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## The Far Shore

Pat Brown  
*College of DuPage*

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## THE FAR SHORE

*Pat Brown*

Sarah Brewer took a sip of her coffee — light, with sugar — as caffeine-crazed butterflies flitted and twitched in her empty innards; it was always like this for her at the big a.m. presentations. She'd spent most of the night composing a Concerto for Database and Spreadsheet, and now she got to perform it for the Court.

Bill Fobbs, King of TrafficTech, was in from New York; his loyal Prince in the Chicago office, Brett Phipp, sat at his right in the cave-dim conference room. Sarah was ten minutes into her presentation; she had given an overview of the latest market research in the area of industrial plant traffic-monitoring systems, reviewed pertinent OSHA regulations, and introduced her proposal to develop a new line of wireless buried-sensor tracking systems.

In the past couple of years, Sarah had developed her presentation skills well — her voice didn't quaver, her knees didn't shake, she could meet and hold the gaze of the most intimidating managers in the business — she was cool, and she had guts. That was why she was here today, as supervisor of the Exploratory Design Group at TT, presenting her proposal to top management — that and the fact that she was *the* brightest, most innovative, most productive young computer engineer the company had seen in recent history; in the two years since her promotion, her group had come through with two *big* marketplace winners, establishing TT as a leader in mid-range traffic-control systems.

“Now, l-e-e-e-e-e-t’s j-u-u-u-u-st *stop* here a minute and do a sanity-check.” The condescending rise-fall of Phipp’s interruption hung in the air for a moment after its sound had died away. “This is all very interesting information, my dear, but I frankly think we’re going to be spending large dollars needlessly. My group’s wired-sensor system has proven to be a cash cow over the past three years; I see no reason to believe that’s going to change. I say we take the money you’re proposing to spend on development, and put it into customer relations; I know a lot of our biggies had a truly *memorable* time in Vegas with us last year — right, Bill?” Brett’s wink and nudge illuminated a gulf that was beginning to seem infinitely wide to Sarah.

“I believe Sarah was going to detail a proposal for us, folks; why don’t we let her continue . . .,” the voice of Ken Thorsen, Sarah’s first boss at TT, boomed. Sarah knew that Ken would support her; she also knew that as a good mentor, he’d not bail her out. This was her battle.

“As you can see, Brett,” Sarah countered, “our market projections show that the customer perception of wireless systems as a desirable leading-edge technology will *dominate* buying patterns in the mid-range sector in two years’ time. I’m suggesting we be there to grab the market before our friends at United Signal gain control.”

A fatherly smile stole across Bill Fobbs’ face. He raised his eyes from the tabletop; they smiled, as well. “Sarah, I’m sure you’ve done your typical yeoman’s — or shall I say *yeoperson’s* — job,” he chuckled as he winked at Brett. “However, I do think this is one time we’ll have to shake our heads at the spreadsheets and databases and market models, and let good old business intuition guide us; Brett’s point is well taken.”

“With all due respect, Bill,” Sarah’s voice edged up a half-step in volume and pitch, “I don’t think we can afford to ignore the data our tools provide. We’re at a watershed in the industry; we simply can’t afford to ‘wet-finger’ our business decisions any longer!”

The patronizing smile seeped from Fobbs’ face; the mirthful crinkles at the corners of his eyes got hard and deep as his gaze cut through the dimness like the beam from the overhead projector. “Young lady, *I* am the boss here; *I* founded this enterprise 23 years ago; *I* know what makes our business tick. Above all, *I* know what this situation calls for — *balls!* I got ’em, you don’t. Now — if you’ll please be seated, we’ll chat a bit about Brett’s proposal . . .”

As it cut through the beam of the projector, the irregular wave of coffee — light with sugar — reminded her of an amoeba. She had always thought of them as flat, as seen under the microscope; at that moment, though, she realized they must have depth as well and that they’d look a lot like the coffee wave did just before it broke against the far shore of Phipp and Fobbs.

And that, as it happens, is where the inspiration for the *café au lait* amoeba-form background on Brewer Systems’ logo came from . . .