up in time, I'm going to have to do this myself." Bob was fuming. Okay, if somebody wanted a few reports or customized meeting agendas, that was one thing, but this was a matter of pride, even for a "lowly contractor" who had just about all of that pride systematically beaten out of him over the past eighteen months.

He pulled the project folder and started opening code files looking for the various routines that focused on convention registration. This was a simple enough task as many of them had just been modified the day before by Mary Ann. From there it took only a little more searching to find the calls to

the libraries that took the data collection from the convention registration form and loaded it into the massive Enpact system.

Like following a trail of street signs on a freeway, Bob easily called up the code library being referenced, which should have immediately loaded a new section of program code that was executed when the routine was called. Instead, his system seemed to hang for a few moments, then came back with a nondescript error message.

THE REFERENCED LIBRARY IS CHANGE-LOCKED AND CAN NOT BE VIEWED

That was strange. Who would change-lock a development library, particularly one that's so old? Sure, it was standard practice for production software, as it kept customers and the general public from getting modifying source code and unknowingly breaking other parts of the system that shared the code. Changes were a part of life on the development side of the system, however, a programmer might have any number of reasons to see or modify the code already written for the system. There would be no reason to be modifying this code, however.

Bob turned to Mary Ann next to him. “Hey, did you change-lock the registration code when you prettied up the registration form yesterday?”

Mary Ann pulled her earbuds out of her ears. “No, I wasn’t changing anything at your level, just making the form a bit more readable.”

“Well, the library is locked. It won’t even show me the code.”

“Who locked it?” Mary Ann asked leaning over to read Bob’s screen.

“It doesn’t say that either.”

Mary Ann shrugged. “Maybe the last person to do a build simply locked it by mistake and simply forgot about it. It’s probably been locked for years. Why don’t you just put in an admin request to have it manually unlocked?”

Bob's eyebrows arched in helplessness. "You want to include a sysadmin? You realize how much paperwork I will have to fill out and how long it will take them to confirm nobody is legitimately using that code? We've only got ten days to get this online."

Jackson, sitting on the other side of Bob, chimed in, "You could always just pull the source code from the archive, rebuild the entire library with your changes, and check it in as a code branch."

Bob thought about the idea. It made sense and put the responsibility of verifying and merging the code on the inconsiderate idiot who left the library checked out. He was now very glad he'd decided to work on this on his own, without waiting to get it on the "song chart" to be worked in sequence. Had he waited until the scoring session two days from now, it would have constituted an even longer delay in getting the routines up and running. "Good idea," Bob said, nodding and shooting Jackson with a finger gun.

"What's the library you're trying to access?" Jackson asked.

Bob looked back at the program code on his screen. "Something called S2EMPST."

Jackson looked puzzled. "That's not in the standard naming scheme. That's gotta be really old code. Even the name doesn't make sense. I'd be careful modifying anything in there."

"Must be. There aren't even any comments explaining what it's supposed to do?"

"Try pulling up the design file," Mary Ann interjected. "Maybe you can at least find a reference and get the name of the programmer who wrote it. Maybe you'll get lucky and they still work here doing something."

Bob closed the code window, typed a few commands, and accessed the system documentation, and extensive online repository of notes, diagrams, and tables that represented a collective 25+ years of knowledge, experience, and effort by dozens of different programmers. It felt a bit like walking on hallowed ground. Who were these ghosts in the machine? What had happened to them? He clicked the search icon and entered a series of commands intended to instruct the archive to look for any references to code library "S2EMPST." He wasn't convinced that there would be only one routine with that name in the millions of lines of code the archive stored. If nothing else, there would certainly be

multiple versions of the code he was looking for, going back possibly years with only slight modifications differentiating one from another. This is where the real sleuthing would come in, and he braced himself for a long list of search results, hoping one would come with a name, or a description, saving him several days of scouring program code looking for clues.

Instead, his screen flickered half a dozen times, filled itself with gibberish, then displayed a brief video of two people, engaged in a rather personal act that could only be described as “very unhygienic.”

All three programmers screamed in unison and pushed their chairs away from the desk. Then, thinking better of this, immediately lunged forward to slam the laptop closed. Bob reached the machine first, slamming it down on Mary Ann’s fingers. Jackson managed to slip off of his chair and caught his chin on the edge of the table. Surely every co-worker in sight had heard their simultaneous cry and seen the spectacle, but none pretended to notice, barely looking up from their own screens.

“What the hell was that!?” Mary Ann hissed as quietly as possible.

Bob looked aghast, “I have absolutely no idea.”

“It’s called a ‘Weaver Bay Beef Smoothie,’” Jackson said, matter-of-factly, picking himself off the floor and making sure his chin wasn’t bleeding.

Mary Ann rolled her eyes, “You know, I really meant that as a ‘general’ question, right?”

Jackson shrugged.

Bob slowly lifted the lid of the laptop off of Mary Ann’s fingers just enough to peer underneath and see if the picture was still on the screen. Seeing nothing but horizontal color bars, he slowly opened the screen the rest of the way and tried to restore the code window. The laptop did not respond to any keystrokes or mouse movements. “It’s frozen now,” he said, trying several different combinations of keys to get the computer to respond, then finally settled for mashing his hand into the keyboard, covering as many keys as a could. The computer made no acknowledgment or protest of this. Bob would have been happy with even a “beep” of annoyance, but it was not to be. The computer was effectively frozen. Even the power button had stopped functioning.

“Ooooh, that looks serious.”

"Yeah, last thing I needed on a tight deadline. What are we going to do now?"

"You could take it down to the Tech Lounge," Mary Ann offered.

"Nooooo." Bob whimpered.

"Oh, it'll be fun. At least you'll get out of here for a while," Jackson gestured around at the lifeless forms hunched over their keyboards, still oblivious to everything going on.

Bob thought for a minute, then reached into his backpack, pulled out a brush, and ran it through his hair a few times.

Jackson stared, puzzled. "Just what kind of lounge do you think they're running?!"

"Just trying to look nice," Bob ignored him and returned the brush to his backpack.

"Wait," Mary Ann gasped, "Who's the girl?!"

"There's no girl." Bob protested.

Jackson was still confused, "He's right, there are no girls working in the Tech Lounge. Just the Help Desk staff."

"Then she's somewhere between here and there," Mary Ann smiled at her deductive abilities.

"The only thing between here and there is three flights of stairs and about ten feet of hallway," Jackson said. Suddenly his eyes lit up with recognition. "So, she lives in the stairwell?" He grabbed Bob's ear and pulled upward. "Out with it. Who is she?"

Bob howled with pain, "Alright alright! Just promise me you won't laugh or say anything."

Mary Ann shook her head, "Laughing is a reflexive action. Nobody can promise that. However, I will try to keep it to a snicker."

Bob looked at Jackson, who nodded in general agreement, gesturing with his hands for Bob to hurry up and get on with the story.

"It's no big deal. Just a girl I see in the stairwell every once in a while. We've never even spoken to each other before, barely made eye contact... Well at least, *I* haven't. Then all of a sudden today, she says 'hi' and asks how I've been as if we're old friends or something. I don't even know the first thing about her. Hell, it took me three months to overhear someone talking to her just so I could get a name: Paula."

"You realize, it's not considered rude or taboo to ask a stranger their name, right?" Mary Ann chided, then searched her memory for a face to put with the name. "I don't know any Paulas here though."

Jackson, the facial expression didn't change, "Jet black hair with blonde highlights, dark brown eyes, usually in sensible shoes, a trendy skirt that cut just above the knee, and a shirt that she severely taxes the stress limitations of the buttons on."

"I ... I ... never check the shoes ..." Bob protested.

Jackson started laughing uncontrollably. "Abort mission, Cadet Chase. Abort mission!"

"What?! What do you mean?"

Jackson put a hand on Bob's shoulder. "Out of your league, my friend. Hell, wrong stadium. I mean ... never mind ... you don't even play the same sport. "

Mary Ann tried to be more sympathetic. "Oh, come on, Jackson. Every guy has aspirations of hitting above his weight class. I mean, Bob's reasonably attractive." She winced and looked at Bob apologetically. "Plus, he's successful, smart ... mentally stable. I mean, sometimes these things work out. I'm sure he can pull off at least one successful date with a co-worker."

Jackson crossed his arms in triumph, "Oh yeah? Well, first of all, she's a senior corporate communications consultant."

"That's fine. Bob's a contractor, but he's at ... roughly ... the same level in his career. Well, at least they won't be competing or comparing job duties."

"She has three degrees, including a master's in English lit and a law degree."

"So? Smart girl. Means she's drama free and very sensible. Probably seeks the same in a companion, and Bob here," she gestured at Bob with a flourish, "is definitely drama free and practically wrote the book on sensible." She nodded triumphantly and turned to Bob. "Hell, if it comes to it, I'll be a character reference and put in a good word with Paula for you."

Jackson signed and crossed his arms, "It's not 'Paula.' It's Paola. Paola Duarte."

Mary Ann thought for a minute, then placed the name. "Ohhhh, yeah, Paola! She's the Brazilian girl who teaches my spinboxing class at the gym. Oh, yeah, she's stupid hot." She saw the look of excitement on Bob's face, then turned suddenly somber. "Yeah, abort, buddy. You can't pull a smart/hot/physically fit Brazilian girl," she said, somberly patting Bob on the shoulder.

CHAPTER THREE

"Bonjour! Bienvenue to zhe Tech Lounge, my name is Aldo, 'ow shall I be helping you today?"

Bob couldn't believe the accent was legitimate, or that the help desk, known colloquially as the "Tech Lounge" was in fact a genuine lounge, complete with downtempo techno music, pink ambient lighting, plastic art-deco furniture, and a juice bar at the far end of the room.

Oh, then there was somewhat haughty maitre'd with the French accent. Bob had almost forgotten about him. "Uh, hi. I'm Bob Chase. I seem to be having problems with my laptop."

Aldo scanned through a giant book on the podium in front of him. "Monsieur Shaize ... Shaize ... I'm afriad I do not 'ave you on mah list, missour. You do have a reservation, no?"

"No. I mean, how could I?" Bob held up his laptop, "My computer is completely frozen. It won't even reboot. How was I supposed to make a reservation?"

"Oh," Aldo looked almost dejected. He clicked his tongue a few times. Scanned the list once more, then wrote something in it. "I am afraid we are full up, monsieur. Without ze reservation..." He held out a white-gloved hand.

Bob rolled his eyes, grabbed his wallet, and extracted a five-dollar bill, making a point to show that it was all the cash he was currently carrying. He started to hand it to Aldo, who scolded him with his eyes. Realizing what he had done, Bob folded the bill neatly, fit it into the palm of his right hand, then extended his arm as if offering a handshake.

Aldo smiled, shook Bob's hand, and deftly removed the bill. He then wrote something in his book. "Ah, yes, Monsier Shaize. We 'ave been expecting you. If you will take a seat, I am sure someone will be with you just zhust a few moments, missour. Can I get you an espresso or possibly a citron presse?"

"No. Nothing. Thank you." Bob skulked off towards one of the couches along the wall, deflated.

"Bluna on ice, perhaps?" Aldo offered.

"Nothing. Thank you."

"Fresca?"

Bob rolled his eyes and sat down.

"The Bluna isn't half bad," came a voice further down the couch. Bob looked over and saw a middle-aged man, perhaps approaching 60. "It's actually German, though," he added in a conspiratorial whisper. "So, maybe, Aldo's pro-Vichy."

"Has this whole company gone insane?"

"You don't know the half of it," the man said, gesturing at Bob's grey ID badge. "You're just a contractor."

Bob was prepared with his usual speech of indignation, but something in the man's tone did not intend offense. It was probably the way he didn't say "contractor" with the same inflection with which most people said "armpit."

Finally, the man smiled and held out his hand. "I'm Alan. Alan Duke. Senior data architect."

"Bob Chase. Middle-tier nobody."

"Ah," Alan smiled, "The salt of the earth. I started out as a middle-tier developer. Actually, back then we developed all the tiers ... and managed the databases ... and did the graphic design ... and took turns cleaning the bathrooms."

"You've been here that long?"

"Here? No. Only about ten years. I cut my teeth bouncing from one dot-com to the other during the bubble. This is just the first one that didn't go down in a blaze of glory, so I stuck around."

"That must have been some fun."

Alan smiled, "Oh, sure. Constant unemployment, multiple divorces, shitty credit rating, but yeah, you get some good stories out of it." He sat back and took a sip of something orange. "So, what brings you to the lounge?"

"Frozen computer. You?"

"Just trying to get a graphing program installed. They lock these things down so tight you have to come down here and beg the techs to allow you to install stuff. Hope you didn't lose anything when the computer froze."

"Not really. I was just trying to get hold of some old code. I'm working on the registration system for Enpower 2020, and we just want to add a couple of fields to the old registration database."

"And that froze your machine? Maybe you should just rewrite the interface yourself."

"No time. We go live in ten days. It would take me longer than that to figure out the data structures without any kind of code reference." Bob gestured at the 50" video screen on the wall which was playing an Enpower 2020 video promotion on a loop. Currently, Pete Maximus, Enpact Software's rockstar marketing exec, was doing a soft shoe dance along the edge of a resort pool wearing a black tux top with a bright orange swimsuit. He was eventually joined by an array of similarly dressed clones of himself, all singing the corporate jingle together in what looked like Busby Berkely's worst nightmare. The funny thing was, for a marketing exec, he was a surprisingly good singer and dancer.

"Aldo tells me you have problem vit computer, no?"

Bob nearly leaped out of his sit. The six-foot-three hulk of a man had somehow completely sneaked up on him. He was dressed completely in black ... Tight fitting slacks and a wool turtleneck that almost covered his neck tattoos. Two black, beady eyes regarded Bob from a mostly shaved head, and two giant, somewhat bruised hands that looked like they'd spent most of the morning punching sides of beef reached out for his laptop.

"It ... It seems to be frozen," Bob offered, handing the machine over.

"Frozen?! Bah," the accent was definitely Russian. "You have not seen frozen until you spend winter in Novosibirsk. Of course, no one in right might would spend winter there wolutarily, eh?" He

chuckled as he opened the lid, regarded the still-frozen screen, and punched a few keys half-heartedly. "What were you doing when problem start, eh?"

"N... N... Nothing," Bob said, remembering the image that would, quite possibly, require several months of therapy to learn to repress. "Just trying to access some legacy code for my project."

The large man regarded him warily for a moment, then stared deeply into his eyes, accusingly. "This would not be cause of lockup," he said with an accusatory tone.

Bob was about to confess to various petty crimes and intents before he realized he hadn't done anything wrong. "Seriously, it's just some old interface code for the registration system," he pointed at the screen, where Pete Maximus was now wearing a tux bottom and bright yellow tank top, playing poker with a few tuxedo-clad celebrities. "For Enpower 2020?" The Russian was still eyeing him suspiciously. "Have you ever been?" Bob asked, hoping to change the subject.

The large man shook his head, "No." Suddenly he looked and said, "Boris does as he is told. They tell Boris to go to tech lounge; fix problem. So, Boris goes to tech lounge. Boris will fix problem." He turned and walked back to the bar area. "Boris will call you when time to come back."

"Yeah, but I really need that--"

"You have problem with this? Boris will fix you too. Go. Wait for Boris' call."

"What about a loaner?"

"Loner? No. Loners for employees. You are what is called ..." he paused for a minute, searching for the word, "contractor. Only temporary," Boris said, putting just a little too much significance on the last word.

"Yeah, but I'm on a really tight deadline and I can't afford to lose even an afternoon of work. At the very least can I have something to check my email?"

"No loaners for contractors. Now, go away or Boris will check your email. You understand what Boris is saying?"

"Okaaaay," Bob said, turning on his heel, not sure what was going on. He started to head for the door.

"Hey, Bob?" Alan Duke was on his feet and walking after him.

Bob turned his head, but didn't stop walking, "Yeah?"

"I've been thinking, you know, about your code?"

"Yeah?"

Alan stroked his beard a few times then pointed aimlessly. "You might try going up to Legacy Support on the ninth floor. They've got their own separate archive there and copies of just about every line of code ever written by this company, used or unused. Might save you some lost time while you wait for Igor there to fix your laptop."

Bob thought about this. He'd worked with that team on a previous project, and they did have access to just about everything, assuming you could get one of them to cooperate. Still, it was better than sitting around doing nothing. "Good idea. Thanks, Mr. Duke. I'll do that." He extended a hand, which Alan shook enthusiastically.

"My pleasure, Mr. Chase. It was nice meeting you. I hope everything works out with your project."

During his ascent to the Developer Bay on the ninth floor, Bob was, for once, grateful he did not encounter Paula -- or was it really Paolla? Was Jackson right? He usually was, anyway. How could Bob have missed the accent? Was that why "Hey! How are you?" sounded so unusually familiar to him as first words? Was that just a peculiar quirk of Brazilian speech? How could he face her again having acted like such an idiot before? The word, "FnnnnGAHHH," played over and over in his mind. Hell, it wasn't even a word; just a guttural moan from a dying loser with terminal mediocrity. He wasn't even sure how many syllables the aimless noise had so he could determine which of them was ahead in syllable count. Was it 4-3? 4-2? Who knew? He refused to let himself consider whether she had heard him trip and fall

after she rounded the corner. A grand total of less than eight syllables exchanged and he'd pretty much embarrassed himself for life already.

He opened the door to the ninth floor and stepped out into the main room. Already it seemed much more spacious than his own part of the fifth floor. Instead of the rows of seats, the developers were afforded expansive desks with -- *gasp* -- were those bamboo dividers? Were people actually hanging things up in their work areas? Memes of various Star Wars and Warcraft scenes adorned the makeshift walls. Action figures sat perched atop monitors and filing cabinets. An array of colorful keyboards and mice were spread across the room. It was almost as if a time warp had taken him back to 2009.

The only thing missing was the people. 11 AM was too early for a lunch break, as most software engineers didn't even get to the office before 10:00, and would only start serious work after 10:30. Lunch before noon was unheard of.

A familiar "click-clack... click-clack" sound echoed in the distance behind him. Bob walked around the bank of elevators, through a room of copy equipment and printers that didn't look to have ever been used, and found his hunches confirmed.

In the distance, by the window, what Bob presumed was the entire population of the floor, were gathered in the "soft seat" area. Two were playing a very heated game of air hockey, much to the amusement of four or five others, who appeared to have wagered on the outcome. Against the window was an array of classic 80's arcade machines, where one medium-height blonde girl was frantically beating on a Centipede cabinet. At one of the large tables in the middle of the room, the last half-dozen or so people were standing around a miniature battlefield arguing something about heat sinks and armor points.

"Um, excuse me?" Bob called out.

Nobody paid the slightest attention to him.

"Hi, I'm from the registration development team? On five?"

Still no response.

"Alan Duke sent me here to see about getting access to an old code library."

"Who is he?" The girl playing Centipede asked one of the guys at the gaming table without turning around.

"Grey Badge," the gamer answered.

"Well?" Centipede prompted impatiently, "How are we supposed to greet our guests?"

The man at the gaming table walked over to stand in front of Bob, apparently sizing him up. The man was comically shorter but carried the air of a much-tougher person. The Ramones shirt he wore didn't really inform Bob's assessment one way or another. "A test of skill is issued, Contractor. You must best our champion. Do you choose a test of physical skill," he motioned to the air hockey table with his left hand, "or mental skill?" He gestured to a booth on the right where a tall lanky man sat with glasses so thick that Bob was surprised the light they focused didn't burn his eyes out of their sockets.

"Look, I don't have time for this, I just need access to an old code library--"

"—and for that, you must prove yourself worthy, Herbert!" the man said with an accusing tone.

Bob rolled his eyes. If this wasn't a complete dead end, it was at the very least a waste of time. "I am not Herbert," he sighed.

"Ramone," as Bob was now calling him in his head, turned to the others, "He is not Herbert! We reach!"

He pointed at the lanky man with the spectacles at the table who, without even looking up, issued his challenge. "And now it is your turn. Your turn to hear the stone, and then your turn to burn. The stone it calls to you. You can't refuse to do the things it tells you to. And as the screaming fire engine siren fills the air..." His voice trailed off and he stared at Bob, expectantly.

Bob was at his wit's end. It was a simple enough request. He just wanted the code. He didn't want to be riddled to death by Gollum in a manga t-shirt. Did they do this to everyone who came in with a request, or was this treatment reserved for him?

Suddenly, familiarity dawned on him. Herbert? The riddle wasn't a riddle, and this wasn't a battle of wits to annoy contractors, it was a test of character to determine worthiness. Pretty sick, yes, but Bob knew first hand that's what happens when software engineers are allowed to gather in mass without adult supervision for extended periods of time. It was well documented in several psychological texts and at least three first-season episodes of Star Trek.

Bob ran the words over in his head, and slowly a long-forgotten tune attached itself to them. "And as the screaming fire engine siren fills the air," he sang softly at first, then with more power and confidence "The evidence will vanish from your charred and smoking chair!"

The spectacled man behind the table smiled slightly and nodded approval. Ramone was dead serious, and he pointed the girl at the Centipede game. Annoyed, she rolled her eyes and without looking up from the game asked, "What man could commit a sin in a single lifetime to bring that upon himself?"

The quote was familiar enough from Mystery Science Theater 3000, but the slight rewording made Bob pause for a minute. She wants the original reference, he decided, racking his memory for the answer. It was back there, either from a late-night horror film, or possibly from one of a few hundred episodes of MST3K, but what was it? Images began to flicker in the corners of his mind. Plane crash ... atomic test ... Hoover Dam ... 60-foot man in a diaper? "Amazing Colossal Man!" Bob blurted out.

There were five painful seconds of stillness, then Centipede Girl nodded at "Ramone."

"Ramone" squinted slightly, snapped his finger, and pointed at a kindly-faced elderly man sitting by the window. The man simply smiled, regarded Bob, and asked, "Where doth the null pointer point? To regions filled with dragons, demons, core dumps, and numberless other foul creatures? Or to an endless array of zeroes as implied in code of old?"

Now this guy, Bob decided, he liked. Finally, someone with a sensible knowledge of technology over pop culture. He answered confidently from an ancient text handed to him during his first computer science course in college, "Thou shall not follow the null pointer, for chaos and madness await thee at its end!"

The old man smiled and nodded his agreement, and all of the assembled developers began quietly chanting, “One of us ... one of us ... gobble gobble ... we accept him.”

“Ramone” placed a hand on Bob’s shoulder and walked him through the crowd toward a lone cubicle in the far, unlit corner of the floor. “Welcome, honored traveler. I am called, Eugene. You have proven worthy. You should put in for a transfer and come join us. We’ve got a couple of openings.”

“What do you guys even work on up here?”

“Work?! Hell, we fell through the cracks ages ago. They give us a budget for maintenance and administration of some legacy apps and servers that I don’t think anybody even uses anymore. It’s been at least three years since any of us did anything other than help some user unlock their account or recover a password. Seriously though, you should look into it. The boss is cool if nothing else.” With that Eugene gestured for Bob to enter the cubicle behind him, where one woman sat hunched over an old desktop terminal with a CRT monitor. She was reasonably pretty, well-dressed, and certainly didn’t seem to fit in with the rest of the team on this floor. “Got a visitor, Captain. Says he wants some archive code.”

“Jeez, Eugene, you didn’t do that silly ‘test of worthiness’ bullshit again, did you?”

“It’s okay,” Eugene pleaded, “He passed.”

The woman sighed and frantically gestured for Eugene to get out of her sight. “The Ramones still suck, by the way,” she added for good measure as he walked away. She regarded Bob with cold, lifeless eyes for a moment, stood up, and offered her hand, “Michelle Goldstein, Product Owner for Legacy Systems.”

“Bob Chase,” he said, shaking her hand, “middle-tier developer.”

“Sorry about my team there, Chase. We share this floor with the remote sales department. When they’re not out flying all over the country taking customers out for six martini lunches, or banging the intern pool in the restroom stalls, they’re generally over on our side of the floor acting like the overprivileged fraternity douchebags and trying to pick fights. Needless to say, my team does NOT get along with them, and we’ve been in something of a severely escalated practical joke war for the last

couple of years. Hence, the little ritual to make sure you were on the up and up and not setting us up for an elaborate retaliation, probably involving swirlies.”

It all made a kind of twisted sense to Bob, who attempted to convey a bit of sympathy in his nod of impatience.

“What brings you to my humble kingdom, Chase?” She continued.

“I need to get some old libraries to hook some upgraded software into the ENP system, but I’ve hit a bit of a snag getting into our code repository. I was told you guys have a separate one that’s probably more complete than ours.”

“You heard right,” Michelle said, spinning her chair back to her keyboard. “What library are you looking for?”

“Not sure specifically. It’s whichever library contains an old first-generation module called S2EMPST.”

“S-2-E-N-P-S-T...”

“No, E-M-P,” Bob corrected her.

Michelle shook her head, “That doesn’t make any sense though.”

“Oh, because spelling it ‘Enpact Software’ in fifteen-foot-high letters on the side of your building does?” Bob sneered.

“That’s what I mean, it breaks the pattern,” she typed a few more characters and waited. “Why do I feel like I’ve had this conversation before? What are you working on?”

“The registration system for Enpower 2020.”

“Oh ... ‘The Widowmaker,’” Michelle whispered under her breath to herself. “So they’re back to doing those again, now?”

“Yeah, you hadn’t heard? Next fall in Las Vegas. They’re expecting more than 20,000 people this year. I hear they’ve even got Falco to sing at the opening ceremonies.”

“We really need to hear a Eurotrash disco version of ‘Puttin’ on the Ritz’ to kick off a software conference?”

Bob shook his head, “Rock me, Amadeus.”

“Ahhh,” Michelle nodded in acknowledgment, then seem lost in thought for a moment.

“Taco,” Bob offered.

She snapped one finger as recognition set in, “That’s right, thanks! Always got those two confused.”

Suddenly, Bob realized what he’d overlooked. “Wait ... why did you call it ‘The Widowmaker?’”

There was a long pause as she seemed to be considering her next words carefully. “Chase, has anybody mentioned to your team why they haven’t done an Empower conference in the past several years?”

“It hasn’t come up, why?”

“It just seems odd. Those conventions were huge revenue streams for years. They helped this company double in size almost every year they were held. Then, suddenly, they just stopped doing them five years ago. No explanation. The company is still growing, but much more slowly. What’s more, most of our great innovations came from those Empower conferences and discussions we had with our customers. So now we quit doing conferences, we quit adding features,” she paused for a moment, “and we quit growing the company. I’ve just always wondered why.”

“Does it matter? We’re back this year. That’s gotta put a few bucks in the Christmas bonuses.”

Michelle nodded but was still deep in thought, “Yeah, maybe. Anyway, it’s going to take me a while to find that module. I’ll package it up and shoot it all to you in an email when I’ve located it.”

“Sounds good,” Bob smiled, then added, “I hope I’m not putting you through too much trouble.”

Michelle shook her head, “Are you kidding? I’ve got a team of ten people who are paid to play video games and support old servers and systems that nobody even uses. I appreciate any escape from that drudgery.”

“So where are we having lunch?” Mary Ann, Jackson, and Bob were staring out the window at gray skies, sleet, and unrelenting winds.

“I’m good with the cafeteria,” Bob said at last.

“Booorinnng!” Jackson sang. “Let’s do the Thai buffet down by the city market.”

Mary Ann pushed her chair back, excited, “I’m game!”

“Seriously?! The weather looks disgusting out there, plus it’s a long haul, and you know, the scooter gangs have been really on a tear these past few weeks,” Bob moaned.

“So, we’ll take the tunnels,” Mary Ann said holding up a clipboard as if it was supposed to hold some kind of significance to Bob.

Everyone who worked downtown knew about the intricate series of tunnels that connected most of the major hotels and restaurants with the State Capital building and its offices. Originally designed as a means for the Governor and state reps to get around without the drudgery of being seen by people, access to the tunnels was one of the few perks of working what was otherwise a low-paying, high-stress, career-killing temporary job with a state agency.

Bob was genuinely confused. “I hate to break it to you, but I haven’t worked a State job in years. My ID isn’t going to be any good in the tunnels.”

“Since when do you need an ID to use the tunnels? Didn’t you ever learn about drafting?” This from Jackson.

“Drafting? No. It never came up. I’ve never used the tunnels except when I had an ID,” Bob said. Jackson looked at him with condescending amusement, “Wait. What’s drafting?”

“Oh, boy, are you in for a treat. Mary Ann here’s a master. Let’s go.” With that, he linked arms with Mary Ann with a courtly flourish and the three of them started for the elevator. Bob broke formation upon reaching the door to the stairwell. Jackson looked disappointed, “Seriously, dude? What’s with your fear of elevators anyway? Flying maybe, but when was the last time someone died in an elevator?”

“I’m not afraid of flying or elevators, I just prefer the stairs, okay? Less breathing other people’s air and awkward social situations,” Bob protested, then added, “But, for your information, about a dozen elevator repairmen are killed every year due to carelessness working around elevators. They’re not as innocent as you would think.” He opened the door and began sprinting down the stairs, determined that he would reach the first floor before Jackson and Mary Ann, just to punctuate his point.

In this instance, he was successful, hitting the ground floor a full fifteen seconds before the elevator, which was almost enough time for him to catch his breath and not appear exhausted. He made a haughty, exaggerated bow as his two companions exited and gestured back towards the stairwell Bob had just exited.

“Hey, it’s Sebastian Foucan.” Mary Ann said, pushing him back through the door, “The tunnels are this way.”

The three descended one more flight of stairs to the basement level. “I’ve never actually been down here,” Bob said amazed that their access cards worked on the door.

“It’s the IT workshop and storage area,” Jackson offered, “You think the Tech Lounge is a freak show? You should meet the mole people that live down here.”

Bob instantly saw that Jackson was correct. From behind various chain-link walls -- meant to protect the myriad and expensive pieces of equipment from would-be thieves -- pale, gelatinous figures with wispy hair and squinting eyes peered up at the newcomers, the fact that they were, quite literally, kept in cages only added to their feral appearance.

The three quickly shot through the room and exited through a “Restricted Access” door conveniently left unlocked via surreptitiously placed duct tape that kept the latching mechanism from closing. They passed into a wide corridor about ten feet across that formed one terminus of the great

downtown tunnel system, which consisted of a series of identical hallways interspersed with security doors meant to discourage the layman's access to the maze of connected office buildings. Fluorescent lights ran along the ceiling, and the walls were freshly decorated with various advertising posters promoting restaurant specials, upcoming plays at the local theater, and various major television events coming up over the next few weeks. To Bob, it looked less like a series of maintenance tunnels and more like an airport concourse.

Jackson gestured for Bob to follow closely between himself and Mary Ann who assumed the lead position. "Okay, hotshot. Stick close to the master and try to keep up."

Mary Ann hefted her clipboard, pretending to read from it as she started down the hallway. As soon as a man in an expensive gray suit entered the corridor ahead of them, she picked up her pace with deliberate speed, as if running late for something. She reached the door right at the same time as the man who, upon seeing how busy she was, held the door and motioned her through. "Come on, you two, if you make me late again, I'll put my foot so far up your ass you'll taste toenail polish!" She snipped, motioning for Bob and Jackson to hurry up. The man in the suit smiled sympathetically and held the door for them as well.

"Be lucky you don't have to work with THAT," Jackson quipped as he passed the man.

At their current pace, they were a good ten feet ahead of the man before he started off again behind them. "Jackson, I think that was the Governor," Bob whispered.

"Was it? I don't watch the news. It brings me down."

They reached a second door. This time Mary Ann, who had freed several sheets of paper from the clipboard, was busily pretending to sort them with one hand and her mouth while she fiddled with her worthless access card in the other. The woman walking beside her took pity, swiped her own card, and held the door for the three of them again. "If you don't hurry up and figure out where my new card is, I'm taking yours, along with your entrails ... as a lanyard," Mary Ann screamed at Jackson.

Bob was now trying to hold back nervous laughter. "Jackson, I've been meaning to ask you something"

“What’s that?”

“You were at the company last year, right? Did you work on the registration system?”

Jackson grabbed Bob by the shoulders and pushed him closer in behind Mary Ann. “Yeah, yeah, I was on the team for a while. They canceled the conference though, so we didn’t do a whole lot of work on it.”

The corridors were getting more crowded now. Mary Ann picked up speed and began shouting at an invisible person ahead of them to wait up. The urgency in her tone somehow subconsciously persuaded an elderly man to chivalrously hold the door open for the three of them and allow them to pass him. “Stay close, or I’ll feed your worthless balls to my dog!” Mary Ann quipped under her breath this time.

“So, what happened?” Bob asked.

“One of the key developers quit.” Jackson racked his memory for a moment. “Denzio, I think his name was. Boy, was that guy a flake.”

“A flake?” Bob asked as the three of them cut in front of a group of interns Mary Ann had been shouting at to make a hole, which they did in a terrified fashion.

“Yeah, one of those tinfoil hat conspiracy nut types. Thought the government was out to kill him or something. One night he just up and disappeared.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Nobody knows.”

“So where does he work now?”

“That’s what I mean. Nobody knows. Skipped town. Left all his stuff in his apartment. They were never able to find him. Dude just went off the grid.”

“Nobody just goes ‘off the grid,’ spontaneously, Jackson. That takes months of planning.” Bob looked around trying to get his bearings, but with no external windows for a frame of reference, he was

hopelessly lost. He called up to Mary Ann, now at least three strides ahead of them. “You sure you know where you’re going? Where the hell are we, anyway?”

Marry Ann pointed to a short hallway that ran off to their left and ended after about ten feet to a pair of red oak doors with the words ‘Beauchamp Plaza’ in ornate letters carved on them. “We’re right beneath the old Beauchamp Hotel on 5th.”

“The one they closed down after it got infested by ghosts or something?”

“Zombies,” Mary Ann said, “But I don’t think that’s why it closed.”

Bob started to slow a little and decided to let Mary Ann continue ahead. “Jackson, they call this project, ‘The Widowmaker.’ Have they seriously tried to do this every year for the past five years and failed?”

Jackson pushed Bob back into motion. “I don’t know. Probably? Maybe? Wait, who called it that?!”

“The head of Leagcy Apps.”

A sign indicated that the city market was down the corridor to their left. Mary Ann put her clipboard under her arm and pushed on the exit door’s bar with both hands. “So, you think one programmer leaving and the convention getting canceled are in some way related? Isn’t that a pretty big leap?” she asked Bob, indicating she had been following the entire conversation.

Bob thought about this for a minute. “I don’t know. You don’t find it just a little bit suspicious that someone so important to the project just disappears without warning one day, never to be heard from again, and doesn’t even leave copies of the code he was working on for the next person to pick up?”

Jackson stepped between the two before the conversation got any more heated, “Guys, I’m hungry, we’re here, let’s eat.” He motioned the two of them into the restaurant. No more corporate conspiracy theories until after lunch.

The three stepped through the doors and into the waiting area of the restaurant. Instantly something seemed wrong. In unison, they looked at each other, then back at the sign on the door. Bob was the first to figure it out, “Oh, no,” he moaned, completely deflated.

APPENDIX

About the Author

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, biking, cooking/baking, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/technoculture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speed-writing first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" are offered free of charge. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

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