

## Prologue

### Bill Gate's Office

In Seattle, it rains nine months out of twelve, and the day I broke into Bill Gates's office, it was as damp and gray as all the others.

It was March of 1994, and I had been trying to get to Gates for four months, ever since I moved from Boston to work in Microsoft's new interactive television division. Through most of 1992 and 1993, Microsoft had tried to lure me away from Lotus by offering me different and progressively more interesting jobs.

And all that time, I kept saying no. I'd been in the industry long enough to know that Microsoft was the Evil Empire, bent on crushing its competitors. In contrast, Lotus had a totally different reputation—more like R2D2 than Darth Vader.

But then I had this dilemma: When someone keeps wooing you, even someone you're not interested in, it's hard not to be flattered. And, if they're rich and famous and powerful, eventually you might even start to get a little intrigued. So I was curious about where a courtship with them could lead.

In the fall of 1993, I agreed to an interview at their headquarters in Redmond, Washington, just outside of Seattle. When I say "an interview," I actually mean a full day of back-to-back interviews, meeting one manager after another for a grueling

ten hours. Each manager I saw measured a certain skill, then sent me to the next manager to measure another skill, and so on down the line, until I started to wonder if I had any skills left. Then there was dinner, which was really just more interviewing, more measuring, more sizing up. Back in my hotel room at the end of the evening, I was wrung out like a dishrag, and I thought Microsoft probably knew what I could do almost better than I did.

Although it was a mind-numbing trip, the thing that struck me was how smart everyone at Microsoft was. At Lotus and just about everywhere else I'd ever worked, I'd always been the whiz kid, the girl genius, the star. But at Microsoft, I realized pretty quickly that everyone was a star. That scared me a lot, but the possibility of working with so many really smart people was also kind of alluring.

And then, in that seductive way the company is famous for, Microsoft put an offer under my nose that included a lot of shares in the company.

What can I say? Forget the Evil Empire. Forget that I had instantly hated Seattle and all that rain. Forget that I was in a long-term relationship with someone who couldn't pick up and leave Boston right away. Shares are shares, and I wasn't going to get the financial package Microsoft offered me anywhere else.

And besides the stock, of course, there was Gates himself, the man I badly wanted to meet.

I'll be the first to admit that I was pretty naïve back then, assuming that all I had to do was get onto the Microsoft payroll in order to have access to Gates. I had no idea how protected he was, how untouchable. So, the week after I arrived in Seattle, when Microsoft threw one of its quarterly banquets for new staff members, I thought the dinner would provide the perfect chance for me to corner Gates and wow him with my really big idea.

Well, that might have worked if I'd been the only one invited to the party. But there were about 50 new employees in the Bellevue Hotel ballroom that night, all dressed up and dreaming of the places they'd go. I expected Gates to eat with us, but

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throughout the four-course meal, he was a no-show. Finally, he appeared out of nowhere after dessert and took his place on the dais. While we were still tinkling our spoons in our coffee cups, Gates started his official welcome-to-Microsoft pep talk.

The truth is I was barely listening to him. I was busy planning exactly what I would say to grab his interest. Glancing at the faces around my table, I was aware that I was one of the only women in the room. That didn't surprise me, of course: I was almost always one of the only women in the room when computer geeks got together. The boys' club atmosphere meant that I had to try harder to make myself heard.

So the second Gates stepped down from the podium, I jumped out of my seat. Unfortunately, almost everybody else in the dining hall that night had the same idea. And I'd forgotten that they were stars in their own right. A couple of dozen eager rookies, all from good companies or schools, all with big ideas and all anxious to impress Gates, flew out of their seats and swarmed around him as he left the stage.

I waited patiently in the crowd for my turn to introduce myself. At any minute, I knew Gates might slip out the door and disappear as quickly as he'd arrived. I was one of the last people to approach him, and I had to nudge my way ahead of a few others to get my chance. But at long last, I was extending my hand.

"Mr. Gates, I'm Soraya Bittencourt, I came from Lotus to work on the interactive TV team. I have this CD-ROM I developed independently that I think you might be interested in. My idea is to produce multimedia travel guides . . ." I was trying to get it all out in just under a minute, the way my interactive CD-ROM would change the travel industry forever by allowing people to research their travel destinations on their home computers and then shop for the best airfares and hotel prices online.

But I'd no sooner gotten the basic concept out of my mouth than another zealous new employee was already cutting in, pumping Gates's hand and throwing out his name and division at the company, his spectacular idea. And I realized I hadn't caught Gates's attention at all.

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“Run it by Charlotte in the consumer division,” was what Gates said to me. Not “That’s the best idea I’ve heard in months” or “Call my secretary—I want to talk about this more.” His unfocused look suggested that mine was just one of ten pitches he’d heard in the last twenty minutes.

I was disappointed, but not deflated. First thing the next morning, I followed up with an e-mail to Charlotte Guyman in Consumer: “Bill Gates suggested I talk to you . . .” The truth was, though, that the only way Bill Gates would be able to pick me out from the crowd of newcomers to Microsoft was by my gender. Still, “Bill Gates suggested I talk to you” had a nice, authoritative ring to it, and I assumed it was what I needed to get people interested in my idea.

Like I said before, I was naive. Weeks went by, and I didn’t hear a word from Charlotte. She probably got dozens of e-mail messages every day that started out, “Bill Gates suggested I talk to you . . .” She probably deleted all of them, maybe accidentally on purpose. In her seat, I might have done the same thing.

So I was back to square one. I decided that Gates himself was my only real hope. First, I thought of sending him an e-mail, but by this time I’d met more people in the company and learned a lot about the inner workings of Microsoft. Like any corporate bigwig, Gates is surrounded by handlers who read his e-mail messages, delete the dreck, then filter the important stuff through to him.

The second plan I cooked up was, on the surface anyway, as bad as trying to talk to him at the new employee dinner. But at the time it was all I had. I decided to hang around Building 8, the X-shaped building where Gates has his office and which is located on what’s called the Main Campus. I guess the phrase “has his office” is misleading: Gates’s suite actually takes up the entire front wing.

I started carrying my CD-ROM with me in my bag or coat pocket, and whenever I was on the Main Campus, I’d casually drop into Building 8, just to look around. I never got past the two receptionists on duty, who guarded the way to Gates’s inner

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sanctum and who more than once glanced at me suspiciously, even though I wore my Microsoft badge in a prominent place. They left me alone, though, maybe because I don't look like your average obsessed fan or celebrity stalker.

If you hang around any place long enough, you start to learn what's what, and I soon discovered that the receptionists in Building 8 were off on the weekends. Even so, security was tight. Hidden cameras were tucked away everywhere. Doors were fitted with blaring, high-pitched alarms. From a command post in the basement of Building 8, security guards surveyed activity all over the campus, and especially around Gates's office, on a wall full of television monitors.

But I've never been one to give up easily. Call me persistent. Or stubborn.

My plan shifted to the weekends. Every Saturday, after I'd put in a few hours in my own office, I'd amble over to the Main Campus and slip into Building 8. When I was sure no one was watching, I'd give a surreptitious push to the door leading to the hallway where I was pretty sure Gates's suite was. Not enough to jog the alarm, but just enough to test the lock. And every Saturday, the door resisted. I'd come back the following day or the following Saturday and try again, and again the door would stand firm. I never really expected it to be any different, but every weekend I tried just the same. This went on for several soggy weekends, until one of those weekends something happened that brightened things up a lot.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and I was on my usual stroll over to Building 8 after finishing up in my office. As I approached Gates's suite, I could see right away that something was different about it: The main door to his lobby was wide open, and a uniformed maintenance guy was up on a ladder, fiddling with the alarm. He never noticed me slip by him into the lobby. He never noticed when I gave my usual push on the door to the corridor leading to Gates's suite. And he never noticed when the door gave under the gentle pressure of my hands, because all the alarms had been switched off for repair.

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I was in!

I slinked through the main corridor, knowing it was only a matter of minutes before I made my debut on closed circuit TV and the guards in the basement realized I didn't belong there. It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be to find Gates's office—an old photo on the corridor wall of Gates and Paul Allen, the co-founder of Microsoft—gave the location dead away.

With sweaty palms and a nervous glance over my shoulder, I opened the door and stood on the dark threshold of Bill Gates's office.

The space had the look and feel of a library in a venerable old law firm, or maybe more accurately, an exclusive men's club. There were custom-made wooden bookshelves lining the walls, a massive desk, a roomy and comfortable leather armchair. Gates's PC held a place of honor on top of his desk, and it was hard not to give in to the desire to sit down and boot it up. Scattered everywhere were framed photos of the company's history, going back to 1975 when the 19-year-old Harvard drop-out founded Microsoft with his boyhood pal.

I was awed, and, under different circumstances, I would have loved to just stand there and absorb it all. But it was the loud thumping of my heart that reminded me how little time I had, how long I'd already been standing frozen at the entry to his office. In the semi-dark, I quickly crossed the room and accomplished my mission: I carefully laid my CD-ROM—with my Microsoft business card and a personal note attached—onto Gates's soft leather chair. It would be the first thing he saw when he tried to sit down Monday morning. I could almost hear his voice: "What the . . . 'Dear Mr. Gates, I know you'll be interested in this if you just take a look at it. I'd love to talk to you about my ideas on how Microsoft can revolutionize the travel industry.' Soraya Bittencourt."

In fact, I did hear a voice that afternoon, but it wasn't Gates's and it wasn't in my imagination.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

The office lights flashed on, and I was caught.

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He was a standard-issue private security guard, complete with badge and navy blue uniform, a little chubby, kind of short. Because he wasn't physically threatening, he used his voice and attitude to intimidate me. And he used them well.

"Who are you?" he demanded, then began rapid-firing a string of questions at me. Where was my ID? Where did I work? How did I get in? What was I doing in Mr. Gates's office? What did I leave on his chair? Why didn't I use the inter-office mail, like everybody else?

I stretched the truth a bit. "Mr. Gates wanted to see my CD-ROM," I said, looking down at my sneakers because, like most people, I'm a bad liar. "It's a very important project, and he asked me to drop it off myself the next time I was in the building."

"Mr. Gates isn't here this weekend," the guard said, inspecting my Microsoft badge as if it were counterfeit.

"I didn't know . . . He didn't tell me. I mean, so many people work on weekends here." It was true. We all put in 60-or 70-hour weeks.

He snatched the CD-ROM out of my hands, examined it front and back. "Brazil," he read aloud from the jewel case, "An Exotic Journey." The word "exotic" caught his attention, and one furry eyebrow shot up. "If this is something dirty, you're gonna be in big trouble, Miss . . ." He read my badge again. ". . . Bittencourt?" He shoved the CD-ROM into his side pocket. "I'll just take this downstairs and have a look."

I spent a lot of time imagining how disappointed the guy must have been when he saw that "Brazil: An Exotic Journey" wasn't pornography but really a multimedia travel guide, and a G-rated one at that. Aside from a few gorgeous women in bikinis on the beach at Ipanema, it was pretty tame stuff that even won a K-12 educational award.

I never found out how my software made its way back onto Gates's chair, but it did. Maybe the guard took pity on me. Maybe he showed it to another guard, who always wanted to visit Brazil and thought Gates should take a look at it. Or maybe the guard was afraid I was telling the truth and that he'd get in hot water if

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he didn't put the CD-ROM back where it belonged, on the big boss's chair.

After I got away from the guard, I made a final stop at the Consumer Division, where people were busy working, and I dropped off a two-page memo on the travel market for Charlotte Guyman. I also left a copy of the CD-ROM for Mary Ord, an acquaintance of mine who had expressed interest in the project. When weeks passed, though, and I hadn't heard from Gates, Charlotte, or Mary, I began to worry that nothing would come of my adventure in Building 8.

Just when my break-in had become simply a good story to tell my friends, and just about the time I'd started to wonder what step to take next, Mary Ord popped into my office unexpectedly. "You busy?" she asked.

I shook my head, my heart starting to pick up speed.

"We've decided to move forward in the travel market," Mary said casually, and I had to stop myself from screaming out. "We're putting together a team—would you like to be on it?"

That was the first breath of life for my brainchild—the software that became, two years later, Expedia.com and that made me a millionaire.