

TWO

“Will this damn thing ever start?”

Sarina wasn't late. At least not yet. But by the way her Geo Metro had been acting lately, she was looking at late days for the rest of the year. Every day since last Thursday, she had gone through the same thing: She starts the car, it seems to be going, but right when she shifts to reverse, it dies. Her uncle Barry claims it's just the cold weather. It was damn cold this Wednesday morning.

After staring out the windshield for two minutes, Sarina tried it again. It started immediately. She put it into reverse and backed out of her normal parking space at the Evergreen Way apartment complex. Sarina had lived there since she moved to Malorett a year and a half ago, when the group started working on the project. Sometimes Sarina wished they could have picked some place else, like maybe closer to Indianapolis, her hometown, but overall, she didn't have many complaints. There were plenty of empty streets for running, and that's all she really needed to get away.

The route from Sarina's apartment to the office was probably the easiest of the group. She lived just south of downtown Malorett, and it was a straight shot there. On an early day, she did see a little bit of traffic, but nothing like a larger city, which seemed more regular to her.

This, Sarina thought, was about as far from a regular city as you could get.

Luckily, last night's accumulation after midnight was less than an inch, and the sun was even shining, which made the drive a little more pleasurable. Sarina noticed a few snowmen down a side road, and she knew the sun would eventually bake at least a portion of their bodies away. If only some of their clients who failed to pay melted away once the sun came up, Sarina thought. And if it were still this cold outside, she could leave a few articles of clothing hanging on their mushy remains. Right when she pulled in to the

small lot at 9:45, she noticed Matt's truck and Drew's car. As she got out of the Metro, another car screeched around the corner and pulled into the space right beside her.

"Hey there, Kevin," Sarina said. "Did you get out of here at a decent time?"

"No way!" Kevin said. "Matt even came in for a little while because Drew found some problem with the security on the site."

Kevin and Sarina chatted as they walked into the building and made their way into the LAB.

"What did you do last night, run to Vegas?" Kevin said.

"I did run, but at home on the treadmill," Sarina said. "It's usually too cold to run at night here. I hate that. In Indianapolis you can run outside sometimes in January."

"Can't you just wear a bunch of clothes?"

Drew was already at his desk scrutinizing over something. He held his head in his lap as he tapped his right foot slowly on the carpet. At least he wasn't talking to himself like usual.

"Are you still working on the same thing, Drew?" Kevin said as he sat at his computer and logged in.

"Yes and no," Drew said. "I think I've found a better way around it, but it might create another problem on some browsers. I can just make the cookie and the session expire and go to another page or something."

Kevin checked his email as he noticed the clock on his computer read 9:55 ... five minutes before they would be moving the discussion to the WAB. The group needed just another short walk through of a few .comU features if they were going to make the demo work properly Friday.

Kevin had 23 new emails, just since last night. Of course, most of it was junk: three for Viagra, two for penis enlargement, one for breast enlargement, three for financial stability and a host of others. There was, however, a message from his sister. Jennifer was in her second year over at Moxee Tech, and she usually had questions for Kevin on her homework. But that was just small talk because she was always near the top of her class in high school, and so far college was no exception.

Hey, Kevin! I'm stuck on my Calculus AGAIN. Will you have a chance to come by and help me out later today? I've got three classes, but I'll be done by 2 or so. Do you wanna do dinner? You need to take a break from the project before Friday!

She couldn't be more right. Kevin Gentry was the last full-time man in on the project, but his contributions had been crucial for .comU. Kevin was placed on the entertainment section of the site ... well, not actually placed. Kevin begged Matt to work on that portion ever since day one. Matt had hoped for a little help from Tech, so he approached one of his former professors a few months into the project. Out of the handful Matt met, Kevin was the one who stood out. Kevin might not have been the smartest or the most creative, but even from the beginning, he always did a superior job. He also had a knack for promotion and making things sound a whole lot better than they actually were. In this way, The Developers were able to grab the attention of many college students for volunteer help through the first couple of drafts of the site.

Luckily for Kevin, he could still escape and go hang out with Jen every once in awhile. She had a lot of cute friends, all of whom Kevin had dated at least once, with the exception of Jane Wilson. Jane was Jen's best friend and, as far as Kevin was concerned, off limits. Plus she seemingly always had a boyfriend, so there was really never much of an opportunity to go out with her anyway. Being the one girl he couldn't have just made Kevin want her even more. He decided he would hurry and reply to Jen before the meeting began.

Yeah Jen, I can make it over for dinner. You wanna go out or eat at your place? Bring Jane if you can. She doesn't have basketball practice, does she? I have a meeting right now, but I'll check back by noon at the latest. I'll try to give you a call later to see what's up.

While Sarina and Drew were still plugging away at their machines, Kevin got up to stretch a bit.

"Has Katy made it in yet?" Kevin said.

"She'll be here," Drew said. "I guess Matt is already over in the WAB."

The WAB was down a longer hallway than from the front door to the LAB, and luckily, there were no Dutch-style doors. It seemed more logical that The Developers could have rented rooms closer to each other, but supposedly, the room right across the hall wasn't available. Sarina saw Butch carrying a couple boxes in there at some point, but no one else had seen anything go in or out of that room. The guys also thought it was strange Sarina was the only one who ever saw anything unusual in the entire building.

Drew entered the WAB, followed by Sarina and Kevin. Matt was sitting at the far end of the meeting table, jotting down a few points. Katy snuck in at last, and she already had her pen and paper in hand.

"I know we've gone over this at least 564 times, but let's give it another run through," Matt said. "I think it would be a good idea now for everyone to briefly rehash their parts, mentioning the new matters we've corrected or changed in any way since two weeks ago. Sarina, go ahead and start with the overview."

"Hold up a sec, Matt," Katy said after setting her stylus and PDA down. "Isn't this meeting geared more toward potential investors for the project?"

"True ... we do need to make sure to thoroughly explain the relevance of the city not only bolstering population but the commerce of the city in general," Matt said. "We did fairly good at that last time, with Kevin's report on site traffic and name recognition of .comU products."

"Thanks slick ... that should be worth maybe another burrito?" Kevin leaned back a bit in his wooden chair. The five members of The Developers sat around a kitchen table in the WAB, which occupied the room most likely numerous years before any of them were even born. Drew, at 31, was the oldest, and Kevin, age 22, was the youngest. Sarina just hit 30 last month, Matt's a year behind her and Katy just turned 26 on Christmas.

"While we are going through this today, if you have anything to add that directly details advertising or revenue-generating parts of the site, say something," Matt said. "OK Sarina, go for it."

Sarina grabbed her water bottle and moved closer to the laptop Matt had set up before the meeting. The Developers despised PowerPoint but found the clients in the area thought PowerPoint was a better invention than fire.

"Like last time, I'm just going to give the outline of .comU: the reasons

this system is necessary for Malorett, how we will get people involved, features of the system, potential problems and remedies and/or ways to prevent them, advertising opportunities and a time for questions,” Sarina said. “I think I should mention the person’s name who will cover the certain topics, that would work nicely. Is that it?”

Drew and Kevin scribbled notes on paper and didn’t even seem to realize Sarina was finished. Matt almost looked as if he were asleep, prompting Katy to nudge him.

“Welcome to .comU,” Sarina continued. “We are glad you could make it today for this short presentation, devoted to explaining the features and possibilities of .comU. I, Sarina Metcalfe, will discuss the reasoning behind developing this community portal for a town like Malorett. Katy Terrill will discuss the ways the community will be able to get involved and intertwined with the product. Drew Davis will talk about the many site features. Kevin Gentry will go into detail about the advertising and sponsorship capabilities. Lastly, Matt Severson will follow up by answering any questions and also discussing the pricing.”

Sarina opened a black folder with a few more notes. Although all of The Developers were fairly thorough in their work, Sarina was the most meticulous of the crew. She had three sheets of notes, mostly typed with notes written in the margin. Every mark was just as clear as the type, and every word was written in bold block lettering. It was frightening to think the audience probably could read her notes a good 20 feet away.

But her current audience — at least the male portion of it — wasn’t paying attention to her notes but instead noticing she was wearing a black miniskirt that would have been short on Emmanuel Lewis. Matt, Kevin and Drew thought it was immensely bizarre to wear a miniskirt during such cold conditions, but they were afraid if they confronted Sarina about it, she would stop wearing them. Instead, they played dumb and just enjoyed the view.

“Many of you are wondering why a city like Malorett, Michigan, would need a community website,” Sarina said. “With a population hovering close to 10,000, how could this benefit the city? Well, first off, we anticipate using this system to its full potential could possibly double the city’s population within three years.”

Sarina stopped for a moment. Drew and Matt glanced at each other, contemplating the last comment.

“Three years?” Sarina said. “I’ve thought about this the past couple of days. Do we really believe our system could double the population in that amount of time?”

“We have to,” Matt said. “We can believe it, or we can pretend to believe it. If we pretend to believe it long enough, then we will believe it.”

“I’m not sure that made any sense, but OK,” Sarina said. “I’ll continue. With a growing population, there will be a need to keep track of people moving in, keep track of those already living here and keep commerce on technology’s edge.

“Getting the word out about .comU should be a piece of cake, considering we hope to have up to 65 percent of local businesses involved at startup and more than 85 percent after one year. This site, in a sense, will be a way to let the economic development of the city govern the influx of people in the area.

“Most cities this size could not handle a situation in which so many people were flocking to the area. That’s where Malorett stands apart and is the reason we selected this town to begin development. With so many empty buildings, housing will not be hard to come by. Property value will start out small and will steadily increase due to the constant flow of people, either touring or actually moving here.

“The talk of Malorett will not stop here. There will be people accessing this site all over Michigan, all over the US, all over the world, just seeing this virtual city ... the first of its kind. Sure, they will be able to get a taste of Malorett online. But can you really experience a city without actually showing up there, at least once? That’s the kicker, and that’s how even tourism will rise.”

Sarina had reached her stopping point and hoped she hadn’t gone too much into Katy’s part. Sarina didn’t even need her notes to give her speech. The only reason she needed them was to make sure she stopped. Sometimes her ambition got the best of her.

“Katy Terrill will now continue and give an overview of just how we will get the public involved and sold on .comU,” Sarina said.

Sarina walked to the far side of the table and sat down, pulling the bottom of her skirt down as much as possible, which wasn't very far. Katy, on the other side of the table, jotted down a final note before she stood to take her turn. Drew leaned over to say something to Kevin, and Kevin gave a short chuckle. Katy glared at them, but both gave her innocent glances. Katy proceeded to the head of the table and made sure her part was ready on the laptop.

"Will Malorett embrace .comU overnight?" Katy started. "How long will it take before people in the city are using the site as a portal for their own lives? We've used a host of methods to attempt to determine the life span on the site, where people will go, what they will do and how long they will stay entertained. Needless to say, all the results were positive."

Katy clicked the laptop mouse to unveil a screen split in three rows. The first, shaded light blue, was labeled "IN THE SCHOOL." The second was a lime color and said "IN THE WORKFORCE." The last one, a light violet, read "IN THE HOME."

"Our first focus group consisted of children and young adults, ages 12-20," Katy said. "That is an extremely broad group, and possibly the most important group. For a website like this to have longevity, the children must be involved from the beginning. During the early phases of .comU, we interviewed 30 boys and girls, young adults, of different backgrounds, different races, etc., to determine what would pique their interests. We found what we expected: This age group is on the computer a large portion of time; they want to see a lot of games and contests; and they want to keep in touch with their friends and meet new ones.

"The workforce group was quite possibly the trickiest to pinpoint, mainly because the age group stretched the largest. The most common needs of this group had to do with keeping up with local business, networking, knowing what is going on with their children and recreational activities. Most businesspeople use their computers at work, but about 70 percent had home computers as well. The most astonishing statistic we found from these initial interviews was that most people in the workforce considered themselves computer literate, even though they lacked numerous online abilities. This gave us a few more ideas of things to add to the site.

“The final group included some homemakers and elderly folks. It has been rumored for some time now that most people age 60 and over do not know how to use computers and do not want to know. It was interesting to us, then, that over half the people we interviewed age 60 and up had a computer. Most said their son or daughter bought it for them but really never told them how to use it.”

Katy had her presentation practically memorized. This gave her time to think about other things, like why the hell Matt was wearing glasses, if Kevin would look cuter in blue or green and whether or not she was wearing her new black underwear. If she were wearing them, they most likely were not showing through her khaki-colored pants, because if they were, Kevin would have already made a comment about it. Wait a minute though, what if that was what they were discussing before I got up here, she thought. As long as he knew that would be the only chance he would have at looking at her underwear, it didn't really matter.

Katy continued with the presentation.

“In the months that followed the focus groups, we incorporated the new findings into what we had already built. Back in January, we brought back many of these same people to have them take test drives through the site. Every single person we brought back — 64 in all — stayed past the time we allocated for them. Now, Drew Davis will delve deeper into the features on .comU.”

Matt was again having trouble staying awake. Maybe he should have held the meeting a little later, just to get a breath. Then again, it was already 40 percent or so over, and Sarina and Katy had both performed perfectly. Matt tried to play off the fact he felt as if he hadn't slept since the project originally started, or the fall of the Roman Empire, whichever came first.

“Great, Katy,” Matt said. “You might also want to mention that parents wanted to see educational tools on the site.”

“Sure Matt, I'll put that on the list,” Katy said.

Katy was already writing away. She remembered more things than Matt thought was humanly possible. Maybe that's why he was always wondering how much she remembered about him – and them – but he was too tired to even daydream about it right now.

“Also, we need to explain a little about the test groups, maybe what the breakdown is of different ages, genders, etc.,” Matt said “I know we have the statistics booklet, but we need to give them a general base to start.”

“Definitely,” Sarina said. “We need to prove to the business people that we didn’t just make this shit up.”

Drew took the stand. He was supposed to discuss every feature on the site, but that would be nearly impossible. He typed into the web browser the address of the .comU that was accessible only as a testing ground. Although the staging server could be viewed from any any browser, there wasn’t a way to get to it unless you knew the exact URL. This would come in handy in the upcoming weeks, when each of the five Developers would be traveling around town, giving the rest of Malorett its first glimpse of the city’s future.

The front page loaded, and even though everyone in the room had seen it thousands of times, it was still breathtaking to all of them. They had built something based on prior sites and prior designs but had woven it so intricately that it would be greater than anything before it.

“Hello. I would like to discuss some of the features that .comU users will see immediately when they visit the site,” Drew said. “As you know by now, we expect this will be the city’s meeting place and portal to find just about anything in Malorett. To do this, we need to be connected in every way possible. As you notice on the front page, we have simple navigation at the top for entertainment, sports, education, government, connect and store.

“Under entertainment, we’ll have restaurant listings, area events, community activities, an events calendar, things of that nature. Users will be able to input their own events and add contact information and pictures with their events. There will be an additional section for restaurant and book reviews, which users will be able to submit as well.

“For sports, results of all local games will be available, as will professional sports, along with fantasy leagues. We even hope to have chat sessions with some of the more prominent coaches and players so the fans can feel like they are part of the game.

“Considering that we are hoping to bring in many new families, the education section might be the most important. There will be information from the public and private schools for parents, as well as a way for teachers to get

homework and papers to and from the students. And of course there will be games and activities for children of all ages to browse.”

Katy set her pen on the table and stopped Drew.

“Do you think we are rushing through this?” Katy asked. “Some of the people are going to be hearing this for the first time. Are they going to be expected to remember it all?”

“There won’t be a quiz afterwards,” Kevin said. “Unless you want to make a quiz and place it in the education section. Get on that, Sarina!”

Sarina rolled her eyes, which for some bizarre reason, Kevin used to think meant true love. Unfortunately, he had been given some bad advice by a fortune teller during a trip to Florida. On top of that, Kevin later found out the fortune teller got hit by a bus the next day.

Katy started to chime in with another comment, but there was a shuffle near the door. Everyone froze; at 10:30 a.m., there was never anyone else in the building but The Developers. On top of that, there was no way for anyone else to get in the first floor, unless the door was unlocked. So much for this site, we are going to get diced by an ax murderer, Kevin thought. The door swung open, and there was a bright light shining in the WAB.

The light finally came into focus as a smiley face T-shirt.

“Jesus, Butch, what the hell are you doing?” Katy said.

“I came to collect the rent check,” Butch said.

“Didn’t I leave that in your mailbox last Friday?” Kevin said.

“Yeah, but I left it in my drawers and ran it through the washing machine,” Butch said. “I tried to piece it together, but it was missing the signature.”

Butch Hodges was the epitome of a local, whether it be a southern town or upstate Michigan. Butch wore torn jeans (not the kind teenagers tried to bring back in style; the kind that had been torn during a tractor pull or a hoe-down of some sort), sometimes a baseball cap (today it was the John Deere version) and, as always, a smiley face shirt. You would think someone would grow out of that phase, not horde 10 assorted colors and rotate them daily. He rarely came around during the day; in fact, this was the first time in at least three weeks most of The Developers had even seen him. Butch lived in the building next to the one that housed the LAB and the WAB. He owned both buildings, and that’s about it.

“I’ll write you a new check, as soon as I stop payment on the last one,” Matt said, making a note in his PDA.

“What, ya don’t believe me?”

“I believe you, but we are trying to get some things squared away for Friday. Do you need it today?”

“It is bowling night. I just loooooove bowling alley onion rings.”

“OK, after the meeting I’ll bring it over.”

Butch grunted loud enough to let everyone know he was somewhat dissatisfied with the results of the discussion. Then again, Butch thought, they could just move out and move into one of the other random empty buildings in Malorett.

“Hey Butch, any idea why the lights upstairs were on last night?” Kevin said. Sarina perked up a bit.

“That was me up there,” Butch said. “Oh wait, that could have been two days ago. Or three days. I need one of those organizer thingys.”

Butch pointed to Matt’s PDA, shook his head and walked out the door. Matt turned to Drew and told him to continue.

“OK, following the education section comes the government aspect of the site. We plan to leave this area as a public forum for people to voice their opinions about anything and everything. We will also use for town meetings and debates during elections times.

“The Profiler, in its simplest terms, is the way community members will contact and interact with new and existing community members so that even in a town this size, everyone will have the chance to know everyone. People will be encouraged by giveaways, contests, etc., to enter profile information and find out more about their neighbors. This method has worked for personal sites and social networking sites for years, and we want to prove it will work for communities to grow together as well.

“Lastly is the store, which will be open to any business in town that wants to sell products and services. It will be similar to the Yellow Pages but much more innovative and useful.”

Drew was pretty much finished with his part, except for one last question.

“Should I field questions during my presentation?” Drew said. “Like if

someone wants to know if his kid is going to get fat by sitting in front of .comU all day?”

“I think we wait to answer questions at the end,” Matt said. “But if they have an urgent question, go for it. Kevin are you ready for your part?”

Of course I’m ready, Kevin thought. He could do this in his sleep, but just to be safe, he determined he should remain awake. Kevin had been known to doze off and occasionally enter a world similar to the one Walter Mitty visited, but it normally involved a very large buffet at an all-you-can eat joint. This was too important to the rest of the group to screw up.

“Is there a rule about not cussing during the presentation?” Kevin asked. Katy had just taken a small sip of her water, and luckily, she barely managed not to spit it right on Drew. The comment drew a small chuckle from Sarina as well. Matt, still rubbing his eyes, glared at Kevin.

“Just do the presentation. I don’t give a shit if you cuss,” Matt said.

Kevin began.

“Imagine you are the media — newspaper, radio, TV, whatever — and a prospective advertiser asks ‘Will my ads reach my target audience?’ Wouldn’t it be great if you could respond, ‘It will reach your entire target audience, even the target audience you didn’t know exists.’ Well, I have good news. With .comU, you will be able to give that answer every time.

“As you’ve learned by now, this site will be the community, meaning this will also be the place to advertise. When people sign up for anything they will have to give information. This information can be processed to determine what areas of the site people visit the most, what stories are the most important, how long they stay on the site, etc. The privacy policy will be clear, in that no names or email addresses will be distributed. To your advertiser, everyone will just be a number. But those numbers are the ones that will be adding up to dollars.

“Our recommendation is to concentrate heavily on sponsorships of site areas, rather than annoying banner and popup ads. Those used to be cool. No wait, those were never cool. The whole idea is name recognition. You have a contest sponsored by a few companies, you print up T-shirts, hats, whatever, with company logos and you have walking billboards. In a sense, .comU becomes another media source.

“As investors of the site, the returns should start immediately with the advertising and sponsorship that can be gained right away. Now, Matt Severson will conclude our presentation by fielding questions and discussing pricing.”

Sarina gave Kevin a golf clap, and Kevin bowed, then waved just like the queen of England. As Kevin took his seat in between Drew and Sarina, Matt stood and walked to the front of the group.

“All right, surely people are going to ask me questions,” Matt said. “There’s a good chance I will point in any one of your directions to help answer a question. I’ll be prepared, but it would be helpful for you to think of some potential questions that might be asked.”

Matt yawned and leaned to his right side slightly. His right foot slipped briefly, but he caught himself to not make too much of a scene. The other four glanced mostly in disbelief back at him. Matt was occasionally tired, but never during a meeting he called. On top of that, this was a meeting he had called two weeks before, and Matt rarely holds to meeting times.

“Hey, Matt, are you going to be OK?” Drew said.

“I just had a rough night,” Matt said, still rubbing his eyes.

“Well your part is just the Q&A, so there’s not much more to go over,” Katy said. “Let’s just go ahead and get back to working on the site. There are still some features and bugs we need to discuss before Friday.”

Matt seemed to liven up a bit.

“Good idea!” he said. “Meeting is adjourned. I need a nap!”

Sarina pulled a small piece of plastic out of her pocket. At first, Kevin thought it was a balloon, but then he realized it resembled a Whoopie cushion.

“Who carries a Whoopie cushion with them?” Kevin asked, grabbing his PDA and standing up from his seat.

“It’s a blow up pillow,” Sarina said. “For Matt to use.”

Sarina handed it to Matt and showed him how to inflate it.

“Did that come with your blow-up Rick Astley doll?” Kevin asked. “You know I’m never going to give you up.”

Sarina, and the rest of the gang, ignored Kevin’s ’80s music comment and exited the WAB.

