

Part 2 Making a Better Waterfall and then Rowing Over It

Chapter 2 Navigating Whitewater

Kartar couldn't breathe, he couldn't see, and he could barely move. He twisted and kicked, and then he discovered he could push himself up. His pillow lay on his bed between his arms and hands. He stared down at it, shaking. A dollop of sweat ran down his forehead and dripped off his nose. His pillow was soaked. The AC must be broke. The sunlight coming through his window was so bright he had to squint.

He felt sick, like he had climbed a flight of stairs after eating too much. Trying to calm down, he settled onto his back and focused on being thankful that he wasn't dead, and hoped he wouldn't dream of those deadly women again.

The bad karma Ma had warned him about has found him. She and Baba wanted to find him a nice wife, i.e., a nice Indian woman. But Lisa was a tall, bossy, American woman with eyes bluer than anything that could come out of his parent's home state, Gujrati. He couldn't stop thinking about her. Now he's divorced and even though it was she who had left him, he had to deal with the karma.

Kartar sat up and his wedding band snagged a pajama button. He freed it and held the band before one eye. He looked through the ring like it was a peephole, and for a moment, he didn't recognize where he was.

His desk and dresser didn't have the Robin Williams books on Web Interface Design, or his proceedings of the ACM on Computer-Human Interaction. In fact his desk was bare. A few of the missing books were stacked on the floor: Code Complete sat on top of volumes 1-3 of The Art of Navigating Waterfalls. There was a box next to the stack and inside he could see more of his books: Testing the World with Record and Playback, and Great Software starts with Great Coding Standards--volumes 1 and 2.

Kartar let go of the ring. He rubbed his eyes before looking again, but the entire room was still a disorganized mess of boxes.

The state of the room was familiar

Kartar got out of bed and walked through his house. The kitchen, the living room, the entire house looked just like the day he had moved in. Only the furniture the house came with wasn't packed in a box or rearranged. Someone must have done all this while he slept. But why?

Maybe someone would do it to get on some "Stupendously Crazy Gags" website. Maybe Noah organized it to get even because of their disagreement in front of Mr. DeLucca. No, he was in flight to India. Donny--did he really dream about Donny giving him a handgun?

Kartar squatted on the floor of his living room, surrounded by boxes, a flat screen TV, and a stack of disconnected A/V

equipment, and he wondered who was going to put this mess back where it belonged. What time was it? He's been away from work since yesterday noon, and after what DeLucca said about 'special' attention given to the manager with the longest line on the Gantt, he had some work to do.

The microwave and all the clocks were missing, likely in some box. The kitchen stove flashed twelve, which was a nice touch. He ran back to his room, and on his bedside table was his old 'gomera'--green--Blackberry instead of his state-of-the-art chrome one. The phone showed it was after nine, so Priya was already in class. He checked his email and all of it was from last year: HR benies info, requirements, budget allocations, discussions about team size.

A meeting reminder popped up which said he was due to be at the project's Requirements Complete meeting in thirty minutes. Just lovely, he thought, it's badgering him about a meeting he attended a year ago. The meeting was his, Donny's, and Noah's first day on the job. They were asked to review the "completed" requirements and gauge how confident they were about organizing development teams to make a release in 12 months. The meeting was the culmination of three months in gathering requirements by the Casino Directors and their Business Analysts. Two months prior they realized they were almost to Requirements Complete so they recruited developers and then, finally, project managers. Kartar, Donny, and Noah all wanted the job: high profile casino,

state-of-the-art handheld gaming.

If only he could attend that meeting today, things would be different. With all his experience of seeing which requirements kept changing, he'd be able to adjust their course and actually release the project in one year.

Kartar un-boxed his clothes and got ready for work. He entered the garage and saw more boxes sitting around a car which looked the same as the rental he had when he came to Vegas.

A broom leaned against the wall, and with a kick he sent it bouncing off the car door.

"They are going to put all this back," he said, wondering about the porcelain Shiva statue that has been handed down through his family for generations. But he had to go. The dream about the women was probably a warning. He had to find a way to keep his line in the Gantt shorter than the others, and he needed to go to work and find out who had done this to his home.

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Kartar went straight to his cubicle. It was completely empty. Even his desk was missing. In fact most of the cubicles on the floor were empty, even Donny's and Noah's. His gomera Blackberry nagged him that he was late to the Requirements

Complete meeting.

"OK, OK, have it your way," he said. He detoured to the latte stand on the way but the stand, along with its back wall of kitsch SciFi posters, was gone.

When he entered the room, he expected Donny to laugh at the joke they had played and then tell him about how they went through so much trouble, but everyone was all business and sitting at the long mahogany table in black pants and a black t-shirt that said 'Cthulhu for President,' was Noah.

"You didn't go to India?" Kartar said.

"Huh?" Noah said.

"Here's our new wheel of project management," Donny said and winked. "I guess that makes you the third wheel."

Phyllis laughed, her pen hovering over a requirements document. LG, some kind of ambidextrous genius, had a red pen in both hands and two more stuck in her Irish red hair.

"Glad you could make it," LG said.

"Sorry I'm late," Kartar said, feeling that he shouldn't be sorry--he was the victim. It was time they stopped playing, so he stood in front of the table long enough to get puzzled looks from everyone, except LG. Her's was more of a dead stare, the kind you give someone someone who you aren't sure will measure up. It was like she had forgotten all the favors Kartar had given her, every month accepting her newest, late requirement,

and allowing her weekly requirement change requests to the existing ones.

"Have a seat Kartar. We've got a lot to do," she said, and the group went back to discussing the document.

Kartar sat beside Donny because if any one would cave and tell him the joke was over, it would be Donny, a big man with a big heart.

Phyllis said, "I'm glad you're here Kartar. LG wanted to know how many screens we would need to process the user's credit card."

Kartar blinked a few times and said, "But we decided not to do that."

Phyllis and LG both looked at him as if he was a stranger.

Phyllis popped her gum a few times and then focused her eyes on him through her horned-rimmed glasses. "Have you been going to meetings without your business analyst?" Her voice was pitched low like she said something scandalous and her eyebrow arched above the frame of her glasses, and she was completely serious.

"Well--no!" Kartar said, his face feeling hot. "Remember, we're going with Visa."

LG looked at Phyllis and Phyllis shook her head. "What are you talking about?"

LG set her hand on Phyllis's "Hold on," and then she

pointed her pen at Kartar, "There are several problems rearing their heads right now. 'We' decided not to process credit cards? A, how are guests supposed to buy their electronic chips, and B, who is the 'we' that decided to change the requirements without the presence of an analyst?"

She popped her gum loudly, waiting for an explanation.

Kartar talked while he searched for the email in his Blackberry. "Phyllis, remember we spent a month building the screens and Donny's team developed data models, and before it was finished, the Casino decided to enter into a strategic agreement with Visa where Visa handles all the work with their system. We just pass an authentication token between our systems and . . ."

Phyllis pulled her glasses off and tapped an ear piece against her teeth.

Noah stopped twisting his hand through his hair. "Maybe I missed something but as Chief Architect, someone needs to tell me about Winner coordinating with a third party system."

Kartar felt all their eyes on him and none of the faces were happy: Phyllis looked like a trust was betrayed, Noah and LG looked angry, and Donny puzzled. Kartar couldn't believe he was having a conversation about something that had been decided a month ago.

"I'll forward to you--" Kartar said, and then changed his

mind at Donny's look. "I'll forward the email to all of you. It came down through DeLucca."

Kartar thumbed the scroll-ball while everyone watched and then gave up in disgust. "My damn phone thinks it's last year."

Donny watched the phone's screen for a moment. "What are you talking about? It shows the correct date." Donny patted Kartar's back, "But don't let that stop you from dragging the Casino kicking and screaming into the future."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand," Kartar said

Noah glanced at his watch and then said with real compassion, "You just need a latte because you're still on Bay Area time. Don't worry. You'll adjust."

LG said, "I really want to get to this Requirements Review done so I'll just put your team down for delivery of eleven screens."

Kartar shook his head. "It can be done in three, but I'm telling you--we don't need any at all."

Everyone stared at him.

"Pad your estimates a little," LG said. "As far as the Casino is concerned, it all needs to be done in a year anyhow, so I don't care how many screens you need."

Kartar gave up objecting and they moved on to the next requirement. He drummed his fingers on his copy of the document and then noticed the problem--the date on the front said the

document was over a year old. Donny and Noah discussed the project with Phyllis and LG with such earnestness that Kartar knew it couldn't be an act.

As the realization that something phenomenal had happened, he broke out in a sweat and his heart felt like it was racing out of control. Everything around him was wrong. It couldn't be a joke. What's happening was too comprehensive to be practical. It took too many resources to pack up a house and change his car. And the gomera phone . . . the date was set by the cell network. It couldn't be wrong! The most plausible explanation was that he's re-living the start of the Winner project.

Kartar listened to them discuss where to position the Casino brand on the user interface. This simple thing by itself caused a months worth of work: redoing layout, requesting sign-off that the requirement was satisfied, not getting it, and redoing it again. The casino directors couldn't decide until Douglas, the marketing director, finally convinced the rest that a marquee at the top of the screen was the way to go. Today, he can tell them what they want before they even know it! It was a project manager's dream come true--a second chance to run a project and run it the right way.

Kartar brought his attention back to the meeting. He stood and used the white board and they accepted the idea easily. None of them had a strong opinion about the logo. Then he took

control for the next requirement, and the next; he filled the whiteboards, he used pens and paper, he pushed ideas, suggestions, and influenced the requirements closer to what they would discover in the next twelve months. But soon problems started coming up: LG started pushing back. She said the requirements were already complete, "they are set in stone and Development should never presume to change them." And Noah wasn't happy: "You're going too far with your team building its own UI architecture. We need a common architecture--a common set of services to make maintenance easier. You're team must tell mine what their needs are and we'll build it. Otherwise it will be the wild west. Each team will be shooting from the hip and building whatever they want and then we end up creating duplicate work, maintaining duplicate code, and doing bug fixes in many places instead of fixing it in one place."

"It's going to slow us down if we need to have every UI design change go through you," Kartar said.

The conversation got louder, and louder until Donny rocked back in his chair. His new but last year's sunglasses with rose tint, slipped down his sweaty forehead to rest on his nose.

Donny said, "Kartar, you need to slow down a little. You're mixing design and requirements together. Don't worry. We'll start the Design Phase as soon as we all sign-off that the requirements are complete and that this is doable in a year."

"But I know they aren't complete," Kartar said.

The room was silent. Phyllis and LG set their pens down. Noah chewed his lip and Donny's elbows pressed on the table and his face rested in his palms.

Kartar put the whiteboard marker in the tray, recapped the pens, and pushed his papers to the side as the bright future of running the project the right way began to dim. Maybe the future was 'set in stone' too. Maybe nothing he could do would change anything. And Priya. Oh God Priya! He wouldn't see her until next summer! Kartar frowned, thinking about the lonely first year after divorce. Just a few days ago, he had shown her how to mix milk and herbs for an evening chai.

LG leaned forward and made a smile about as genuine as a Barbie doll's. "On a lighter topic, the Casino thought your teams would be more in the spirit of the fun--that is what a Casino is all about right?--if they have fun team names."

While Donny and Noah looked thoughtful, Kartar leaned forward and said, "Wow. The UI team will make the Winner an amazing experience. We'll be Wow."

"I like it," said LG.

"Noah and the architecture team," said Donny. "Kinda like a band. Maybe Noah and the Architects."

"Too long," Kartar and LG said at the same time.

"How about this," Kartar said, not believing that they are going through this again. "Noah's Arch."

"Love it!" said Noah.

"I knew you would," said Kartar.

"And what about the server side team?" said LG.

Donny opened his mouth but Kartar interjected, "Ka-Ching."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," said Donny.

"I know," said Kartar. He didn't finish the meeting smiling like the others.

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Kartar sat in his cubical in the project management aisle while two men from Facilities installed his desk. A short distance away, Donny and Noah were moving things into their cubes. Noah was building whiteboard city: whiteboards on every cube wall and two rolling whiteboards already filled with scribbles and lines and comments about race-condition, transactional, and WDIWT which Kartar knew from the last time he went through this year, was pronounced "wood it" and meant, "whose dumb idea was this?" Donny was busy mounting a small basketball hoop to his wall and trying to find room for his putting green.

LG was in the aisle-way next to Donny and Noah, talking while the two of them worked, saying things like: "Development is trying to take over," "it's the Casino's project," and "who

said Kartar was in charge?"

Kartar tried to ignore her but she was really agitated. He needed a different tact. Could anything be changed?

He looked around his cube. He hadn't brought his things into work like he had "last time" he had his first day, that was a difference. While a guy from IT setup his computer and phone, he thought more about "last time": WOW took three months to finish the UI Architecture Design document. He knew what it should look. He could finish the document in one or two days and have his team enter the Development Phase early this week instead of three months from now. Now that would make a big difference!

Kartar's hand trembled as he guided the mouse to book a meeting room and send out meeting invites to his three developers, and then Kartar hunched over his keyboard and worked on the UI Architecture design document over which he and Noah had or would fight over. He stopped typing and stared at the screen, trying to decide 'would' or 'had,' and then he gave up trying and got back to work.

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When Kartar entered the conference room, each member of the team sat in one of the twenty leather executive chairs, spread out as

if to guard against single grenade blast from taking all of them out. Rockstar, his laptop closed, his sunglasses on, and his foot on the windowsill, talked about how much money he lost on horses. Kong sat at the other end of the table, his laptop open, and having a video conference with his mom and dad back home in Hong Kong, and from the tone of the Cantonese, his mom was upset at his dad again.

Prince was sitting in the middle, focused on his laptop. Kartar got a glimpse of the screen and saw that Prince was doing his moonlighting work of editing for the Strip Uncovered, some kind of 'literary' magazine of stripper stories and Casino poetry.

Kartar handed out stacks of stapled papers. "I've got a draft of the UI Architecture design document."

Rockstar said, "Oh that? Have we reached Requirements Complete? OK. Shouldn't we be working together on this? If we finish too soon, what are we going to do the rest of the Design Phase?"

"Hah!" said Kartar, "You guys are too important to bother with this so I've already started. It's already at 60 pages so we'd better get the meeting started."

Prince made a face and kept his laptop open. Kong said "bye" to his parents and then poked at the document as if scared of it.

"It'll be finalized after I run it by Noah," Kartar said and put his last stack of stapled papers in front of Kong. "And this is the UI requirements document LG finished. King Kong, I know you love model-view-controller programming so I'd like you to take first cut at this and hammer out a design document while Prince, Rockstar, and I discuss UI architecture."

The team looked at him strangely. Only Rockstar flipped through a few pages of the design document but then closed it, lifted it by one hand and then said, "It's got a good heft. I say we call it good."

Kartar brushed his thumb down a sideburn, focusing on the bristle sound the hairs made instead of getting pissed off. "And by the way, LG thought we should have team names, so we're called Wow." Kartar smiled again.

Prince slammed his laptop shut. "What the hell? OK. I'm gonna ask."

"I knew you would give in first," said Rockstar, smiling.

Prince gave him a dirty look and then said, "Who is King Kong, and these other people? The only ones I see in the room are us."

Kartar's smile faded as he realized his mistake. They had given each other these nicknames after a few months of working together, after Rockstar had ended up in jail for getting into a fight at a rock concert and Prince bailed him out of jail

wearing a Purple Rain t-shirt.

Rockstar tipped his sunglasses down and pointed at King Kong. "Since the credit card payment requirements are in front of David--"

"And my surname is Kong," King Kong said.

Prince shook his head. "I just can't believe what goes on in those management meetings." He leaned over the table and hung on to it with both hands as if it would jump away. I suppose LG put in a requirement that you should call David, 'King Kong,' and I suppose she gave us all nick-names."

Kartar looked at the faces around the table. King Kong looked as if he didn't mind the nickname. Prince was still white knuckling the table and Rockstar's persistent smile looked more like he was in pain. There was an easy way out of this. Kartar put this hands into his pockets, crossed his fingers, and took it.

"Prince is right. LG is going to have IT change your email addresses to reflect your nick names. You to Rockstar and you to Prince."

"I get 'Rockstar'? Right on!" Rockstar smiled and flipped open the UI Architecture design document.

Prince opened his copy of the document, shaking his head. "My girlfriend has this horrid Purple Rain concert shirt she wears in bed. I wouldn't be caught dead in it."

"Purple Rain?" said King Kong.

"I'll email you a link," Kartar said. "Right now, we need to review these documents. I'd like to get halfway through the architecture by 6."

"What about you Kartar," Prince said. He was chewing his lip and watching Kartar. "What does LG call you?"

Kong said, "Ah, I see guys like him in other casinos. Usually, they have on a shiny white suit."

Prince snapped his fingers. "Yeah!"

"It's obvious Kartar," Rockstar said. "You're our Indian Elvis."

Strange, Kartar thought, they were happy calling me Kartar last time.