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Professor Brown

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Comply

It's 12:53 PM, and I know I can't leave. The Code has drawn the curtains and locked the door of my cramped dorm bedroom—locked me inside in the tight space between my XL twin-sized bed and my peeling faux-wood desk. My eyes scan across the dim room in the fashion of a projector, much like the assignment due by midnight. Staring at one corner of the room, I can simultaneously see my wall of fantasy maps and posters in one side of my vision while still making out the warped green glow of the lava lamp I earned at Hei-10 Arcade two years ago. I wonder if I could measure the angles my vision makes up—but that's in three dimensions, and I'm only working in two. This assignment should be so much simpler.

I turn to the rubber duck smiling up at me from just below my monitor, anything to keep my eyes from the dark blue glow of The Code. Ducky gives an encouraging nod, and my eyes stay on him, his little yellow face both innocent and carefree. In a way, his world is in two dimensions. He doesn't have to eat, sleep, or do anything really. The only things he knows about are the bit of coding I'd taught him and the intricacies of bathtub architecture, plumbing, and culture—none of which are of much use to me when trying to determine something like,

the minimum number of two-dimensional people out of N total people in a circular room hit by a projector at the center projecting an angle of D degrees assuming perfect placement and rotation.

Ducky hadn't gotten a word of this, so I explained it like a pizza box with pinprick holes in it—rotating a pizza slice around the box to try finding the fewest number of those holes it would cover at any given time. However, due to him never having tasted, or even seen pizza before, the comparison was lost on him.

I sigh, rubbing my head. All in all, it should be pretty simple, but I can't think of a better implementation than iterating around degree by degree, but that would take 360 cycles and leave out any decimal cases.

I'd tried explaining that to Ducky too, but he just nodded and smiled, asking if I'd considered taking another break. Suffice to say, all of the above is nerd-speak for "I have a solution, but it only works some of the time," and some of the time is not enough. My grade is already falling below a ninety, and I can't afford anything below a perfect score on this assignment. Still, my mind feels like mush, and I fear that looking at The Code will make it real again.

Just because you're hiding from me doesn't mean I'm not real, a digital flicker plays in my head. *You can't hide from me like some bad dream, friend; I'm as real as the keyboard beneath your fingers.*

"Quiet," I say, "Let me think. I need to figure this out."

Let's give you twenty seconds before you receive another encouragement shock. Would you like me to count down in binary to save you time?

My hands moving instinctively, I press ALT+TAB on my keyboard, switching to my web browser so I can finally look at the screen.

Don't do that, The Code chides in a voice full of static, but it's my only escape. I need something to make me happy, something to make me laugh, even for just a moment—a gentle

exhale from my nose would be enough. I open Viewloop, drowning out the scolding and hissing of The Code in utopic dopamine and serotonin.

A painful shock prickles throughout my entire system. It zips across my body like moving all asleep limbs at once, the needles tearing up my arms and legs. I cry out, wincing as the pain subsides. I look at my clock and it's already 1:37.

I warned you, The Code says. You insist on always making things harder on yourself, don't you, friend?

"Shit!" I shout, slamming my desk, rattling my keyboard, mouse, and Ducky with them, leaving him a bit boggled.

"Hey, it's okay, Charlie," Ducky says, hopping into a confident stance. "Sometimes you need to give the tub some time to drain. Maybe you should go take a walk or grab something to eat or drink."

"I wasted too much time already," I say, grimacing as I face The Code—lines and lines of block fragments and unfinished logic, color-coded and nested together, all grinning at me in a bitwise smile.

There you are, The Code sneers, I missed you, Charlie. Why do you keep leaving me so?

I read through the code I'd written, but it might as well be another language—Ducky's favorite joke. I try to decipher it again, line-by-line, and I begin to recapture my understanding of the mess I'd written.

"Okay," I say, thinking aloud. "Let's finish up the easy parts. I'll have an idea for the projector by then."

“You can’t turn on the shower without connecting all the pipes,” Ducky grins from below me, but I hardly notice him. I’m already away, furiously typing, typing as if my life depends on it.

Faster, The Code says. *It’s already 2:00*, and I listen. My hands are the cables from my cloudy, unfocused mind into the deep recesses of The Code—building it, growing it, feeding it. By 2:15, I’ve got the main logic set up, and by 3:00, I finally get the sorting algorithm in place. I’m finally making it somewhere.

“Great job!” Ducky bounces up as my focus wavers. “Two hundred lines of code? Wowie!”

I pat him on the head and sip the last few drops from my water bottle. I better go refill this.

Not so fast, The Code says, grabbing me, the static of its touch prickling my shoulders as I fall back to my seat. *The door is locked until I say so*.

“Now that’s not fair!” Ducky says. “You’ve gotta give yourself some time to recuperate.”

“I—I need a minute,” I say.

Aw, do we need another encouragement shock? The Code coos, static popping in my ears.

“No, I just want to take a second.”

I’ll give you ten.

Just as fast as before, my hands move of their own accord in a defensive maneuver, ALT+TAB is pressed, and the shock jerks me backward.

Grinding my teeth through the pain tickling its way up my limbs, I look in the corner of my monitor, and it’s 5:15. I’m getting hungry and a bit more than parched.

“Fine!” I shout. “I’ll do it!”

Now that’s a good boy, The Code smiles. *Finish up, friend, or you won’t be having dinner tonight.*

Biting my lip until it bleeds, I type away, giving The Code exactly what it wants. I write up that sub-par solution, moving the projected pizza slice around one degree at a time, satiating its insufferable appetite.

“This can’t be good for you, Charlie.”

“Shut it, Ducky!” I say, not taking my eyes off The Code. “I—I have to finish up.”

My arid tongue presses against the roof of my mouth, lapping up the metallic taste until my fingers cramp and I pause.

Get back to w—

I crack my knuckles and keep going. My fingers are cripples in a sprint, crawling and clamoring away as fast as they can manage. Every movement hurts, but a desperation keeps them dragging themselves inch by inch, the sand and gravel burning against their whole bodies.

I add a semi-colon, press enter on the last line, and sigh. It’s 7:30, and all I’ve gotta do is test it.

I type a few commands into the terminal to get into the correct directory and paste the sample input, holding my breath.

The terminal spits out a bunch of numbers. I scan them. Wrong. They’re all wrong.

I slam my fist against my desk. “Damn it!” I shout. “I swear everything looks right.”

Not quite right enough, The Code grins. *Just a bit further, friend. I’m sure you can handle it.*

“Just—just let me get some dinner first. I’ll think better on a full stomach.”

Need I remind you that the doors are locked, my Charlie?

“No, just unlock them for a few minutes. I can reheat—”

Do we need some more encouragement?

“Please, I just need a minute!”

Five seconds, Charlie.

ALT+TAB and my whole body convulses with the pain. Every limb pounds with the beat of my heart, my eyes are dry, lids pressing down. My stomach is rumbling, my mouth is chapped and tastes of stomach acid. It’s 11:47 and I haven’t done anything. I slap myself in the face.

Yes, a stupid mistake you’ve made, friend.

I bite my arm until its red and I’ve nearly drawn blood.

How foolish you are.

I punch the desk, and I feel my knuckles collapse painfully.

You did this to yourself.

“No, you did this to me!” I shout, and The Code’s bitwise smile droops a bit. I drag my weary fingers across the keyboard, covering the code with my schools’ homepage.

Now, now. Where do you think you’re going?

I click on the course shell of my coding class.

You know you can’t submit it until its finished.

I scroll to the assignments tab.

You think you can scare me with a little bluff like this, boy?

I click on “Project 3.”

It won’t be perfect, you know!

I click on “submit files.”

You won't be a good coder if you do this! You'll fail!

I drag The Code into the submission box.

Don't you dare, Charlie! You'll never pass the class like this!

I click "Submit Assignment."

As feeling finally returns to my limbs, tears stream into my eyes, and I let my shaking hand hover off my mouse, only to be met by the warm touch of rubber. Ducky holds one of his wings against my hand, looking up at me with his own watery eyes as if to say, "You're going to be alright."