

The debug loop

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December 21, 2025 — [a14eef5e](#)

Marcus closed his laptop at exactly 6 PM, just as he had promised himself he would every day this week. The screen went dark, but the code remained illuminated behind his eyelids-persistent, glowing green text against black. Even as he stood from his desk and stretched, he could still see the function he'd been wrestling with, its logic branching through his mind like creeping ivy.

Not now, he told himself. *Work is over*.

He made dinner-pasta with store-bought sauce, the same meal he'd eaten three nights running. As the water boiled, his mind wandered back to the memory leak in the application. Maybe if he restructured the garbage collection calls? Or perhaps the issue was in the parent component, not the child. He caught himself drumming his fingers on the counter in the rhythm of typing, each tap a phantom keystroke solving problems that could wait until tomorrow.

His girlfriend called while he ate. Sarah's voice was warm, talking about her day at the veterinary clinic, a difficult surgery on a golden retriever that had gone well. Marcus made appropriate sounds of interest, but part of him was still debugging. Her words became background processes while his main thread analyzed whether implementing a cache would improve the API response time.

"Are you listening?" Sarah asked, not unkindly. She knew the signs.

"Sorry, yes. The dog's owner was crying?" He guessed, poorly.

"That was five minutes ago, Marc."

After the call, he tried to read a novel-something about a detective in Victorian London that his mother had recommended. But the detective's methodology reminded him of debugging: isolating variables, testing hypotheses, following the trail of clues through nested mysteries. Even fiction had become code.

At the gym, counting reps became iterations in a for-loop. *One more set* translated to *one more compile*. The rowing machine's display showed metrics that made him think about performance optimization. His heart rate monitor might as well have been displaying server response times.

He met Tom for drinks, his oldest friend who worked in marketing and didn't know a compiler from a cucumber. But when Tom complained about a difficult client presentation, Marcus found himself mentally architecting a solution-a simple web app that could dynamically generate presentations based on client data. He was halfway through explaining the tech stack before he noticed Tom's glazed expression.

"Remember when you used to talk about music?" Tom asked. "You had that whole theory about Radiohead's album structure."

Marcus did remember, vaguely, like recalling a program written in a deprecated language.

That night, he lay in bed, Sarah sleeping beside him. The ceiling was a blank canvas where his mind projected code. He tried counting sheep, but they became objects in an array, each one instantiated with properties: fluffiness, jump_height, sequential_number. He tried meditation, focusing on his breath, but his inhales and exhales became binary: 1, 0, 1, 0.

At 2 AM, he gave up and opened his laptop. The blue light washed over him like baptism, like coming home. The bug that had haunted him all day revealed itself within minutes—a missing await keyword, so simple it was almost insulting. He fixed it, pushed the commit, and felt the sweet release of resolution.

But even as he closed the laptop again, he knew this was just one bug fixed in a system full of them. Tomorrow would bring new problems, and the day after that, and the day after that. The code would follow him home, eat dinner with him, sleep in his bed, wake with him in the morning.

He looked at Sarah, sleeping peacefully, her mind presumably full of dreams that had nothing to do with her work. He envied her ability to close the clinic door and leave the sick animals behind. But then again, maybe she dreamed of surgery, of sutures and symptoms. Maybe everyone carried their own infinite loops.

Marcus finally drifted off around 3 AM, his last conscious thought a promise to himself that tomorrow he would try harder to context-switch, to properly close all his mental tabs. But even as sleep took him, somewhere in his subconscious, a background process continued running, optimizing and refactoring, an endless daemon that would not—could not—terminate.

In his dreams, he was debugging reality itself, and the bug was somewhere in his own source code.