



A QUESTION OF REALITIES

1,282 Words

I studied physics at open university and enjoyed the many debates about reality.

I am also a huge fan of the movie – The Matrix.

Could we be living in a matrix kind of world? At the whim of others?

Those discussions led me to write this humorous short story.

A QUESTION OF REALITIES

“What about reincarnation?” Ken asked, slipping several dry roasted peanuts into his mouth.

“What about it?” Gary responded, his pint glass poised at his lips.

“What would you come back as?”

Gary considered the question. A slow grin spread across his chubby cheeks. “Jennifer Lawrence’s bra,” he said.

“A move up the evolutionary ladder, then,” George said, licking the froth from his pint off his upper lip.

Gary scowled across the small round table. “You’d come back as a toad then, George. No change there.” He howled at his own joke.

The three friends were enjoying their customary Wednesday evening drink at the Hare and Hounds.

Customary in that they did it every Wednesday to get away from their wives and kids.

Friends in that they worked together, lived within walking distance of the pub and tolerated each other, barely.

“Déjà vu,” George said. “Now that’s weird. I have the feeling we’ve done this all before. Like that film *Groundhog Day*.”

“We have,” Gary said. “Last Wednesday.”

“I don’t mean that, I mean we’ve discussed reincarnation before.”

“Maybe it was a five hundred years ago at ye olde Hare and Hounds,” Ken said, laughing.

“I get that déjà thingy feeling all the time,” Gary said. “Every night when I’m doing the dishes. I think to myself, didn’t I do this last night?”

Gary and Ken exchanged a high five. They’d both spent two weeks in Florida the previous summer with their families and now considered themselves naturalised Yanks, complete with gestures and language.

“It’s all a question of reality,” George suggested, cryptically, tearing the backing off the beer mat and folding it into a soggy origami frog.

“Here we go,” Gary said, tracing his finger through a shallow pool of spilt beer on the table top and writing the word *groan*. “Another gem of philosophy from our armchair Socrates.”

Ken sniffed his own armpit and said, “I stink therefore I am.”

Gary took a long swallow from his pint and shuffled in his seat. “I’d better get comfortable for this. If I nod off just prod me.”

“You might scoff,” George said, shrugging off the derision. “But how do you really know you’re here, in this place, at this time?”

“Because I can’t hear my wife nagging me,” Gary said. “Ergo it’s Wednesday and I’m in the pub.”

“Leave ergo out of this,” Ken said.

“I don’t mean here in this pub,” George said. He jabbed a meaty finger into his own ample midriff. “I mean here.”

“What in your stomach?” Gary asked. “Plenty of room.”

This time he exchanged a fist bump with Ken.

“No, here,” George repeated emphatically, with an elaborate gesture to their surroundings. “Here in the flesh.”

“I don’t get you,” Ken said.

George had got hold of the argument and like a terrier he wasn’t about to let go. “We could just be a figment of someone’s imagination.”

“It’d be a sick mind that imagined us,” Gary said.

“Surely he would imagine something more shapely,” Ken said, sizing up a voluptuous figure with his hands.

“Maybe we’re just characters in a computer game, controlled by a kid.” George was in full flow now.

“No bloody kid controls me,” Gary said, indignantly.

“But how would you know?” George challenged, hands spread.

Gary was a little slow at the best of times. He was proficient at digging holes. He knew how to put a quid on the ponies. He had mastered the intricacies of the telly remote control. Technical stuff like washing machines, cookers and Cartesian

dualism were just over his head. His understanding didn't venture beyond off and on.

"What do you mean how would I know?" Gary asked.

"Everything you said and did is programmed by this kid," George said. "He makes you say everything and do everything."

"Hey, nobody makes Gary Pyatt do nowt he dunna wanna do."

"You just said that because the kid made you say that," George said.

"Nobody made me say nowt," Gary insisted, getting a little flustered.

"He made you say that too," George said, starting to enjoy himself.

Feeling the whole discussion getting away from him, Gary picked up his glass and took a drink.

"He made you do that too," George said.

Gary quickly put the glass down because he didn't want to appear to be doing something someone else wanted him to do.

Ken laughed. "He's just winding you up, Gary."

"I'm not winding anyone up," George said.

"We know," Ken said. "It's this little brat on his computer."

George just shrugged and settled back in his seat and took a long drink from his glass, his point made.

"Last orders!" shouted the landlord from behind his bar.

Back to his jovial self, Gary said. "Can't you get this kid to extend last orders?"

Another high five ensued.

Thirty minutes later they strolled out of the pub doors and headed towards the bright lights of the kebab shop down the road. Ken and George were still debating existence while Gary was debating the shapely reality of the girl across the street. He stepped out onto the road still transfixed and heard Ken's warning. He turned in time to see the lorry bearing down on him, its horn blaring. Too close to avoid.

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"Adam! What have I told you? It's a school day tomorrow. Get that game switched off and get to bed."

Adam hit the pause button. He recognised the angry tone in his mother's voice. He realised he'd reached DEFCON 1 and perhaps it was time to switch off the game.

He hated leaving it at this part. Frozen on the screen was the wide-eyed expression of horror on the character's face as the lorry thundered towards him.

The real-world sim game was very addictive. Tomorrow, when he came home from school, he would play again and decide what would happen to his character. Would he kill him or save him? It was the third time he'd played the game and it was really cool how it varied each time, simply by changing subtle outcomes. Next time around he'd make the Gary character a woman just for the hell of it.

He shuffled to the window at the end of his bed to draw the curtains. He noticed a small pinprick of light high in the sky. It wasn't a star because it seemed to be moving and getting gradually bigger. A plane he concluded, but as he continued to watch, it grew even bigger and brighter still. He was fascinated by it, unable to turn away. It seemed to grow very large very quickly and was moving at an incredible speed, leaving a fiery trail behind it like a comet.

Wind suddenly rattled the window and Adam felt his ears pop as the air pressure changed. Thirty seconds later the asteroid struck the ground, instantly destroying not only his house but the whole city. The chunk of errant rock had been ten miles wide and composed entirely of iron. The scientists would have called it an extinction event had they survived long enough to file the report.

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Gleeb eased back on his pongle and crossed one tentacle over the other three. Two of his eye stalks swivelled. First one and then the other in what was an expression of self-satisfied smugness any Altarian would recognise.

His companion's fins shimmered and trembled with exasperation as he said. "Seriously, an asteroid? That's a little cliché, isn't it?"

"I was bored with the game," Gleeb said. "It was the quickest way to end it. What shall we play now?"

"Domination?" his companion suggested.

"Okay," Gleeb agreed. "Choose which universe you want to be."

