

Personal Essay

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ABSTRACT

I am a senior at Old Dominion University. I will be graduating soon with a Cybersecurity degree. This paper follows a particular moment in time working in IT. It will showcase my knowledge as well as my attitude. It will also briefly discuss reflections and looking forward.

I've never told this story before. It's an embarrassing story.

Look, here's a table with a cheap paper cover on it. The design on the paper is of various birthday hats, cakes, and balloons, along with Happy Birthday written in English, Spanish, and Hindi. The cover yellows on the edges, there's various cup sized water stains, and a large tear across the word cumpleaños.

If you remove the paper cover, the table has decades of writing etched into wood; various slurs, fascist symbols, as well as declarations of love, bible verses, and a MySpace url. The table legs sit on 3 fuzzy green balls, the leg with a missing ball makes the entire table wobble unevenly. It's a mystery to me as much as it will be to you what happened to this fourth ball.

Sitting on top of the table, as monolithic and unmoving as the cover beneath it, is a HP LaserJet 1020 printer, assembled in a factory in China and bought by ODU in July 2005. The printer is white with grey accents on the side. There's an indicator light for power, an indicator light for error, and a small plastic catch tray for the paper. Along the back is a USB 2.0 slot, and the power cable.

This marvel of technology and the equally miraculous table beneath it sits on the 3rd floor of an ODU building, in the middle of a dense maze of cubicles, only occasionally occupied by hopeful grad students checking their email. The wall, carpet, and lights are piss-stain yellow, and the air doesn't smell of anything particular.

If you were to take the printer apart you would find at the bottom the drum and roll. The roll rubs against the drum, providing a negative electric charge to the entire drum. Across from them is the laser, which reads the printer page in XPS and then shoots positive charges onto the drum to engrave the XPS file. Next you would find the hopper, which stirs the toner before moving it to the developer roller, as it does this the toner develops a negative charge which

attracts it to the positively charged areas of the drum, which then carries the film and paper up to the fuser, which melts the two together.

This printer, this table, the floor, the glass building, the street it sits on, but most importantly the printer, are a symbol of despair.

There's a winding inside me, even now, as I write this, as I read it back. I feel as a spring feels when it's been pressed down by a great boot, I want you to feel it. I want you to be a spring with me.

This printer doesn't work. It's my job to fix printers, it's our job now. It shouldn't matter much that this printer doesn't work, it's just that there were four printers before this we couldn't fix. The last one was a ticket sent in by a professor in the middle of class, as we shuffle in it seems he has decided the magnitude of whatever he's trying to print should halt the entire class.

He and his students awkwardly stare as you struggle for a minute to flip the printer over. You unscrew the bottom panel and stare into a cascading mess of circuits and jagged plastic parts. You mess around for twenty minutes, in silence, occasionally broken by the professor asking when you would be done, if you even knew what you were doing.

Eventually you sheepishly admit defeat, he yells at you, you leave, you report the ticket to your boss, who yells at you, and then you leave.

This new printer will be your 5th mistake if you fail, a generous amount by your boss's admittance.

You are 18, you are 2 months into your first semester of college, you fought and pleaded for this job, your only job before this was working at a hot dog stand in a stadium where your boss said to lie that you were 21 so you could sell beer at the register.

This table holds your hopes and dreams, the wind that was once at your back is now pushing against you. What would you do? Would you think of the embarrassment of failure? Of giving up? Would you cry, feel tears welling up in fear, I did. It's just a printer. Perhaps you understand now why I hesitate to tell this story.

Fixing printers is the lowly noble janitorial role of the IT sphere.

How would you fix this printer?

I turned it off and then on again. That didn't work, the error light blinked. I went downstairs to the utility closet and rooted through decades of unorganized cardboard boxes to find printer cartridge Q2612A, I was acutely aware in this moment that my life was threatened. In the corner of the utility closet was a stack of very heavy computers two shaq's tall, that looked like they were thrown on top of one another (they were) and that may fall at any slight disturbance. My boss warned they would kill someone one day, just to make sure I wasn't the one killed.

I was twenty minutes into the hunt when that boss called to ask what the (I'll spare your ears) was taking so long. I said I took a long number two, because the utility closet was a particular sore spot in his side.

If I had any hope of fixing the printer sometime this shift I would have to get lucky, and under a box of Networking textbooks from the 90s was my saving grace, an all black printer cartridge placed just for me. The only gift from god I'd see that semester.

I ran back upstairs and pulled the two tabs on the old cartridge and replaced it with a snap of the new one. I tried the printer. It didn't work, the error light blinked.

If it wasn't for the fresh graduate student who wandered in aimlessly in the middle of my failure, I would have smashed the printer with a weighty hammer and maybe see if I can get away with it.

I'd estimate this printer was used maybe once a month, and its working didn't particularly matter, there were two better color printers downstairs. It did matter to my boss that I could fix something, and to me, that I could fix something.

I asked the graduate student to log into his cubicle and I carried the printer over to it, and connected it. The graduate student seemed to be renewed by my quest to fix this printer, as though by logging in he had just embarked on the great journey with me. He watched with the excitement of an inconsequential observer as I tried to print, and the signal was blocked.

All of life is sudden realizations and mistakes between them.

I remoted wirelessly into my administrator computer and checked the permissions of the graduate students in this building. For some reason of lapsed judgement or another, they had been blocked from printing, and I unblocked them.

We watched together with held breath as I hit print. Nothing. Error light, blink, blink, blink. One piece fell into place on a potentially ever increasing canvas.

I found my way onto a printer forum to download an ancient printer driver and install it. No dice.

Then came the true struggle, the last resort.

Getting into the guts of the printer, the macabre.

I unscrewed the back plate and disassembled with the grace of a surgeon in the middle of a heart attack.

Out came the drum, the roller, the laser, the hopper, and then the fuser assembly. I turned the assembly over, and the grad student could spot it as easily as I could, a giant chunk taken out of the plastic. Like someone had bitten into it, perhaps they had, someone who got mad before me.

I didn't feel any relief, just resignation that I was still here. I put in an order for the replacement fuser part, and my two week notice.

Who knows if the printer ever got fixed, who knows if anyone even tried to print to it again.

There's a big service elevator near the back of the building that no one ever uses. Even though I was on the 3rd floor I took it down and it takes minutes just for the thing to get moving once the door closes. I cried on the way down.

I think the takeaway I'm supposed to give you is perseverance. I'm at a job in the same field now, and I'm competent and happy. I think this experience showed me to value workplaces that treat me with respect, and that I should commit myself to my work even if it's hard. Going forward I will still hate printers.