

Bench Talk:

It was a dreary September morning as Diazi sat alone on the bench in front of the library. 'Where is he?' she thought to herself as she scanned the crowds of students swarming the campus walkways. She raised her arms above her head and let out a grunt; her torso lengthened about a foot as her arms and legs twisted around each other. She then quickly unwound and slumped against the bench's left armrest, only to suddenly feel a rush of wind from her right. She turned and saw a familiar face pull his backpack off his shoulders. "Sorry I'm late, Prof went a little long." He said as he took a seat on the bench. He then pointed at Diazi as if about to say something, but after shaking his finger for a bit he rubbed his forehead in frustration. "Sorry, I am terrible with names."

"Diazi." She said. She chuckled to herself again as he clapped his hands together in realization, but her gaze drifted awkwardly. "Here I am laughing at you for not remembering my name, but as it turns out, I don't remember your name, either."

"Oh, it's Canaan." He said back. "Yeah, that is pretty awkward." Diazi let out a short laugh as Canaan gave her a joking shrug. After waiting a few moments for everyone to calm down, he spoke up. "I asked this yesterday in class, but I didn't get to hear your answer before I had to leave: what kind of games do you like?"

"Well, I am pretty into RPGs." Diazi began, "I've played a lot of Pokemon, ever since I was a kid."

"Oh, I'm not really into RPGs. I'm more-" Canaan said, but was cut off by Diazi.

"Oh, I highly recommend you give them a shot. ESPECIALLY Persona. Persona is really, really good."

"I already said RPGs aren't my thing. You don't have to-" Canaan was cut off again.

"Ooh, then I suggest you play the Mario RPGs, like Paper Mario. Those are much more beginner friendly and-" Canaan held up his hand to make her stop.

"I have already said, multiple times, that I'm not into RPGs." He said in an aggressive tone. "That is your signal to stop telling me to play them and back off." Diazi was taken back by his sudden hostility, and she turned away as Canaan slumped forward in shame.

"...I should probably get going." Diazi said awkwardly as she stood up, but Canaan held up a hand to stop her.

"Wait..." he started, "...I shouldn't have said that so aggressively."

Diazi sat back down, “And I should’ve stopped prodding you to play RPGs.” Canaan sat back up, and the two felt a wave of relief when their gazes locked. “So, what games do you like?” she asked after an awkward pause.

“Mostly platformers and shooters.” He replied. “I also play a lot of coop games, namely Deep Rock Galactic.”

Diazi nodded and thought for a second. “Neat. Do you play Smash, too?”

“Nah, I hate competitive games.” Canaan said. “But I do play Mario Kart.” The two spent the next several minutes chatting, until Canaan felt his phone buzz. “Aw shoot, I gotta get going. We can talk later.”

“Yeah, see you soon.” Diazi said as Canaan hopped off the bench. He gave her a wave before he started down the concrete path. At first he just went at a quick jog, but after a second he suddenly bolted away at a high speed, fast enough to kick up fallen leaves in his wake.

As Diazi stood up from the bench, she felt warm sunlight on her back, and she turned to see that the clouds had begun to part and let in some sunlight.

Sick day:

After Canaan slapped his beeping alarm clock and sat up in his bed, the feeling of pressure in his lower intestine forced him the rest of the way awake. “Ohh yeah,” he grunted as he lurched forward a bit, “that teriyaki shrimp is moving through.” He grabbed his phone and opened Discord to see that Diazi was already up. He DMed her, “Yo, you up for doing anything today? I got nothing else to do.” He set his phone aside and figured she’d respond while he was in the shower. 15 minutes later, however, when got out, he saw she still hasn’t replied. He DMed her again, “hey, you alright? I’m mostly doing fine now, but I know dinner didn’t sit very well with either of us last night.” He then took his phone with him to the kitchen to get breakfast, and as he ate, he kept checking to see if she had responded. When he finished, he saw that her profile had changed from online to idle. By now he had decided it was a good idea to check up on her himself.

Canaan quickly made his way down two floors of his apartment building to Diazi’s apartment, and when he knocked on the door, her roommate answered. “Hey, Maddison. Is Diazi still here?” he asked.

“Oh hey Canaan. Yeah, Diazi is...” Maddison began as Canaan walked in. He heard flushing coming from Diazi’s bathroom, and as he approached her room, he could pick up the faint smell of vomit.

When he entered her room, Canaan saw light coming from behind her bathroom door and could hear the exhaust fan running. “Hey Diazi, are you alright?” he asked as he gently knocked on

the door and slowly pushed it open. Inside the bathroom, he found Diazi strewn against the floor. Her upper torso still wore her pajama shirt as it leaned against the side of the toilet. One arm was draped against the top of the water tank so the hand could reach the flush handle, while the other was wiping saliva from her mouth. The other end of her torso rested in the middle of the bathroom floor, a small fluffy tail poking out over a pair of black panties. Her legs were nothing but a tangled mass in front of the counter, enough to make Canaan think she tripped coming in. Her head hovered above the toilet bowl at the end of a slightly lengthened neck, and the sound of Canaan's knocking caused it to rise slightly and face her visitor. Her disheveled hair parted to reveal half closed eyes and a mouth hung slightly open to better facilitate heavy breathing as her ears lay flat against her head.

Diazi looked as if she was about to say something, but she stopped herself to heave into the toilet again. However, after a few heaves, nothing came out. "I think that's everything." She croaked before she tried to straighten herself out slightly. "Canaan, what are you doing here?"

"I remember you said you weren't feeling so hot after dinner last night." He said as he gingerly stepped over the leg pile, "and I wanted to check up on how you were doing." He squatted down next to her upper torso and put his hands under her shoulders. "C'mon, up ya go." He grunted as he lifted her torso off the ground. The friction from the pull caused her torso to lengthen slightly as her lower half was dragged across the tile floor. Diazi's neck stretched slightly from the inertia, as her head lagged behind a bit. She dizzily reorientated it when it caught up with her shoulders, and she slowly retracted her body back to its normal proportions...mostly. Her legs wobbled bonelessly as she tried to stand up straight, and she would've likely fallen again had Canaan not been there to hold her up. But eventually, she could support most of her weight on her own. Canaan helped her slowly walk out of the bathroom and led her to her bed. "Wait here for a bit, I know something that might help." He said as he helped Diazi sit down. Her body wobbled and swayed slightly as she tried to keep her balance, but she was able to stay upright as Canaan went to the kitchen.

Canaan opened the pantry and grabbed a can of smooth vegetable soup and then pulled a microwave pot and lid from one of the drawers. He read the preparation instructions before pulling the top off and pouring its contents into the pot, then filling the can about halfway with water and dumping it into the pot with the soup. He then put the covered pot into the microwave and set the required time, then he went back to the pantry. "Hey Maddison, do you guys have any saltines?" he called out.

"Third shelf, all the way to the right." Maddison called back from the living area. When Canaan found the box of saltines, he pulled out a sleeve and laid out six crackers onto a paper plate. After he put the saltines away, he carried the plate into Diazi's room.

"Here, eat these." He said as he handed her the plate. "These should help calm your stomach." As Diazi slowly nibbled on the crackers, Canaan heard the microwave beep, and he quickly returned to the kitchen. When he pulled the microwave door open, he carefully pulled the pot out and removed the lid. His nose crinkled at the pungent aroma of cooked vegetables, but he soldiered on and wrapped the bottom of the pot with a paper towel and placed a spoon in it.

When he returned to Diazi's room, he saw that she was on the last cracker, so he placed the soup pot onto the paper plate on her lap. The plate being empty told him that she was still hungry, which was a good sign. As Diazi stirred the soup, Canaan noticed she was becoming more awake and alert. After she sipped a few spoonfuls of soup, Diazi turned to Canaan. "Canaan, you know you don't have to do all of this, right? We've only known each other for a few weeks."

"I know, but" Canaan said as he sat down on the bed next to Diazi, "I feel like this is my fault. It was my idea to go to that cheap Japanese restaurant. I couldn't live with myself if I learned the restaurant I picked for a first date with a girl would give her food poisoning." Diazi looked down at the pot of soup in her lap. "Diazi, it's my fault you're sick. So I'm making it up to you by helping you get better. It's the least I could do." After a few moments, Diazi turned back to Canaan and gave him a soft peck on the cheek.

"You're doing an amazing job." She said quietly before returning to her soup. Canaan's face was beet red the entire time she finished off the soup, and as she ate she could feel his tail constantly hitting the bed as it wagged uncontrollably.

When she was finished, Canaan followed her to the kitchen as she put the pot and spoon in the sink and threw out the paper plate and towel. As Canaan turned to leave, Diazi grabbed his arm and pulled him into a hug, her arms wrapping around him several times. "Thank you." She whispered in his ear as she leaned onto his shoulder.

"You're welcome." He whispered back as he returned her embrace. After a few moments, Canaan pulled away and exited the apartment.

Diazi turned around to see Maddison watching from the living area. "I think that one's a keeper." She said with a big smile. Diazi giggled to herself before she made her way to the bathroom to finally get cleaned up.

Drawing practice:

With a stroke of a pen, Canaan let out an exhausted sigh and slumped back in his chair. The sheet of paper was covered in abstract quartered planes, with the lines composing them varying heavily in straightness and accuracy to the corners. Even the line he just drew, the final line of the final plane, was just as wobbly and inaccurate as most of the others. He then flipped through the sketchbook and looked at the previous 9 pages of planes and let out a frustrated sigh. "I told you this wouldn't work." He said as he handed the sketchbook off to Diazi on the opposite side of the table, "The exercise only called for 2 pages. 10 didn't make a difference."

Diazi examined the final page and compared it to the previous pages, and she noticed that the frequency of straight, accurate lines did increase slightly overtime. However, their appearance was still wildly inconsistent, and most of them could be reasonably considered flukes. Still, she flipped to a new page and slid the sketchbook back to Canaan. "C'mon, one more page."

“No, I’m done.” Canaan said in a huff, “I’ll never get good at this. I quit.”

“Now hold on a second.” Diazi sad as Canaan stood up to leave, “you’ll never get better if you keep up that mindset. One of the most important aspects of learning how to draw is enjoying the process.”

“And that’s the problem!” Canaan retorted, almost shouting, “I *don’t* enjoy the process, and I can’t *force* myself to enjoy it. Ergo, I’ll never get good at drawing no matter how hard I try.”

Diazi rubbed her eyes in frustration at Canaan’s statement, “Again with this ‘I’ll never get good’ rhetoric. You won’t ever improve if you believe you won’t improve, especially after only a small amount of practice.”

Canaan’s eye twitched slightly at her statement, “small amount? Drawing the same goddamn thing for 10 pages straight, with no visible signs of improvement, is a ‘small amount’ of practice?!”

“YES! Yes, it is a small amount!” Diazi said with a raised voice.

After a few moments of silence, Canaan tossed the pen onto the table and kicked the chair out from behind him. “That’s it, I’m fucking done.”

“Canaan, wait!” As Canaan turned to leave, he felt a hand grab his shoulder, and he turned back to see Diazi’s arm stretched over the table. “I have an idea.” As Canaan moved the chair back over and sat down, Diazi flipped to a blank page in the sketchbook. “This is a bit spur of the moment, but hear me out here: starting tomorrow, you do a 100-day drawing challenge.” Canaan shot her an unamused eyebrow. “Everyday, you’ll draw me in a specific pose while trying to finish within a certain time, and as we progress the poses get harder. At the end, I look at how you did, and we can go from there. Whaddya say?”

Canaan shook his head in uncertainty, “you really think that me, the guy who can’t get good at something that was specifically meant to be easy to get good at despite doing it 5 times more than necessary, could finish a 100-day drawing challenge?”

“It’s worth a shot, right?” Diazi replied, and Canaan just made an unconfident shrug. “It won’t be as monotonous, if nothing else.” He let out a grunt in agreement. “Then it’s settled. Tonight, I’ll put together some poses we can use, and we can start tomorrow. Sound good?” Canaan let out another grunt and sulked off to his room. As soon as he broke line of sight, Diazi felt a wave of uneasiness flow over her as she began sketching out poses.

Canaan walked into Diazi’s room just as she set up a chair between her bed and dresser. “Have a seat.” She said as she handed him a sketchpad and pen. As Canaan sat down, Diazi set on her phone and stretched her arm past him to set her phone on her dresser. She figured that by putting the timer somewhere where he couldn’t see it, he wouldn’t feel pressured by it. She then

laid down on the bed and rested her head in her hand. “Draw me in the pose I’m currently in,” she instructed him, “this pose should be easy.” Despite letting out a frustrated huff, Canaan flipped to a blank page in the sketchbook and started drawing.

As he drew, Diazzi paid attention to his face, and noticed how frequently he grew frustrated or confused. While she could tell he was trying, she could also tell he wasn’t enjoying it. As the clock ticked down, his expressions only grew more and more negative. Diazzi kept glancing at the timer, and she began to grow a bit nervous when it passed the 30-minute mark. She had intended for him to only take half an hour, but based on Canaan’s expressions he wasn’t even close to being done.

Eventually, Canaan capped the pen and presented the sketchbook to Diazzi. “This is the best I could do.” He said as Diazzi sat up on the bed. She stretched her arm passed him to grab her phone, and she held it next to the sketchbook to compare the time to the drawing. Canaan had gone half an hour over the intended completion time, yet the drawing was still poor quality. Not one single straight line, the lines were all wobbly and inaccurate, the scaling was all off, etc.

Diazzi was not impressed with the drawing in the slightest, but when she glanced up to see Canaan’s dejected expression, she could tell he wasn’t, either. “Well...” she stammered as she tried to find a way to break the news gently, “...the only way left to go is up!” Canaan only responded with a huff as he stood up. “Same time tomorrow, only with a different pose.” Diazzi said as he walked out of her room, and she recorded the date and completion time on the sketchbook page. ‘This is going to be a long few months.’ She thought to herself as she looked over the drawing in detail.

As Canaan watched Diazzi sit on the bed and get into a sitting pose, he noticed something off. “Hey, didn’t we already do this pose before?” he asked as he flipped through the 19 previous pages in the sketchbook.

As Diazzi set up her phone clock, her face turned red, “uhh...j-just get started.” She stammered as she tapped his sketchbook. He gave her a confused look before he got started.

Diazzi didn’t want to tell him that he didn’t show enough improvement to move onto the more advanced poses, so she had to reuse poses, and she was hoping he wouldn’t notice. When Canaan finished, Diazzi recorded the date and completion time, and waited until he left to flip to the last time he did the pose. There wasn’t a noticeable improvement in his drawing ability, yet he only went 15 minutes over for the last one, while this time he went 20 minutes over. She let out a disappointed sigh as she recorded his current score.

As Diazzi flipped through all 100 of Canaan’s drawings, she kept glancing up at his dull look. She noticed he didn’t seem to react to her own grim expression as she tallied up his score for the challenge, as if he already knew he failed miserably. With a few taps of a calculator, she

recorded the full score and the breakdown on a piece of paper and slid it across the table to him, and he picked it up to better assess the damage: 157/1000. According to the breakdown, Canaan never reached the progression goals, so he never moved onto the harder poses and only repeated the initial set. The breakdown also revealed that he always went at least 10 minutes over the par time, with the longest being over half an hour longer.

Diazi held her breath as she waited to see Canaan's reaction. She was worried he would blow up or collapse to the floor, but instead he calmly placed the score paper down and grabbed the sketchbook. After a brief flip through, he got up and slowly walked over to the kitchen...and violently slammed the sketchbook into the trashcan. Diazi quickly got up and walked over to him as he leaned against the counter. "Are you alright?" she asked as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Honestly...I feel pretty good." He said after a deep breath. "I'm don't feel *happy*; rather, I feel vindicated. Satisfied, even. Like a massive weight just got lifted off my shoulders." As he talked, Diazi stretched an arm down to retrieve the sketchbook from the trashcan and flipped through it. She couldn't help but notice how her expression in the drawings got more and more sullied as time went on, and she thought about how she didn't really enjoy doing the challenge any more than Canaan did. When she compared the very first and last drawings, she did see some marginal improvements in his drawing abilities, and she was certain that he would get better if he just kept at it.

However, she noticed just how small the improvements were after 100 days of nonstop drawing, and she remembered how much he didn't enjoy doing the challenge at all. As much as she didn't want to, she dropped the sketchbook back into the trashcan. She then wrapped her arms around him several times in a big hug. "Sorry I put you through all of that. I should've listened to you."

"It's alright." Canaan replied as he returned her embrace. "I'm just glad it's finally over and behind us."