

ONE

On occasion, Matt wished some technologies, like telephony, had never advanced. He envisioned the days where human operators had to make call connections, plugging wires in a Battleship-like board that covered a wall the size of South Carolina. Not that Matt was old enough to ever witness one in action; the only images he had of a working model were from *Andy Griffith* reruns.

Back then, it was surely easier just to ignore a call, assuming the operator punched the wrong hole. Or better yet, one could always pick up the call and use a disguised voice, claiming to be Edna at the corner grocery store or Ludwig van Beethoven, and the operator would have no choice but to disconnect.

Unfortunately, the 21st century brought about the rise of the cellphone, and even though its dependability was sketchy at best, it was difficult to avoid. Matt reasoned he could ignore one or two calls, and even a message could be discounted and blamed on being out of range, the snowy weather or cosmic forces. But there was no way he could ignore eight calls and four voice mails from the office, especially as the owner. Matt gave in and called Kevin to say he was on his way to the LAB.

But Matt wasn't on his way yet. It was 10 p.m., and 3 inches of snow had fallen in the past four hours. Even in his 4x4 it would take him at least 30 minutes to get to the LAB. After two years of working there, Matt had actually started calling it the LAB. To him, it was just some cheap office space on the south side of Malorett. Is Malorett, Michigan, even big enough to have a south side? This question perplexed Matt often, usually for 12 seconds during breakfast. Of course when he ate breakfast with others, it bothered him for a good 17 seconds.

It just became increasingly difficult to explain to prospective clients that this 2-year-old computer software company was working out of two bed-

rooms in a pre-1900 house. Even still, could it be called software? Matt had decided long ago it was too cumbersome to explain his company's services: website development, database programming, website hosting, computer technical support, advertising, marketing, writing, pretty much anything a customer wanted. Software had to be the best way to explain it, even if it wasn't always software.

The group couldn't really disguise a setup like that in a historic district-turned commercial area. Instead, Kevin came up with LAB, the Local-Area Bedroom, and the WAB, the Wide-Area Bedroom. These names were spinoffs from local-area network and wide-area network, types of networks an IT professional could discuss for weeks. The workers here, Matt thought, were far too busy to explain technological terms to the public. The group performed most of its programming and development in the WAB, while they left the LAB for the big-time stuff: meetings, table tennis, strip shows, that sort of thing. Once they even managed to find a stripper who could play Ping-Pong while giving table dances. Surely Matt wasn't being called to the LAB just for that.

Either way, Matt Sevrenson never had to explain where he was going again. He could just say LAB or WAB. Most people either thought he was an evil scientist — because he always was carrying around something that resembled a test tube — or always performing a bad Elmer Fudd impersonation. Matt didn't care because the supposed test tube was just a large pen. It was one of those multicolored pens that had blue, black, green and red ink, and if you tried to click all four colors at the same time, it was broken forever. The pen was Matt's favorite, even though the black ink was currently empty. He had signed the first contract for The Developers with it, and many more had followed. But this next contract, well, that was a whole other ballgame.

There was never any traffic on a Tuesday night in Malorett. Wait a minute ... there was never any traffic in Malorett at any time. Winter seemed like it should have ended a decade ago, but it was still March. The city had received 4 inches of new snow during the day, and 3-6 inches more were expected that night. Malorett pretty much looked like Hoth, minus Darth Vader and storm-troopers, for five months out of every year. The snow drifts were particularly impressive this morning as Matt's vehicle sloshed through a sand/salt/snow

mixture. Tauntauns would have made the trip more interesting, he decided, but it would have also made it more arduous, at least without a lightsaber and a droid or two.

Matt drove down Main Street past several empty three-story buildings. Matt had made the trip hundreds of times, yet he still couldn't grasp the emptiness of the town. Malorett isn't a ghost town; the ghosts have even left Malorett. What was once a booming town in the 1880s with 100,000 people had dwindled to about 10,000 or so. The city had flourished due to rich mineral deposits in the region, but once those dried up, residents quickly vacated. The Developers kind of stumbled on to the town through Moxee Tech, which is just minutes away. Matt graduated from Tech eight years ago, while Kevin just picked up his degree last year.

Matt finally pulled into a small parking lot next to yet another three-story building. It was almost 11. He hoped he wasn't late. Matt looked up and saw bright lights coming from the left side of the second story, which was supposedly vacant. Matt estimated the last time those lights were on had to have been last month. He momentarily lost track of what he was doing when Katy appeared.

"It's about time!" Katy said. "What the hell are you wearing?"

Matt looked down and realized he still had on shorts. That made sense considering he was ready for bed, expecting to make it back into work at 7:30 Wednesday morning. Once Matt had worn yellow and green Zubaz pants, and everyone laughed. He just assumed people would hopefully shut up if he wore shorts when it was 20 degrees outside. No one made fun of what Sarina wore – or better yet, what she didn't wear – at these temperatures.

"Why does it matter what I'm wearing?" Matt said. "What the hell is going on down here that's so important?"

"We had some ideas, and we wanted to fill you in. Don't you want to be here for it?"

"Yeah, but can't it wait until the morning?"

Matt assumed Katy had been at the office since he left, around 7 p.m. It had been a pretty busy month so far for the group: not that any other month in the two-year history of The Developers had not been busy. The target date for the big launch, though, was less than a month away, and the group had

just two full days to prep for a major site demonstration.

Katy and Matt walked up a small set of stones to the main door of the building. She had left the door wide open because once it was closed, it was tough to get back open. Not only was the door made out of solid wood, but someone had tried to turn it into one of those Dutch doors, with a top and bottom. It didn't work perfectly, but worse, the person put the door back together so miserably that the top half sometimes would not budge unless it was heated. The Developers spent most of the previous winter just traveling through the bottom half and making multiple visits to the doctor for scoliosis testing.

"You are never going to believe some of the things we forgot," Katy said. "We may want to have a few more volunteers look over everything. How could we do this?"

Katy was almost breathless, and she never gets that way, Matt thought. Well, at least she usually didn't outside of the bedroom. If Matt told her that, though, he might get his head shoved through in the top half of the door, even if he knew that from personal experience.

The two walked down a small corridor and approached a non-Dutch style door. Even though the door was shut, Katy and Matt could hear full conversations, which appeared to be either shouting arguments or audience members trying to coerce game show contestants to make the right moves.

"Dude, it's not THAT big of a deal!"

"What? I can get into this user profile without even knowing the password! How is that not a big deal?"

"Dude, you programmed it! Do you think other people are going to figure that out?"

"Yes ... and stop calling me dude, slick!"

Drew, as the oldest Developer, usually passed his ideas directly to Matt. But Matt wasn't there, and a major issue had arisen, which left Kevin with the job of getting Drew under control.

It wasn't working tonight. Matt and Katy had finally reached the door.

"You've got to be kidding me!," Matt said. "You need me here at practically midnight because you don't think the site's secure? This couldn't have waited until the morning?"

Nothing was said for 20 seconds as Matt sat down in his industrial-strength swivel chair and booted up his Macintosh computer. He originally thought this was going to be some big deal and was happy to make the trip into the LAB. OK, maybe not happy, but at least intrigued, considering they had been over the demo at least 50 times, and everything checked out.

“Uh, Drew, do you have anything to say?” Matt said.

“Yeah ... why the hell are you wearing shorts?” Drew said.

“I was planning on going swimming once the snow melted ... 43 years from now,” Matt said. “What is going on?”

Drew wasn’t dissatisfied with the project up until this point. He wasn’t discouraged by what he had found. He just didn’t understand how they had gotten this far and he had never seen this.

“OK here’s the deal,” Drew began. “If someone logs in, everything’s cool. If someone who doesn’t have a login account tries to access the site, they have to signup. That’s cool too. But if someone signs up, then logs out immediately ... they really aren’t logged out.”

“But that’s not true!” Kevin said. “We just need more specific instructions, like to close the browser. Maybe we need a little note saying without closing the browser, a hacker can steal your identity. What would that be worth, a Taco Bell burrito?”

Drew continued to gaze at his screen with a blank stare as Kevin rocked in his easy chair. Kevin looked at Matt and Katy, trying to figure out what was going through their minds. He checked his watch and realized they had only 4 minutes alone, so that wasn’t enough time to break their hookup record. That had happened just after they had broken up for the third time, or was it the fourth? Kevin could hardly remember, nor did he really want to keep track of it all. He had called the *Guinness World Book of Records* to check if they had a category called Fastest Breakup Sex, but unfortunately, the event hadn’t been verified, and Kevin didn’t want to see the evidence.

Even though Matt’s computer had chimed on startup, he still held his head down in his lap. With an early morning meeting, this was a complete waste of his time.

“Please do not call me in for this shit,” Matt said. “We’ve got plenty to finish by Friday. I like Kevin’s idea. If we need to change it, we can change

it. Katy, what do you think?"

Katy had been rather silent during the whole ordeal. Matt assumed she had already made her comments before he got there. Now he wondered if she was thinking about something else, or him.

"Yeah, that's a good plan," Katy said. "Sarina can work on that with the other help features in the morning. Even though we are showing the demo for the second time, it doesn't have to be perfect."

"It would be nice to actually make some money from something we built," Kevin said. "Drew, are you going to live? Do you need a taco?"

"I could always use a taco," Drew said. "Is everyone leaving?"

It was midnight. The group had invested so much time and energy the past few weeks that Matt had implemented a midnight curfew, just so everyone would be at least a little conscious the next day. As they inched closer to the release of .comU 1.0, each person's mood seemed to go back and forth daily. But the four members who were there Tuesday night felt extremely confident, if not a little cocky, that they finally had something that, like MC Hammer, couldn't be touched.

And the biggest hope was that they would finally reap the benefits of this website that would, in turn, benefit the entire city of Malorett.

Matt remembered something that he noticed before he originally entered the office.

"Does anyone know why the second-floor lights are on?" Matt said.

"No way!" Drew said. He jumped out of his chair, raced out the door, through the hallway and stepped under the top half of the front door. Apparently Matt wasn't the only one perplexed about the lights.

"Damn!" Drew shouted.

Matt, Katy and Kevin speedily walked to join Drew out front. The lights were off.

"Sarina said she would give me 20 bucks if I saw the lights on!" Drew said. "Don't you remember her saying that?"

"Where is Sarina tonight?" Katy said. "If she's within 20 miles, I'm sure she could just run on down here."

"True," Kevin said. "Is anyone cold?"

With temperatures barreling toward zero, they figured it was a good idea

to go back and grab their coats before they left for the night. Drew continued to stare motionless at the upstairs window, while Katy maneuvered her way between Matt and Kevin back inside.

“Does someone live up there?” Kevin said. “Are they just on business trips or vacation or maybe they can see in the dark?”

“Don’t be crazy,” Drew said. “I saw a lady up there once. Well, I didn’t really see her, but I thought I saw her.”

Either Drew was making absolutely no sense, or Matt was shivering too badly to understand what he was saying. There was a slight possibility that his legs might suddenly become warmer if he spoke, Matt thought.

“Come on. Either you saw her or you didn’t,” Matt said.

“OK, I didn’t,” Drew said. “I saw a shadow.”

“And the shadow looked like a lady?”

“Actually the shadow looked like Grimace, and it appeared to be carrying what resembled a purse. So I just assumed it was a bigger lady.”

“All right, let’s check with the Butch tomorrow. “He’ll be able to straighten everything out.”

Having said this, Matt realized he could just go start his truck and warm up by turning on the heat. After being giddy for most of the day due to the excellent site development, then being pissed off after making it down to the LAB to see virtually nothing wrong, then being frigid while standing outside at night talking about a ghost, Matt had completely lost his mind. Matt ran down the steps, avoided two snow drifts that were right between his truck and the office building and pulled up on the door handle. For some odd reason, he locked it, so Matt fumbled through his shorts pockets, found the keys and opened the door. Katy made it outside and handed Drew and Kevin their coats.

“Thanks, Katy,” Kevin said. “So can I again interest you in becoming Mrs. Kevin Gentry?”

“Have you interested me in that before?” Katy said.

Drew walked slowly down the steps, still dumbfounded by the second-story lights. He had already forgotten about the earlier problem with .comU.

“If Butch doesn’t have an answer, I will find out myself,” Drew proclaimed. “Landlords never have answers!” Matt said.

“That’s not true,” Kevin said. “Remember that time we were watching ‘Jeopardy,’ and he knew about that Buddhist temple?”

“Why yes, of course ... the one that looked like a spaceship,” Matt said. “He does have answers. We shall get to the bottom of this!”

“Matt, you can’t say ‘shall,’ ” Drew said. “Programmers don’t say antiquated terms like that. Maybe ‘shell,’ but really.”

Katy had been soaking in the dialogue while she tried to finish bundling up in her heavy coat. She was still focused on preparing for the demonstration Friday and had stayed out of what she dubbed “petty conversation.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Katy said, walking just behind Drew while motioning to Kevin to walk down the stairs. Finally, everyone made it to their vehicles and plowed through the snow toward home, already preparing in their minds for the next day of fun.

>:¢ - Katy

@:) - Matt

>:P - Kevin

>8. - Drew

:D - Sarina
