

# **Fictional Startup**

Sean Helvey

# **Fictional Startup**

Sean Helvey

©2015 Sean Helvey

# Contents

all . . . . . 1

# all

They were 30 seconds away from being consumed by the largest computer software company in the world because their company had run out of cash. The legendary venture capitalist Bill Farnsworth was sitting on their branded couch drinking water from a branded glass and looking extremely upset in his branded t-shirt while going through the company's limited number of options together with founders Josh Martin and Sally Greenfield, who were wearing branded hoodies. Their one paying customer had grown tired of the company over promising and under delivering. Version 2 of the dream machine didn't live up to their expectations; It had too many bugs and not enough features. It seemed as if it could have been built by one person, but the company had a whole team of engineers, according to their website. Lazuli was working in the engineering room with the lights off, but the door was cracked and she could hear everything.

The startup community in Aimesville had been booming. When Bill Farnsworth arrived and created "Light Speed", the world's first business accelerator, the city transformed from a quiet cowtown into a technology Mecca. Bill studied theoretical physics in Pasadena (He referred to the location instead of the name of the university, to avoid sounding pretentious) and had worked in venture capital from the age of 18, thanks to a deep network of wealthy family members in the industry and an inheritance from his grandfather. Bill had just returned from his 5th expedition of the season. He was a thrill seeker and the lack of 10x investment returns recently had lead him to pursue hobbies including but not limited to arctic exploration, brewing tequila, and filmmaking.

Josh Martin and Sally Greenfield had talked about starting a business since they ate lunch together during their first day as interns at

Jenkins & Bartleby. Josh always admired Sally's ability to captivate an audience, while she longed to have the cold and calculated approach that Josh had perfected. In their early days at Jenkins, Josh and Sally worked on a project together and slept under their respective desks for 2 weeks straight. Sally's husband enjoyed the freedom of holding the remote control and cleaned the house incessantly while she was away. Josh sent Sally a link to a viral blog post about Light Speed one day which prompted a visit Aimesville the following spring. They both wanted to change the world and executing this vision was going to require a significant amount of capital.

Josh had been formally trained in economics, but was also the president of his fraternity and captain of the lacrosse team at Denver State University. He thrived at the globally renown consulting firm Jenkins & Bartleby, leading a series of complicated restructuring transactions which resulted in record results for the company and its investors. Josh had the peculiar habit sitting back with his feet on the desk and making notes in his journal with a freshly sharpened number two pencil for the first hour of his morning every day. He somehow managed to drink coffee from a mug, carry on conversations with his employees, and continue with his routine journaling, without losing his balance in the chair.

Sally studied marketing at McWilliams College and had an uncanny knack for telling stories. She was always smiling and wearing egregious amounts of red lipstick. Her marble eyes had an eternally optimistic expression, the persistence of which was actually quite frightening, once you had gotten to know her and experienced the organizational turmoil that was her life. It wasn't clear whether the joke about her cat being lost inside of her purse was really a joke, because the bag would appear to move on its own occasionally, and something that sounded like a meow could be heard coming from it during meetings.

They happened to be visiting Aimesville during their annual startup

bash where companies hosted events highlighting their entrepreneurial culture. Every conversation seemed to revolve around Farnsworth and his accelerator, Light Speed. The most coveted startups around town were all in Farnsworth's portfolio. Founders had cool t-shirts and were "always hiring", especially if you were a talented software developer. The energy was infectious. Sally was sharing pictures on social media the entire time and wrote a frenetic blog post after the first day of events titled "Aimesville or Bust" in which she declared that Aimesville was the Dubai of the mid-west and likened Light Speed to Dubai's artificial palm tree shaped islands which branched out into the ocean.

Lazuli Shepherd was a prodigious cellist and had become a sensation in her community of Mccamish, Vermont by the age of four. In addition to music, she was a gifted artist and displayed advanced writing abilities. She began editing the Mccamish Bugle at the age of 13 and started a hedge fund with her earnings. Her own algorithm "Lazuli's latter" was the subject of her Master's thesis in semiotics which she completed at the age of 21. She had toyed with virtual reality headsets and wanted to create a seamless experience where people could enter a beautiful dreamlike state through the use of technology. Lazuli was visiting Aimesville in the Spring too, because she had read the same viral blog post.

Lazuli felt slightly more introverted than usual at these events. When she met Sally Greenfield, she was surprised that they had so much in common. Lazuli didn't wear a lot of makeup like Sally. She expressed pristine thoughts and built magnificent systems, which according to Sally, was exactly what she and Josh Martin were doing with their startup. They needed talented engineers like her if they were going to change the world, she explained. Lazuli felt marginally more comfortable talking with Josh, and he was sincerely impressed with her ideas on artificial intelligence and virtual reality. When she revealed her idea for the dream machine, he was floored. The following morning Josh's journal entry was focused on the economic reality of building a dream machine.

Once she had returned to Vermont that summer, Lazuli often meandered through the forest and fantasized about building the dream machine with Greenfield and Martin in Aimesville. What if the contraption could change the world, as Sally had suggested. She hadn't considered the impact that the device might have, because she had been so focused on the design, but it actually did have the potential to help many people. She drafted an immaculate handwritten letter to the team in Aimesville, indicating that she had made her decision, and would be relocating to join them in the Fall.

Josh had been reading Bill Farnsworth's blog "VentureAdventure" for weeks, so he was ready for his meeting with the fabled investor, and prepared to answer questions about revenue growth. Sally made eye contact with Farnsworth the second he walked into the coffee shop. For a venture capitalist, Bill Farnsworth seemed surprisingly down to earth. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with baggy shorts, leather sandals, and reading glasses with photochromic lenses. Bill purchased a coffee and sat down, thinking that this team seemed to have a special quality, and wondering whether they might be capable of producing 10x returns.

Before Bill could say a word, Sally burst into a somewhat long-winded story. Bill wasn't 100% certain what exactly the story was about, but he was enchanted by her glistening eyes and confident that the two of them seemed like winners. He believed that they would figure it out if they had the right amount of resources and mentorship along the way. She mentioned issues like domestic violence, malaria, and obesity, as she weaved her way through the history of technology and what it can accomplish for society.

Josh was more explicit when he spoke, drawing a picture of the dream machine and a graph illustrating exponential revenue growth in his journal for Farnsworth. The two of them had ordered dream machine t-shirts and paid extra to have them printed overnight. It was a convincing performance, and by the end of the conversation, they had tentatively secured a spot in the next group of Light Speed

portfolio companies.

His standing desk was mess. Pumpkin, his girlfriend's Cocker Spaniel, lounged below the crumb waterfall as Alan O'Reilly took another disinterested bite of his tempeh bowl and wrote a text message in his permanent smart phone slouch. After years of database administration, Alan had refined his already introverted disposition into a samurai sword of stored procedures and shell scripts. When his display lit up early in the morning with a phone call from an unfamiliar 809 area code, he instinctively blocked the call and continued writing his text message. Later in the afternoon, an email indicated to him that the phone call and subsequent voicemail had been from his old fraternity brother Josh "The Martian" Martin. Josh was offering him a position as an Engineering Manager and a significant amount of equity in his new tech startup. The lifestyle sounded incredible. Unlimited vacation, free beer at the office, and dogs were allowed! He would no longer have to work remotely from his dimly lit apartment.

Demo day was rapidly approaching now, and the last 6 weeks of the accelerator program had been far more intense than Greenfield and Martin had anticipated. O'Reilly had agreed to come aboard as the Engineering Manager, but he couldn't make it out there for another month and a half. Josh took it upon himself to live up to the Light Speed motto of "Sell First Build Fast" and whipped up a prototype of the dream machine that probably caused at least three different types of cancer when actually used by a person. It consisted of a microcontroller attached to a pair of safety goggles and contained only 1,000 lines of code, but the financial story made sense. If they sold 200 of them this year and 5000 next year, a second round of investment could value the company at approximately 10x the initial investment provided by Light Speed. 5 of the 6 weeks were spent ironing out their presentation for demo day and most of their budget went toward an elaborate video production which would show off features which hadn't yet been built.



The dream machine demo had been a raging success, and the company raised twice the original amount of funding in the following week, through connections provided by Farnsworth. They only had one paying client using the prototype, but now that O'Reilly was in town, they had hired several software developers to build out version 2 of the product. The team worked night and day throughout the summer, taking breaks for ping pong occasionally, and drinking copious amounts of beer. The big joke on the team was the company across the street. They had been around for 20 years, long before Light Speed, and their plain office lacked all of the amenities that were available at the dream machine office. Josh, Alan, and the engineering team got wasted one night and toilet papered the company across the street.

Lazuli was surprised at the amount of toilet paper that littered the streets on the morning that she arrived in Aimesville. She was so excited about building her dream machine, that she had come straight into the office from the airport, without even seeing her new apartment. She rang the doorbell which had been reprogrammed to produce an elongated fart sound at the company's last hackathon. One of the engineers answered the door and showed her to her desk in the engineering room. The engineers resumed their conversation about the prototype, saying that Josh and Sally had no idea how bad it actually was. Apparently they needed time to refactor code and add tests, but the founders are so focused on demos and new features, the engineers never have time to do things right.

That evening, Lazuli overheard an argument between the engineer who had been there the longest and Josh. The engineer said that Alan was useless as a manager and Sally was driving the team nuts with shifting priorities and impossible deadlines. He was completely burnt out by completing repetitive tasks and thinking about leaving the company. Josh had his feet up on his desk and was taking notes in his journal as the young engineer continued to vent. Josh didn't appreciate the slandering of his former fraternity

brother, Alan, and thought that the kid was way out of line. Alan was oblivious to the conversation, standing at his desk in the engineering room, reading a text message.

The engineer left that evening, slamming the door, and ringing the elongated fart doorbell on the way out. Lazuli slept under her desk that night because she had been inundated with bug fixes the second she arrived. She stayed up the entire night trying to figure out the system, but wasn't making much progress. The rest of the team didn't feel any loyalty to Alan or Josh, so they decided not to come back the following day. Alan still hadn't personally introduced himself to Lazuli, but he did send her an email, assuring her that her job was safe.

The following day Lazuli received another email from Alan that they were one month late on delivering version 2 of the dream machine, and company's biggest client was going to terminate their contract if it wasn't delivered by Friday. He also mentioned that her productivity metrics over the past couple of days had been sub par, and that Josh had said the feedback she gave on her first survey response seemed very negative. She wasn't aware that the automated surveys she filled out were distributed to the management team, so she decided to be less honest in the surveys, and became much more fearful about her future there.

Instead of wasting money on engineers who were just going to walk out the door, Josh and Sally decided to hire a young man by the name of Aaron Roberts to head up a client services group. Aaron had his own office on the other side of the building and wasn't allowed to interrupt the engineers with any questions about the prototype. Sally also hired a Director of Marketing to focus on new clients and a Product Manager to do something that Lazuli didn't understand. Both of the new hires were members of the Leadership Team along with Josh, Sally, and Alan.

After working all day Wednesday and Thursday without going home to her apartment, Sally stumbled across the street in search

of food. One of the engineers from the company across the street noticed her company shirt and asked how she liked it over there. When she dodged the question and inquired about his job, he replied enthusiastically, inviting her to lunch with his team. She didn't have time for lunch with the Friday deadline looming in her mind, but she was too tired to come up with an excuse, and ate lunch with the company across the street.

Their manager smiled and made eye contact with Lazuli when she met her. Her engineers explained that they were all happy and the best talent came to work there, just based on word of mouth. They only had a few clients and one product, but their customers were so pleased with their product, that they sent thank you notes and told all of their friends about it. Engineers were encouraged to fix bugs at their own discretion and take time to refactor code. The team pair programmed often and shared responsibility to avoid burning out and cultivate new skills. Developers worked directly with marketing and product team members and were even allowed to communicate with clients.

Lazuli took a business card from the engineering manager from the company across the street and sauntered back to the office. She rang the doorbell, but it was 5 minutes before someone came and opened the door for her. Josh opened the door and walked silently back into a conference room where the Leadership Team was having a heated discussion. She worked in the engineering room with the lights off for the rest of the evening before hearing Bill Farnsworth's voice booming through the office. Bill had let himself in and put an abrupt end to the Leadership Team meeting. He wanted to know more about version 2 of the dream machine. It was Thursday evening now, and in spite of the branded couch, glasses, shirts, and hoodies, the company was on the brink of losing their only client and running out of money.

Instead of sleeping under her desk in the engineering room that night, she stayed up and worked on a presentation which she

went over with the Leadership Team the following day. It was a culmination of everything that she had learned independently and in school over the course of her life. Lazuli was very capable of solving all of their problems. She made pointed suggestions to Alan and Josh based on the teachings of Deming, Brooks, and other authors that she admired such as Hermann Hesse. It made allusions to mythology, incorporated a tasteful amount of neuroscience, and featured examples based on quantum physics, in case Farnsworth decided to attend.

Lazuli was fired immediately after the presentation for having a negative attitude. The company's only customer renewed their contract that afternoon because the client services group lead by Aaron Roberts had assuaged their concerns about bugs in version 2. The Director of Marketing and Product Manager painted a picture of new features coming out next year that was just irresistible for the client. They didn't even want version 2 of the dream machine anymore, because version 3 sounded so extraordinary.

Lazuli went home to her new apartment for the first time and slept the entire weekend. She emailed the company across the street on Monday morning, and was offered a contract position for a couple of weeks, before they took her on full-time as a software developer. She ran into Alan in the street one day and he explained that Farnsworth had decided to double down his investment in the company. They were on a hiring spree again and had already brought on five new developers while gearing up for version 3.

Lazuli stayed at the company across the street for years and eventually became the lead developer. She approached her work there with the same fervor that she had exhibited learning to play the cello as a child, editing the newspaper in her teens, creating her hedge fund, or mastering semiotics in grad school. Leading the team was a new experience for her though. She strived to be a servant leader, proactively guiding and helping her teammates. Lazuli kept her team small and empowered each of them to make decisions

about whether we needed refactoring, more tests, bug fixes, or new features. The engineers worked in unison with other departments.

Her original ideas about the dream machine were vastly different than the horrible version 2 prototype that she had worked on. She envisioned a divinely elegant system which would coax people into a dreamlike state, not a pair of virtual reality goggles. She hired a lawyer to hash out any potential issues with intellectual property and then brought her splendid invention into being. An angelic headband delivered transcranial magnetic stimulation which could help people with a variety of brain disorders. Lazuli found that wearing the headband before sleeping helped her brain feel rested in the morning. The local university was studying her prototype to confirm its safety and analyze all of its potential uses.

Lazuli never saw the need for venture capital. She bootstrapped her side project and did her best to make it affordable for other people as well. Her L1 cost hardly anything to produce and became readily available as a medical device around the world, eventually earning her a nobel prize. She traveled the world as a celebrity, and eventually moved bad to Vermont, settling down and starting a family. A judge ruled in her favor when Martin and Greenfield challenged her patents in court. The mechanism behind the L1 was wholly unique compared with anything that could be found in the dream machine.

One day, the building that had been branded bright blue was painted grey and the custom doorbell was replaced. An article in the newspaper featuring Sally Greenfield explained that they had been acquired by the largest computer software company in the world in a heroic exit which embodied the characteristic acumen of Aimesville and the entrepreneurial community there. The co-founders didn't make much money in the deal, and neither did Farnsworth, but the story had a nice ring to it. After two years with the large computer software company, they decided to leave and create another successful startup to change the world again.