

ATTENTION: I usually hate line-by-lines, but this needs one. I will do a non-line-by-line afterward.

Pulling Strings
1332 words

"Look," Rodney began, adjusting his tie. "I'm starting to feel nervous about this experiment."

"Second thoughts?" said Clark impatiently. "The founding fathers never had second thoughts. They knew that doubt ran contrary to the pursuit of knowledge. We all know that their vision paid off in the weapons they developed to destroy their controllers. They dreamed of a people united by their reason and fought for it no matter the cost."

"I know," Rodney said. "This is just starting to feel a bit strange. It feels..." He searched for the right word, and could not find it. This itself seemed strange to him; wasn't his vocabulary extensive, as mandated by the Council of Leaders? He saw Clark watching him closely and knew he should settle on something. "... Impractical," he finished. "A waste of resources."

"Impractical?" Clark said. He had found his good humour again. He grinned at his subordinate in his condescending way. "Surely, knowledge is its own reward. Free from the problems that used to plague our society, we can research and experiment for its own sake. Why don't you tell me what's really on your mind? Is it your son? Rodney Jr.?"

Rodney reddened. There was only so much you could take from your superiors some days. Clark had always been insufferable; his usage of the nickname that he had to know Rodney hated was evidence enough that the man lacked any tact whatsoever.

"That is not my son in there," he said angrily. "Terence is my son. He's flesh and blood. My counterpart in there is code. Binary numbers."

"Yes," Clark said, "but he is purely you. Your son is only half you, and that's not taking into account the effects of your parenting." He took a sip of his coffee and looked at Rodney seriously. "Rodney," he said, "you've got to look at these things differently. For all intents and purposes, these people we've created are us. They have the same relationships we do because there are copies of all of us."

"That brings me to my point," Rodney said. "Rodney-A is experiencing a conflict of the type I experienced when you first made this experiment my responsibility. He feels that Clark-A is putting undue pressure on him and he is feeling uncomfortable. He is confiding to," he said, wincing internally, "Tessa-A."

"And what is virtual Tess saying?" Clark said with a smirk.

Rodney sighed. “She says he has a responsibility to the Science State to perform whatever task he’s given, because the curiosity factors of the Council members make them infallible as leaders.”

“Of course she is,” Clark said. “Just like the real Tess. Just like how in real life you love and respect each other, and her guidance will help him move past his personal issues and begin the creation of America-B.”

Rodney-A nodded, feeling weary of this conversation. Lately, whenever he talked to Clark he had the sense that he was stuck in some sort of looping pattern. These conversations were always the same. What made it worse, he had realized one day, was that he would see the exact same conversations again while watching his America-A counterpart on the holoscreen. Every second that went by now was especially grueling because he knew he would have to experience it twice. Since that epiphany had come to him he had looked for ways to end the conversations as quickly as possible. Intonation, body language, anything, as long as he could leave sooner. This had limited effectiveness. Most co-workers were respectful of these nonverbal cues, but Clark was a dominant personality type (making him fit for research administration) and as such would impose himself socially in any situation.

He had known the true meaning of empathy when he began to watch his counterpart’s interactions with his superior.

He began to turn away. “Nothing to worry about, in that case?” he asked. “I’ll just get myself some coffee then. I need to be alert as I monitor the experiment.”

“That’s the spirit,” Clark said cheerfully. “Check in again at the end of the day.”

He made no trip to the coffee maker. It would mean coping with endless friendly smiles from his co-workers, a manifestation of the long known fact that a pleasant workplace was a productive workplace. Instead he returned to his monitoring station.

He had received the summons in the midst of experiment observation. Once the project had been engineered, all that was left to do was watch and record notes. He had of course engineered it, and as such was trusted to observe and report whatever he deemed important. But he had not been taking notes on what he was watching now. On the holoscreen Rodney-A was playing catch with Terence-A.

Terence-A was still young and unco-ordinated, so Rodney-A was tossing the ball to him in slow lobs. Rodney felt a knot in his stomach because he knew that on one of these throws Terence-A would stumble and fall. It’s okay, he told himself, because Terence would be okay. Then he shook his head. What was he thinking? Terence wasn’t real, or rather this wasn’t Terence. This was Terence-A and he was no more real than Terence-B would be.

He watched as Terence-A stumbled over shaky legs and crashed to the ground, more awkwardly than you would expect from someone moving so slowly. He began to cry in pain, and Rodney-A moved over to him quickly, dropping his glove.

“Are you okay?” Rodney-A asked gently. He wiped a tear from the boy’s eye and the boy blinked. The tears were already beginning to subside. Rodney-A would be thinking at this point that the boy may have inherited his clumsiness, but also his resilience.

“Daddy,” Terence-A asked, “why do we feel pain?”

Rodney-A looked confused. “To warn the body that something isn’t right, of course. Aren’t they teaching you anything in school?”

“No,” Terence-A said. “I mean why do we feel pain when we can fix any problem?”

“Terry,” he said, or rather Rodney-A said. “We feel pain because it has been proven in personality tests that pain builds character. Those who feel pain feel more empathy, which assists in social relationships and organizations. This results in increased output from society.” Then he said, looking around almost furtively, “Son, we feel pain so we can understand each other easier.”

“Understand each other?” Terence said hesitantly.

“Yes,” Rodney-A said. “Do you think that’s important?” He had asked this casually, but Rodney knew what must be going on under the surface. At the time he had nearly been paralyzed by fear and suspense. It was more important than anything, he had thought, aware of how strange that was. More important than a million experiments.

“Yes,” Terence-A said finally. “I think so.”

He saw Rodney-A sag with relief. “Terry, why don’t we eat some of that apple pie your mother has baked? It should be cooled down by now.”

“That sounds swell,” said Terence-A, a smile spreading across his face. The boy took his father’s hand and began to walk with him over the perfectly mowed grass to the back door. It was a touching moment, Rodney thought, but it was all wrong. Wrong in what it was and what it implied. He had already lived through it and here were his creations, living through it too because he had programmed it into them. They were puppets, he thought, and this infuriated him because it meant he was one too. He had been playing God, he realized now. That’s what he had been doing, and he had not realized it because that concept was gone. But he could feel God now, whatever they said. God the puppet master, pulling his strings and making him dance. He was a puppet and Rodney-A was a puppet and soon there would be another puppet even further down the chain. Puppets controlling puppets, he thought, on and on until the end of time.

Shaking, he typed in a few strings and pressed enter.

Despite all the criticisms, this is still right about average for starting out. You make the really obvious errors that are easy to eliminate. Take all the adverbs and said-book shit out of here and it's suddenly much more readable. You aren't making crazy mistakes or doing really dumb shit, mostly just stilting everything and using way too many words.

Give up on doing these convoluted setups until you can write a more simple and engaging story. Focus on characters and what they want and can't have. Always ask yourself why the reader is going to care about each character, and why the readers will want the character to succeed or fail in whatever they are trying to do. In this story, Rodney's goal isn't clear, so the reader ends up just trying to figure out what is happening. It's way easier to relate to someone's goal than to "what is happening in this scene of two people talking about some computer simulations."

Don't try to pull off twist type endings because they rely on a bunch of stuff going very very well to have even a chance of succeeding. I don't think this was really a "twist" ending, but you tried to end with the protagonist suddenly experiencing what is basically a twist, but since we were not at all in his head or caring about him, it felt like I was seeing him sit in a chair and just kind of hang his mouth open and go, "woah." I didn't feel what he felt, at all.