The Far Shore

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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 Pipp’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 Pipp and Fobbs.

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