



# PROGRAMMING LOVE

```
/** Comment - here is the story **/  
class ProgrammingLove{
```

**START**

A novella by  
**DENISE TARANOV**





# Prologue

```
public static void main(String[] args){  
    System.out.println("...")  
}
```



# 1: Encounter



Having shaken out the dark gray throw rug, Stewart lays it over his apartment balcony's iron railing and pulls off a white thread that still clings to it. He holds the thread out in midair, then releases it, leaning forward and tilting his black frame glasses to watch it fall. An errant gust of wind unexpectedly tosses the thread and lodges it in the hair of a blond woman passing below.

Stewart's eyes widen momentarily, and he pushes his glasses back against his head.

"It's 3D, third floor," says the woman walking toward the side door with her hands extended behind her to carry a reclined bookcase; a wavy-haired man follows holding the bookcase's other end. Stewart peers down at the woman's hair but can't see the thread.

"You have to hire movers next time," the man says as the three enter the building.

Stewart steps quietly into his apartment, gently closes the sliding glass door and curtain, and sets the rug on the carpeting. He tiptoes across the room to press the side of his face and his fingertips against his front door.

He hears the distant elevator ding and door slide, then footsteps. The woman and man stop on the other side of Stewart's door. Stewart hears the thud of one end of the bookcase hitting the hallway floor, and the jiggling of metal.

While in this listening position, Stewart becomes aware of movement on the other side of the room: a gray squirrel, having sneaked into the apartment while the balcony door was ajar, has caught its claw in the tightly looped carpeting and is struggling for release. Its tail flicks erratically, and its dark eyes are fixed on its captured front paw. Anxiety shoots through Stewart's nerves, paralyzing him. He debates if he should hold his position or risk moving and making noise, which might draw attention to his apartment. He glares at the squirrel with intense dissatisfaction.

"Did I get the wrong key? It's not fitting," says the woman in the hallway.

The squirrel, having worked itself into a panic, is tugging its full body weight against its paw. In an instant, it's free. It turns and jumps onto Stewart's maple side table, knocking a wireless phone off its charging base, and darts under the sofa and over to the sliding door. There, the squirrel burrows under the curtain and scurries along the door's edge.

"Come on," says the man.

The squirrel makes futile attempts to run through the door, the handle being much too high and not operable by squirrels. Stewart reluctantly leaves his position and tiptoes rapidly to the sliding door.

"Maybe it's upside down," says the woman.

Stewart opens the sliding door. The unobservant squirrel remains huddled and scratching at the metal track edge. Stewart tiptoes quickly toward the kitchen to get a broom to push the squirrel. He hears scratching against the metal track under the floor length curtain, and it occurs to him that the squirrel's claws could get caught again. He opens the kitchen closet door, lifts the broom from its wall hanger, and runs toward the squirrel like Don Quixote with his lance.

The clawing and the hallway's clicking of key in lock crescendo and simultaneously release to silence: the squirrel, having found the opening, hops onto the balcony railing and out to a tree branch, plush white underbelly curving slightly as it leaps, while the neighboring door swings open to an empty apartment.

Stewart closes the sliding glass door, his eyes monitoring the opening for things attempting to escape into his apartment before it's sealed. He secures the door with the lock and pulls the curtain closed.

As he's returning the wireless phone to its base, Stewart hears a knock at his door. He walks over, looking as he goes for fuzz at the spot where the squirrel's claw was caught and is certain to have severed carpet loops.

Stewart looks out his peephole and sees a man wearing a red cap and jacket. Stewart opens the door. The man is holding an insulated red pizza cozy with a yellow piece of paper taped on top.

"Reynolds? One large?" he says, reaching into the cozy to retrieve the pizza.

Stewart clasps his thin hands and takes a step back. "This is for someone else. I didn't order a pizza," he says.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." He nods.

"What do we got here," the delivery man says, leaning back and looking at the number plate affixed to the top of Stewart's door frame. "3E, that sounds right. Someone else in there with you?"

Stewart's eyes widen remembering the squirrel, and he shakes his head no.

"Know what? Maybe it's 'D' or 'G'," he says, looking at the paper and around the hallway. "They do that sometimes, mess up one letter."

"Well," says Stewart, his dark eyebrows briefly rising above the top of his glasses as if they're checking the hallway themselves, "that's possible."

"Hold on a sec. Let me check." The delivery man turns around and knocks on the door to 3D. Stewart quietly closes his door.

Stewart hears the man knock on the neighbor's door a second time, and then muffled talking. Suddenly, the man bangs on Stewart's door. Stewart doesn't open it. The pizza delivery man yells, "Buddy! I know you're in there! 3E, open up."

Stewart is startled and frowns, and opens his door to see the delivery man again.

"I called the store and they said it's 3D. I heard someone say they're coming but it's taking forever and I gotta go. Do me a favor, my car's full of pizzas and I'm behind. Mind just paying for it and figuring it out with your neighbors? It's not much. I'll give you a coupon," he says. "Don't forget a tip, though. I'm sure they'd give me

give you a coupon," he says. "PROGRAMMING LOVE, though. I'm sure they'd give me something." He winks at Stewart and laughs at his own way of handling that.

Stewart pays for the pizza and a mathematically convenient tip, and brings the pizza into his apartment. He sets it on his wooden coffee table, the smell unfurling until his space is saturated with it.

He needs to remove the pizza from his apartment.

He gets a piece of paper and writes a note that he tapes along with the receipt on the top of the box:

*This is the pizza you ordered. 3E has paid the following amount.*

*13.12 pizza with tax*

*1.88 tip for delivery person*

*15.00*

*Please reimburse \$15.00 to 3E.*

*Thank you.*

Stewart quietly opens his door, sets the pizza box on the floor in front of 3D, knocks on the door, and goes back inside his apartment. He resumes his listening position.

The door to 3D swings open as a woman says, "Sorry! Thanks for—" Stewart hears the scrape of the cardboard box against the carpeting, and the sound of papers being lifted. The door closes. Stewart's relief at the box being retrieved is immediately followed by concern that he won't be paid back; he considers what he should do if he isn't. He decides he will have to make a second note with words like, "This is to remind you of the payment 3E made on your behalf." Just as he's

turning to get another piece of paper and the black Sharpie® marker he uses for all his notes, someone knocks on his door. Stewart looks through the peephole and sees the blond woman.

Stewart says, "Yes?" without opening the door. He's hoping this brief response will communicate that he prefers she leave the money and go back inside her apartment.

"Hi. Sorry to bother you. Did you pay for our pizza?"

"Yes, I did," says Stewart standing back from the door since talking while peeping is not comfortable. He looks back through the hole.

"Thanks for doing that. I wanted to give you the money," she says. "Could you open the door?"

"You can slide the money under the door."

"Okay," the woman says warily. She attempts to slide the money but the metal kick plate at the bottom of the door blocks the money's passage. The sound of the bills crushing against the door makes Stewart wince. "That's not going to work."

"You could also put it in an envelope and tape it to my door."

"I just moved in. I don't have any tape or envelopes. Could you just get dressed and open the door?"

The realization that this woman thinks he's talking to her while naked causes Stewart to step back and pace in a circle. He doesn't want to say he isn't naked because this would steer the conversation to an awkward topic. If he provides an



because this would steer the conversation in an awkward topic. If he provides an alternate reason why he can't open the door so she comes back later, he's worried she won't return. If she leaves the money in the hallway, he's afraid someone will take it or she'll hide behind her door and pop out at him. He concedes defeat and accepts the humiliation her imagination causes him.

He says, "Just a moment!" and walks to his bedroom and back again as if he got dressed. He pauses by the door, and then opens it.

The woman from the sidewalk is outside his doorway; he now sees her from the front having viewed her earlier only from above. He remembers the white thread and examines her hair to locate it.

"Hi, I'm Anastasia," the woman says and extends her hand. Stewart shakes it, disappointed that he doesn't see the thread.

"I'm Stewart."

"Nice to meet you. It's good to know at least one neighbor. I just moved in across the hall." Stewart nods. "Thanks again for paying for the pizza. I got your note," she says, holding up the paper. "Here's the money." She hands him \$15.

Stewart takes the bills and smooths them. "No problem," he says and smiles.

Anastasia smiles.

Stewart's smile was tense and perfunctory, caused by his relief that he received his money and no longer has to worry about its return. Anastasia's smile is huge—electric!—and genuine. She had been worried moments ago that this man, Stewart,

electric!—and genuine. She had been worried moments ago that this man, Stewart, is perverted given his being home in his underwear and acting so strangely with the note and closed door. Meeting him in person, she thinks he's probably not a pervert, just awkward. She still thinks he's odd, but she sees the possibility that he could be odd-cute, like a newt.

Stewart feels blinded as if he looked directly at a camera flash. When Anastasia smiled, her mouth, the mouth of a doll with a perfectly bowed upper lip, showed white rounded teeth and her gums. This was disarming for him, a sight so pretty and innocent. This is a smile he didn't know he wished his whole life to have directed at him, and he came to know this only after it happened.

In this moment, Stewart's life focus shifts to winning the affection and hopefully innumerable additional smiles from this woman who used to be just a woman walking on a sidewalk who has revealed herself to be the most beautiful girl-woman in the world.

Anastasia notices that Stewart is looking at her as if waiting for her to say something else. She pictures a newt wearing glasses. "Great!" she says. "See you around the building, then." Stewart nods.

Anastasia turns and opens her apartment door, steps inside, and waves. Stewart looks past her to the apartment inside; he glimpses the right half the man from the sidewalk sitting against a wall and holding a slice of pizza to his mouth. Anastasia closes the door and locks it.

Stewart goes back inside his apartment and locks his door.