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Debug

His hands were shaking just a little as he drew them away from the keyboard. His mouth hung slightly open, as much from exhaustion as amazement. He sat there, slouched in an uncomfortable wooden chair, staring into the computer screen. His desk was a graveyard of stained cardboard coffee cups. A few of them were pushed aside to make room for the mouse. His screen was a clutter of icons and code, with a particular window in the foreground displaying a single sentence and an incessantly blinking cursor.

He had long since run out of music he wished to listen to, and his room was silent save the quiet hum of his hard drive and the occasional passing car. The satellite speakers mounted on his ceiling hung like tiny aliens singing the faint songs of ambient electromagnetic energy. His room was a few floors up from the street. It was warm and he left the window open. He thought he heard a bird. There was no wind.

The room was dark except for the glow of the monitor on his face. His glazed eyes glistened in the artificial light. Light from the hallway peeked in from under his door. The yellow glow reached a few inches into his room. No one was outside at this time, but the hallway was always lit. The first rays of morning sunlight drifted into his window and touched his face.

His bookshelves were lined with textbooks and programming manuals. “Unix for the Impatient,” read one. “Effective Java,” said another. One shelf was full of science fiction. A crumpled faux-money bookmark peeked out from the pages of Stephenson’s *Cryptonomicon*, which rested between Chuck Palahniuk’s masterpiece and a pair of trilogies by William Gibson. It was clear they had all been read, white lines down the spines betrayed his bend-back style of reading. Somewhere under the piles of paper next to his desk was the novel he was currently reading. The room was small, as in all dorms, and so the paper had to be spread around the floor in piles. They covered the floor evenly, like water having found its level: a precisely organized mess.

There was an odor permeating the room, like stale sheets. He didn’t notice it, though. His senses were dulled to it as they were to everything. He no longer smelled the coffee grounds slowly drying in the cups. Hazelnut, Colombian, and an African country he was not familiar with. He didn’t remember whether it had tasted good; it was a tool, not a pleasure. The scents in his room overpowered the subtle ones outside. If, at that moment, he had been just waking up, instead of having not yet slept, he would have noticed the smell of impending snow. But for him there was only stagnant air.

Still nearly motionless, he continued to look at the screen. He read the sentence several times as his facial features softened, relaxed. His shoulders slumped down even further, if that was possible, as though his spine was melting. Eyes that had been open for days now looked around the room, searching for a witness, for someone to share this moment with him. But he was alone. He sighed heavily, slowly, and read the words again as his lips parted in a tiny smile. “All code run successfully,” it blinked.

Finally, he closed his eyes.

Just as he felt the soft embrace of slumber envelop him, a soft rap sounded at his door. His eyes were open again, and his mouth sounded out the words “come in,” though no sound came out. He cleared his throat and tried again, decidedly still awake.

“Come in,” he said wearily.

The figure on the other side of the door turned the knob and stepped into the room, yellow light pouring in behind him. The silhouette spoke, “Still coding, huh? You poor bastard.” Carl stepped into the room and hopped among the paper piles.

Edmund smiled, having found his witness, and gestured at the screen.

Carl read aloud, “Errors were found. NullPointerException() at ClientDriver.java:147.”

Edmund’s smile vanished and he snapped his head back to the message that still blinked steadily. “No! That’s impossible!” He grabbed the sides of his head, as though ready to pull his hair out at the roots.

“Relax,” Carl placed his hand on Edmund’s shoulder, “I haven’t even started yet.”

Turning to look up at Carl, Edmund’s face was a scrambled mix of pity and awe. “Do you ever sleep? I think the only time I’ve ever seen you up has been after three in the morning.”

“I don’t go to class, remember?”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Edmund paused while composing his question. “Do you ever ask yourself if this is really worth it? I mean, this is absurd. I haven’t slept in more than 48 hours; this is my second all-nighter.”

Carl shrugged. “Sure it’s worth it. You just need to keep your eyes open. There’s plenty of reasons to stay, you just need to find yours.”

Edmund looked back at the screen in dismay, the error now taunting him. “I need to finish this, or staying here won’t be an option.”

Carl said, “Yeah, I should get started. Wanna head over to a computer cluster and work on it there? It’s probably crowded with losers like you. Misery loves company.”

“Thanks, friend.” With a grunt, Edmund lifted himself out of his chair, spilling over a pile behind him.

“Any time.”

Edmund slipped into a bright orange coat and walked with Carl down to the street. Carl, as always, was wearing shorts and a clean white T-shirt, untouched by the sudden winter chill that had descended on the campus like a ghost in the night.

They approached the major road that cut through the center of campus, dividing the dorms from the academic buildings. At all times of the day this road was humming with cars passing into and out of the city across the river. Carl and Edmund stopped at the edge of the crosswalk and waited obediently for the “Walk” sign.

Edmund watched as the red “Don’t Walk” flashed suddenly to “Walk.” He took only a few purposeful steps into the street when he was nearly killed. A taxi cab, painted with flames down either side, roared past Edmund, missing him only by inches. The horn blared and the man made some gesture out the window. Edmund was stunned. Carl ran up next to him.

“Dude, it says not to walk. I understand you have no respect for drivers, but that guy would clearly have mowed you down,” Carl said this while pointing to the sign which only just then turned to an inviting white “Walk.”

“That’s twice this morning I’ve hallucinated something.” Edmund placed his palm on his forehead, checking for a fever. He was in a cold sweat.

“Come on,” Carl offered, “let’s get out of the street.”

As they entered the shelter of the huge domed building, Edmund tilted his head up to the sky and inhaled the cold air. He filled his lungs with its refreshing purity and closed his eyes. The first flake of snow struck him on the forehead. They went inside.

Edmund entered a code on a small keypad, the password that gained him entrance to the computing cluster. A few students sat hunched over machines, typing away furiously under the pressure of some impending deadline. Carl nodded to a couple of machines in the corner where they could sit and watch people go in and out while they worked. “People watching,” he called it.

Logging into the terminal, Edmund opened up his code and prepared to run the tests one more time. He could have sworn the message he had seen was real. Carl seemed completely disinterested in coding, and opened up a web browser.

When the girl walked into the room, Edmund and Carl looked up simultaneously. They had neither seen nor heard her, but they had certainly felt her. Her presence seemed to elevate the entire room to a new level of existence. Her black hair hung straight and rested on her shoulders. Her face was a striking assemblage of Asian and European features. She passed row after row of terminals before turning down Edmund and Carl’s aisle. She walked up to the empty seat beside Edmund and asked if it was taken. Edmund shook his head quickly.

Edmund began running his test suites, trying hard not to turn and stare at the lovely creature that had lit down next to him. He finally built up the courage to introduce

himself. He told her his name, and she told him hers. He forgot it instantly. He was too involved with watching her lips move to hear a word she said, but he was sure it was clever and sweet and perfect.

“Looks like you’re done,” she winked.

“Huh?”

“With your project. It says you’re done.” She pointed to the message on the monitor: “All tests run successfully.”

Perplexed, Edmund looked over at Carl, who just shrugged.

Suddenly, Edmund was struck by a thought. It seized him by the throat and demanded his attention. The test messages. The “Walk” signal. The hallucinations. No, he thought, she is real. She is the reason for me to stay.

Edmund leaned over to Carl and whispered, “Please tell me you see her too.”

The girl smiled at Edmund with a confused look on her face and asked, “Who are you talking to?”