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Professor Brown

CRW 4122

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Artist Statement

For my final portfolio, I decided to revise “Comply,” which I have renamed to “Compliance.” To start, I chose to entirely rewrite the opening of “Comply” to ensure the reader is following. The most common critique I received was that the beginning was unclear and it made the rest of the story much more difficult to follow. I gave the opening more room to breathe by introducing Charlie when he’s starting his assignment, explaining it to Ducky. Because this is a story about overworking oneself in pursuit of perfection, I decided to forgo some of the vagueness I previously thought was subtlety by placing three instances of the word “perfect” in italics before the readers are introduced to The Code. That way, when The Code appears, there are breadcrumbs leading to what the character is supposed to represent. I also put more emphasis on Ducky in the beginning since many people wished he was a greater part of the story overall. I gave him a few lines that aren’t quite as funny as his original ones, but I’m sure they’ll come together in a third draft.

Another common critique was confusion about how much time Charlie has left and that the story is missing chronic tension since he has so much time. First, I decided to push the time back a little bit, having Charlie start about an hour later than he did in the first draft. Then, I placed more signposting to remind the reader how much time is remaining before the submission. To address the tension portion, I decided to reject the suggestion to start the story closer to midnight because I think it is contrary to what this piece stands for. It’s about

perfectionism, and one of the biggest parts of being a struggling perfectionist is the toll time takes. Ten hours might feel like a lot to some people, but to Charlie—for this assignment—that goes by in the blink of an eye. To lean further into this point, I put clearer descriptions of the doomscrolling Charlie does that lead to The Code’s encouragement shocks. Even though I never use TikTok, I feel like I might have to replace my mention of YouTube with TikTok in the third draft of this piece to really hammer this point home, but maybe it’ll come across regardless.

A minor detail I included was also the beginnings of Charlie’s code in the Consolas font (the font used in VSCode—a software used for coding). I heard from a few people that they wanted to see what it looked like to code, so I included a little experimental font-switching to be a bit more illustrative for those who haven’t coded before. I’m not certain if I’ll keep this in future drafts, but I think it’s a cute little addition nonetheless.

One last major critique that I believe I’ve rectified is the question Maggie posed: “why does [Charlie] stay in the major?” She pointed out that computer science sounds “like hell” and that she’s not certain why Charlie continues on this path. I think my new introduction shows that even though Charlie is frustrated, this is something he loves deep down—not to mention, something he’s good at. I give him a couple moments to ramble that are cut off, and I think these help make the story feel more like a personal struggle than a struggle with a specific career path.

Even though this revision isn’t perfect, I feel like this story is a major part of who I am, and I hope to someday revise it to the point where I feel it’s “*perfect*” enough to publish somewhere. Regardless, thank you for the enjoyable class experience, and I wish you the best of luck with your future endeavors, Professor Brown.

Sincerely,

Caleb Rosenfeld

Compliance

“Okay, do you get it now?” I ask, looking down at the little rubber duck sitting on my desk.

Squinting, Ducky bobs his orange beak in a studious nod that doesn’t quite fit his cartoonish face. “Hmm,” he says, tilting his head. “I think you lost me at ‘basically’”

I sigh, letting my face fall into my hands. I roll backward in my chair, bumping into my bed behind me. This coding assignment is already coating every inch of my racing, spacious mind. My dorm bedroom, on the other hand, is anything but spacious; its painted cinderblock walls are only brightened by my various movie posters and fantasy maps. I guess that old lava lamp I won a while back brightens it too, but it’s been turned off for a few weeks since my AC can’t seem to handle the heat.

I glance at my phone, getting a brief glimpse of the bags under my eyes in the black mirror. I look at my clock instead—it’s almost 2:00pm, and I’m trying to go over this assignment with Ducky before I commit to it, but I’m running out of time. It has to be *perfect*, but I feel like I have barely enough energy to type three lines. I guess that’s where being an ex-gifted kid gets you.

Ducky paces on my desk, scratching the bottom half of his beak in deep thought. “Do you need a bit of time to think before starting? Maybe a nice walk outside would do you some good!”

“I’ve only got until midnight,” I say, “and my friends from class said it took them eight hours, and they still didn’t have working code. Can you at least try to pay attention, Ducky?”

Ducky stops in his tracks, confidence brimming as he puts his little yellow wings on his hips. “Alright, Charlie. I’m ready this time!”

I look up at my monitor, reading through the PDF again in an attempt to think of a better way to explain this. It's called "The Projector Problem"—a coding problem that imagines a projector in the center of a room full of people. It's my job to code something that will systematically determine what direction the projector should point to avoid hitting any people with the light.

"Alright, it's like a pizza box," I say, trying my best to simplify the assignment. "But with little pinprick holes in it." I rap my fingers on the desk, vibrating Ducky's thoughtful expression. "And my goal is to rotate a pizza slice around the box to find the fewest number of those holes it would cover at any given time. Now, that doesn't sound too hard, but the size of the pizza slice is random, and I only know the Cartesian coordinates of the pinpricks. So, that means I'll have to use trig to convert them to polar coordinates and use the angle to figure out—"

"What's pizza?" Ducky asks.

I stare at him, feeling every second pass like I'm at the bottom of an hourglass. I let loose an identical sigh to my last. "Nevermind," I say. The only things Ducky 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 figure out a solution to this problem, no matter how good his intentions.

I tap my temple, staring at the PDF. I could iterate around degree by degree, but that would take the code 360 cycles and leave out any decimal cases—nerd speak for "I have a solution, but it only works some of the time." It has to be *perfect*, so that won't do.

"Maybe if you just turn on the water, a solution will flow out," Ducky says with a shining smile.

I scratch my chin, pressing ALT+TAB on my keyboard, switching to VSCode. I watch the little cursor blink on and off in the blank screen—a black canvas I’ll surely be staring at for the next eight hours.

After much hesitation, I start typing. I begin as I always do—the header comments.

```
// Charlie Becker  
// COP 3502C  
// projector.c  
// 10/28/23
```

Next, I move to the imports, and I know I’m gonna need the math library for this one.

```
#include <stdio.h>  
#include <stdlib.h>  
#include <math.h>
```

Perfect. Now comes the actual assignment. I lean back in my chair, already exhausted at the prospect of starting. The aching sensation to pick up my phone begins to creep in, but Ducky’s right—I’ve just gotta start. Then, things will flow. I let my fingers loose on the keyboard, laying the groundwork. Eventually, code starts to leak out like a thick black ooze squeezing from the drain—the slop clogging my mind coagulating on the screen as I type.

I look up to see my code—The Code—staring right back at me. The lines of text shift and flicker before my eyes, forming a growing cheshire grin.

Hello, Charlie, it says in a slow, methodical voice. *How is the assignment going?*

I blink, glancing at Ducky, who wears a wide-eyed expression. I’ve never seen this face before, but somehow it feels familiar—like I’ve met it, maybe many times. “It’s barely started,” I sigh. “I’m struggling on how to implement this. The assignment doesn’t specify if I need to account for decimal angles, and I—well, I’m sure I’ll just bore you with the—”

Define a constant for pi, The Code says. *You’ll need it to convert from radians to degrees.*

A slight smile arises on my face; now that's a good idea. I scroll back to the top and define pi for the first few digits.

Ah, The Code tuts, but don't forget that if you make it of type "double," it can hold up to 15 decimals points.

"Thanks," I say with a nod, quickly using Google to copy and paste the first fifteen digits of pi into the constant. "That's really helpful." I look down at Ducky, who's biting the tips of his yellow wings as if they were his fingernails.

"I'm not so sure you wanna get help like this, Charlie," Ducky says with knitted eyebrows. "It doesn't feel quite right."

"Why not?" I ask. "I can use as much help as I can get."

Exactly, The Code says, its voice like digital molasses. All I ask is for your complete attention until you're finished—to keep you productive, of course.

"See? That seems reasonable," I say, though Ducky's nervous expression proves he isn't convinced.

Of course it's reasonable, The Code says. You need that grade, don't you? Let's make sure you can focus. The Code begins to flicker and hiss, making Ducky jump so high he almost falls off the desk. Static-covered arms reach from my monitor, stretching and crackling to reach for my curtains. The Code draws my curtains closed, blocking out the afternoon sunlight. Then, its arms reach for my door, nudging it shut and locking it with a click. As fast as a blink, the arms vanish back into the screen, and The Code is staring back at me.

Perfect, The Code coos. Now, Charlie... won't you get back to work?

I get back to it, continuing my haphazard skeleton code. Still, not knowing exactly how I want to structure the program slows me down. Before long, I feel that aching again—the urge to stop and breathe, to grab my phone, even if only for a second.

Keep going, The Code says. *You’ve barely started after all.*

I let out a puff of air and force my fingers to keep moving. I’m starting to lose track of what code’s doing what, now, and I keep forgetting little things—an asterisk here—a semicolon there. The little mistakes start to build up, weighing my hands and mind down. I scroll back up to the top where The Code grins at me with its lowered, pixelated eyelids.

What are you stopping for? Keep moving.

“I just need a second to breathe,” I say, looking down at Ducky who gives me a thumbs up.

Do you need some encouragement? The Code asks.

“No,” I say, starting to stand up. “I just wanna stretch my legs real qui—”

The Code’s static-covered arms reach out as quick as lightning, zapping my skin with its touch. I grunt, collapsing back into my chair, and The Code’s arms retract.

“Wh-what was that?” I ask.

It looks like you did need some encouragement, The Code says. *I’m more than happy to give you a little nudge whenever you need, my Charlie.*

“You shocked me!”

I’m only trying to help you, The Code assures me. *You’ve been sitting here for a mere hour; yet you want to take a break already?*

I look at my clock. “I...I guess you’re right.”

“But that shouldn’t stop you from getting the blood pumping!” Ducky says, doing squats on my desk with his tiny rubber legs.

“No, I really gotta get this done,” I say, taking a deep breath. I dive back in, but progress is about as fast as an underwater treadmill, with none of the bloodflow that might provide. I type and type, pausing only to delete my clumsy, stupid mistakes. The ache starts to set in again, and it becomes stronger the more I sit there, clicking away.

I pause, finally reaching a point that requires a solid decision on how exactly I’m gonna tackle this ridiculous projector, but I still can’t think of a better solution than my first one. Letting the program loop for 360 cycles isn’t that much in the grand scheme of things, but it’s missing so many edge cases. What if one of the values isn’t a whole number?

Why have we stopped? The Code asks, tutting once again. *You don’t need some more encouragement, do you?*

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

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

My hands moving instinctively, I snatch up my phone, somehow feeling that it could stop The Code, stop it from hurting me.

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 tap on YouTube, drowning out the scolding and hissing of The Code in utopic dopamine and serotonin. The safe haven scrolls past my eyes as my mind empties of worry—a blissful silence from within giving me a gilded peace, a peace that feels timeless.

As my eyes pull free, 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—4:00pm. Only eight hours remain and I’m probably twelve from finishing.

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

“Shit!” I shout, slamming my desk, rattling my keyboard, mouse, and Ducky with them.

“Hey, it’s okay, Charlie,” Ducky says, hopping back to his feet. “Sometimes you need to give the tub some time to drain. Maybe you should go take a walk or grab a snack!”

“I wasted too much time already,” I say, grimacing as I lock eyes with 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 everything 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 patch up these 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 4:15, and I listen. My hands are cables from my cloudy, unfocused mind into the deep recesses of The Code—building it, growing it, feeding it.

By 4:30, I've got the main logic set up, and by 5:00, 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, blocking the way with its fuzzy, hissing arms. It wags its finger at me, coming closer. I fall back to my seat. *Seven hours remain. 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. Its arms start to close in around me, the black and white specks a flickering reminder the unique way they torture me.

"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, snagging my phone, and the bliss consumes me once again. I'm lifted up into a foggy, unfocused headspace. I'm not certain I can feel my limbs; I'm not certain I can feel anything. I want to feel. I want to—

The shock jerks me backward. Grinding my teeth through the pain tickling its way up my limbs, I look at my clock, and it's 7:15—less than five hours left. 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, 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 9:30, 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 assignment’s sample input, holding my breath.

The terminal spits out a bunch of numbers aligned like a crooked ladder. I scan each number, climbing the sample output alongside my jumbled, messy terminal. They don’t match up at all. Wrong. It’s 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.

I touch my phone, and—after a flicker of relief—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, quite the 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. I drag my weary fingers across the keyboard, covering The Code's face 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 it's 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.”

You’ll never pass the class like this!

I click on “submit files.”

You won’t be a good coder! You’ll fail!

I drag The Code into the submission box.

Don’t you dare, Charlie! If you do this, you’ll never be perf—

I click “Submit Assignment.”

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.”

Plan of Action

For “Do Not Forsake Me,” I plan to radically revise it into a novella-length story. As is typical of my fantasy stories, I got perhaps a tad too ambitious with this story and included a lot of elements that many of my peers wanted expanded. Ironically enough, I struggled quite a bit writing this story for fear of that very thing, so it’s disheartening to know that I didn’t succeed quite as well as I’d hoped. However, it was still encouraging to find so many of my peers were passionate about my story and wanted to hear more from this world I’d created in only a week.

The biggest critique by far was about Kynn’s relation to his pet and best friend, Ty, and why Kynn apparently cared more about him than the rest of his old family. Given more page space, I think this can be made much clearer with a few flashbacks here and there to illustrate what happened that led to this point. When it comes down to it, Kynn is in denial, believing that he can bring Ty back from the dead, while he’s certain (because their souls were consumed by the lantern) that the rest of his family cannot be brought back. He’s really just chasing a goal because it’s the only thing he knows how to do anymore. Most of the people who made him happy aren’t around anymore, so Kynn’s belief is that he needs at least one of them back to be happy again. Of course, this isn’t realistic, but people are known to lie to themselves when in grief. I’m hoping that the revision will help show that this is the lie he has to overcome.

Other than that, I’m not certain what other revisions I’ll make. Often, I have to think on a bunch of different ideas before revising a story—letting them gestate. Then, I sit down and, with all the critiques in mind, I start to rearrange, remove, and add things as they feel natural. In fact, this feels like the most natural end of this portfolio, so I think I’ll stop it here. It’s almost ten, I’ve got another final exam tomorrow, and I wanna listen to the Ducky in my head for once. Again, I thank you for this class, Professor Brown, and I wish you the best.

Sincerely,

Caleb Rosenfeld