

Technical Difficulties

Tom tapped his foot against the desk impatiently as he stared at the frozen screen in front of him. He leaned back in his chair, his right ear pressed against his cell as he listened to the phone on the other end ring for the fifth time.

Unfortunately for Tom, there weren't many alternatives to this: he wasn't going to unplug all the cords and lug the whole desktop computer to a repair shop, and he couldn't search the Web for a solution as long as the computer was out of commission.

He pulled a long stray hair off the arm of the chair. *Must be Lana's*, he thought to himself, flicking it away.

He idly mulled over the rest of the desk. The kids' games were stacked neatly on the bottom shelf next to the computer monitor. Above that, a row of CDs, with a couple of random manuals thrown on top of them. Tom's glasses sat at the very top, right between the lamp and the family vacation photo. Tom frowned. When had the frame gotten so dusty? He could still see all four of their smiling faces as they posed behind their sandcastle, but the bright colors of their swimsuits had been dulled quite a bit. He made a mental note to clean this desk sometime soon.

More ringing. Someone had to be there to pick up the phone, right? He hadn't figured that tech support would be first in customer service, but he had a deadline to deal with.

Tom sat up and gave the monitor a solid whack with his hand. Nothing changed. Just a blue screen staring coldly back at him.

He was just about to hang up when he heard the short *click*. He held the phone steady as he looked up at the ceiling, thanking whoever was in charge up there. Still, there was only silence after that.

“Hello?” said Tom.

“Thank you for calling FocusTech Support,” the voice intoned. It was an automatic recording, one of those robotic female voices that you couldn’t actually talk to. Tom ran a hand through his hair with a sigh. Not a good sign.

“To begin,” the voice went on, “if you’d like to call about a technology problem or need assistance with a technology product, please press 1. If you’d like to call about a position at Focu—”

Tom pressed 1. He quickly put the phone back up to his ear.

“If you’re calling about a computer problem, press 1. If you’re—”

Tom pressed 1 again.

“Honey?” A different woman’s voice called out to him. Tom swiveled around in his chair to see his wife poking her head through the doorway.

“If you’re calling about a Mac computer...” Tom held his hand up to her.

“Hold on a sec, Ames,” he said, pressing another number while his wife watched him patiently.

1. 2. 1. Another 1.

Finally—“Please hold while we connect you to one of our technicians.” The voice shut off, replaced with a jazzy bit of hold music.

Tom lowered the phone slightly and looked up. “Sorry about that, Amy,” he said. “What’s up?”

His wife looked past him at the desk. “Everything okay? Is the computer broken?”

Tom glanced back at the blue-lit monitor. “Yeah, I tried resetting it, but it’s still not doing anything. Calling some tech people I found in the phone book. Seemed like the easiest thing to do for now.”

Amy crossed her arms, leaning against the doorframe. “Well, that thing was pretty old,” she said, “and the kids love playing on that thing whenever you’re out. I’m surprised it hasn’t happened sooner.”

“Look, it’s fine,” Tom replied. He hit the side of the computer with his free hand. “I’m sure it can be fixed up. That’s why I’m trying to talk to someone who knows what he’s doing.”

“Why don’t you just get a new one?”

“I don’t have time to just *get* a new one. I’ve been behind on work all week, and my boss is expecting these expense reports by Monday, just like every other week. Which is why I need a working computer *now*.”

“Oh no, not the expense reports!” Amy tilted her head and smiled at him. “Well, don’t knock yourself out. I’ll have dinner ready in an hour—just in case you want to spend part of your weekend outside of this cramped room.”

Tom was about to retort when he heard the music stop, and a voice say: “Hello, this is the FocusTech support office, my name is Kevin, how may I help you?”

“Oh, hello,” he said into the phone. He mouthed a quick *thank you* to his wife, who waved back, then spun to face the computer as she shut the door. “My computer is, uh, stuck, I guess. I can’t get it to work.”

“All right, what seems to be the problem?”

“It’s just, it’s not working. I was in the middle of working on it, and the screen just turned blue. I’ve tried pressing buttons, but—”

“Ah, the ol’ blue screen of death.” Tom heard the man chuckle to himself on the other end. “Okay, this might be tricky. Have you tried resetting your computer?”

Tom pressed the reset button once, then a second time. “Yes, but it’s not doing anything. Still a blue screen.”

“Hmm.” Silence. “Are all the cords plugged in properly?”

Tom scowled as he scooted around to look behind the desk. If all this was because he accidentally jostled one of the cords...but he couldn’t spot anything hanging loose. “Yes,” he said, “everything is plugged in.”

“Interesting.” Silence. Tom thought briefly that the guy might’ve hung up on him, until he eventually responded with a grunt. “Okay, I’m not sure what exactly I’ll be able to do over the phone, but...I need to go get a reboot manual real quick. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, uh...” Before Tom had time to react, however, the jazzy music from before had started up again. He rubbed his eyes with a grimace. Things were not going according to plan.

He rested his head on one hand, closing his eyes. The blue light shone through his eyelids, creating a sea of dark purple for him to blindly stare at while being forced to listen to the ridiculous, friendly little ditty playing on his phone. Time seemed to stretch on and on as he sat there. It would’ve been a peaceful,

almost enlightening experience, if there weren't such a large amount of stress attached to the whole thing.

Tom stretched and opened his eyes. He glanced up at the family photo. What he would give to be back on that beach, relaxing with his family without a care in the world...

"Daaaddy!"

Tom felt a small pull on his sleeve. He looked down at the little girl looking wistfully back up at him. "Whatcha doin', Daddy?" she asked.

"Sorry, Lana, Daddy's on the pho—"

"Lana!" Her older brother ran into the study behind her. "You shouldn't bother Dad while he's in here!"

Lana scratched her nose, then pulled on Tom's shirt again. "Daddy," she said, "Can...can me and Martin play on the computer, Daddy?"

Tom shook his head. "Sorry, sweetie, the computer's broken. No playing on the computer until it's fixed."

Lana gave Tom her best pout. "Aw, no fair...but I wanna plaaaay..."

Tom looked over at Martin. "Hey, go play with your sister."

"Ooh!" Lana's eyes lit up. "Can we play House again?"

"No, House is boring," Martin whined. "I'm already ten years old, I don't play games like House anymore."

"Aw, but Marty! Daaad!" She started spinning, twisting Tom's sleeve around.

Tom heard another *click* on the phone as the music stopped. He sat up straight. "Look, Martin, just do something with her for a bit."

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, play a board game or something.” Tom switched his focus to the phone. “Hello?” he said into it.

“Okay, Dad.” Martin took Lana’s hand, leading her out of the room. “Come on, sis.”

Lana gave Tom one last “Bye, Daddy,” before toddling away with her brother. Tom was watching them go when he heard Kevin’s voice again.

“All right, let’s see here...” Tom rolled back and forth in his chair, waiting for the news. “So, ah...say, what’d you say your name was again?”

“Tom. It’s Tom.” He was fairly certain he hadn’t said his name yet, though he decided not to bring that up.

“Right, Tom. Here’s what we’re gonna do. Go ahead and hold down the on switch.”

“Hold down the...got it.” Tom pressed the button on the hard drive by his feet. After a few seconds, he felt the room grow slightly dimmer, and he looked up to see that the blue light had vanished. “Oh!” he said, “The computer turned off. Now what?”

“Okay, now try turning it back on.”

Tom was *this* close to throwing his phone across the room. All the waiting he’d been through, just so he could be told to turn it off and on again? *What a joke!*, he thought. *You don’t need a manual to figure that one out!*

Tom pressed the button. And—

“Nothing,” he told the phone. “Nothing is happening!”

“Really?” Tom heard the sounds of shuffling papers on the other end. “You tried pressing the on button and everything?”

Tom nodded, then shook his head when he realized how silly that was. “Yes, I definitely pressed it.”

“Huh...I don’t know. You said it’s a desktop, right?”

“Yes, but I—” Tom jumped in his seat as the door swung open. He had to lift his legs as Lana scurried in, crawling past his chair toward the small space under the desk.

“Hey, what are you—Lana!” he yelled.

“Shhh!” she whispered back. “I’m hiding!”

“You’re—what? Sweetie, get out of there, I’m trying to—”

“Hello? You there?” Tom heard the technician’s voice, though he was holding the phone at arms length while he dealt with his daughter squirming around beneath him.

“Yes, I’m here,” Tom said distractedly. “Are you sure there’s nothing else I can do?”

“There! I found you!” Tom watched in exasperation as Martin ran into the study and crouched down. “Oh,” his son said, switching to a whisper himself.

“Sorry, Dad. We’re playing hide-and-seek. Lana, I found you, so you’re it now.”

“Oh no!” Lana said excitedly. She began scooting out from under the desk, stepping on her dad’s toes along the way.

“Come on, guys,” Tom said as calmly as he could, “get out, I’m trying to—”

“I’m not sure I can do much more for you,” he heard Kevin say. “But tell you what, I’m going to look for one more manual, something for dealing with crash situations like these. Just give me a minute.”

“What? No, you don’t have to—”

“Dear?” Amy appeared in the doorway, looking down at the two kids scurrying to get up off the ground. “What’s going on in here?”

“Dad’s on the phone,” Martin responded.

“Hide-and-seek,” Lana added.

“Everyone! Shush!” Tom hissed. “Amy, get them out of here!” He turned to face the blank computer and lifted the phone to his ear. “I’m sorry, hello?” But it was already happening again—those familiar tones of guitar and piano played tinnily through the speaker.

Tom moaned in frustration, clenching his fist around his phone. His arm was halfway through the motion of tossing it, but he thought better of it and tried backing out. This resulted in him juggling the phone and running into the desk, which caused the CDs to noisily rattle against each other. He saw the family photo start to topple over, so in one swift motion, he firmly grasped the phone as he reached for the frame to steady it, and everything came to a standstill. Tom stood there, balancing with a knee resting on top of the desk, and didn’t move for a few moments.

He slowly turned to peek behind him. His wife and two kids were watching him from the door, with varied expressions of open-mouthed surprise on each of their faces.

“Tom?” Amy finally said. “Are you all right? What just happened?”

Tom gradually brought his leg down and straightened himself up. “Nothing,” he muttered. “Nothing.”

And like a light bulb that had flickered to life, Tom realized how succinctly that statement had summarized his current situation. Nothing had changed with the computer. He’d probably have to go get a new one.

With this realization, Tom felt a little better. There was nothing he could do about it now, so the prospect of losing work time didn’t feel like such a burden now. He looked up at the vacation photo one more time. He couldn’t think of the last time he’d taken a vacation.

Tom looked over at the kids. Martin was holding onto his mother’s arm, looking nervously back at him. Lana was playing with her hair, waiting for something to happen while staring at nothing in particular.

Tom set his phone down on the desk. “Sorry about that, guys,” he said. “Hey, who wants to go play hide-and-seek?”

Lana perked up and clapped her hands. “Ooh, I do! I do, Daddy!”

“How about you, Martin?”

Martin bit his lip. “Are you sure, Dad?”

“Sure I’m sure. I’ll even be it. Think you can hide from me?”

Martin started to smile. He let go of his mother. “I bet I can,” he said.

“Okay then, here we go,” said Tom, putting a hand over his eyes. “I’m counting. One...two...”

Lana squealed and ran out the door and down the hall, with Martin close behind her. Tom peeked through his fingers as he watched them go. Amy put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, you okay?” she asked. “What about the computer?”

Tom shrugged, then gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll figure it out later,” he said. It was time to make sure something good came out of all this. He started down the hall, humming a little tune, before realizing it was the first few notes of the hold music he’d just listened to over and over.

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Kevin lounged in his swivel chair and clicked his computer mouse a few more times. He flipped through a couple of pages in the manual laid out in front of him. He didn’t see much point to it—this guy’s computer probably just had a dead hard drive that needed replacing—but hey, a job’s a job.

He grunted as he flicked the music switch off, then adjusted his headset. “Okay, you there?” he said into it.

But nothing came back. Kevin blinked, craning his neck over to check the phone on the desk.

“Huh, that’s weird,” he said.

His co-worker in the next cubicle rolled out from behind the wall. “Dude,” he said, “did the guy hang up on ya?”

“No, it’s still on. I don’t think he’s there, though.”

“Well. Genius must’ve figured everything out on his own then, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Kevin hung up the phone.