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Math 419: Historical Perspectives of Mathematics
Mathematical Reflection

Biologist Charles Darwin once said:

A mathematician is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black hat which isn't there.

Your task:

Write a paragraph, giving your interpretation of this claim. Dare to show some creativity, yet show organization in how you respond. Overall, paper is to be typed, double-spaced. Do not exceed 1-page. Do no resort to Xerox reduction or margins whose limit is zero. Check spellings/grammar. The goal of the assignment (in addition to prompting some necessary reflection on your part) is to provide a sample of your writing.

I huff and grunt as I scramble about the shadows – “OWWWW... SON OF A ... GUN!” I lost my sight in the accident all those years ago. I fumble through the scattered furniture as if I am the wrong puzzle piece being stuffed into a hole. “*Honk Honk!*” I swear if she honks one more time I’m just going to sit back down and start working again – I don’t care how great of an award they want to give me, she can go to the ceremony without me if she is in that much of a hurry! I heard her heavy steps not but seconds later and the door swung open behind me. “Charles, what are you doing out of bed?” she said with a hint of concern in her tone. “I just have to find my top hat, and then we can go to the ceremony. No need to honk the car horn repeatedly! Help me find my hat, honey. It’s not every day that a brilliant blind man such as myself wins an award! I have to look my best.” More concern was on her voice when she said “What ceremony, Charles? And please don’t play these games with the blind act and top hat – it’s not funny.” “Em, we have the Year End awards ceremony this evening – you know, for my research with Jerry Johnson? – So I just need to get my hat, then we can go.”

“Charles, snap out of it! You aren’t a blind man and darling there is no top hat. You have never owned a top hat and you never will because I can’t stand the sight of them!” She was in tears as her voice lowered to an uneasy whisper: “Charles, sweetie...you don’t know a Jerry. I wasn’t honking the car horn – we don’t own a car. There is no research. There is no ceremony. There is no award. You hit your head years ago and when you woke up you thought you were a recognized blind mathematician that solved unsolvable problems and that there were riches and glory just within your reach. The doctors said this wouldn’t happen anymore with the new medication... Charles...brace yourself for this... you are an average mathematician. You solve some problems here and there, sure, but you stay at home scribbling while I go to work all day. Everything you do has been done before but you insist on doing your math.”

My head began to throb with the rush of memories. This wasn’t the first time we have had this conversation. I rubbed my eyes and quickly felt the sensation of pushing too hard – my vision slowly returned. Was it all a lie? Was my life’s work nothing more than a fictitious intruder into the heart of my deepest memories? Have I accomplished nothing more than mediocrity? Have I created an illusion of fame and fortune but done nothing more than probe for that which was imaginary?