

Jim and Joe

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When I got home, I sat myself down to start writing. It was raining outside.

I had to write it down. I had to get it through somehow.

I got up and called him, and I said "Joe, I gotta write this book."

"I know, Jim. You told me."

"I gotta make it understandable."

"Yes."

"I have to understand it."

"Yes."

"What?"

"It's two in the morning. We were talking about this, and we went home because it was two in the morning.."

"I'm sorry...but do you understand I have to write this?"

"Yes. But I'm going to sleep now, Jim."

And he hung up.

'And it's gotta be complicated. I mean complex. No, I mean elaborate. No, I mean interesting. Interesting, because if it's not interesting people will stop reading. I hate people. I have this thing to talk about. I have the world to talk about. Dam it, only quantum physics and it's enough to never understand, but that's only the beginning. And people only care for interesting things.'

So I stood at the window and looked at the rain. 'Do I hate people? I might just despise them. I hate it when I get angry about this. Hating it makes me angry too. Quite the predicament. I like the word predicament. I should use it in the book; it's funny somehow. Why do people think some words are funnier than others?'

It wasn't that dark outside. It was dark, it was raining, but the lights of the city were lighting the clouds. 'I wonder if the clouds contribute to the electricity bill. If I think about it, they do bring water and people are fond of water. Yeah. I should also use *fond of* when referring to something vital. It's so easy to think of funny things sometimes. Too bad I can't do it while talking. I should be grateful I don't write like I talk. *how I talk?* I have to write this.'

A car passed through the rain. 'splash splash. Maybe words are funny because we use them in funny situations. Leave it to me to state the obvious.' I sat down. I like to watch the ceiling from time to time. 'It has a certain finality. No. whiteness. *whiteness* is stupid. not finality. great writer, can't find a stupid word for an

obvious feeling. wholeness. yeah. definitely. *definitely maybe*. where the hell did I hear that?' Writing can be a very personal experience. 'Reading should be personal too. How the hell are people gonna get any more personal than reading? It's just two people. the writer and the reader. nobody can get between them. well unless there's more than one writer. and the stupid reader's listening to music while reading. damned e-readers. but no. it's personal. it's gotta be personal. but I can't put myself out there. I'm a horrible person. no. I'm just boring. I'd like to be horrible. what would that be like? but I am boring. I can't put myself in the book, the book will be boring.' I sat up again. The rain had quieted down. I could make out the water dripping from high places. I always feel that that is the end of the rain. Once I can make out water dripping through the rain, the rain seems kind of pointless to me. I mean, if I were to walk through the rain, the dripping would be the part I disliked. 'not dislike. avoid? no. yes. something.'

'I have to write this.' "damn." 'dam beavers making dams. I like that letter. The world is big. and it's beautiful. and I hate that I'm so corny. I can't possibly write that. *Look, people. Math is not only not boring, it shows how pretty everything is.* Nobody listens. Nobody reads 'till the end. too bad nobody's making fonts from naked ladies. ...rule 34? I wonder what it would be like to try to write thoughts. Not with naked lady fonts. that would probably sell well. write thoughts. when I can't even make them out before they're done. or something like that. and thinking is a dialogue. people do like dialogue. but if you take one person's thoughts and make it into a dialogue between several people, they're implicitly fake and empty. maybe most people are. nope, not true.'

For a story to be readable, it needs structure. More than that, it needs a purpose. I guess I wasn't truly sure about the purpose, so I couldn't write. 'It never ends. Thinking about it. It has to be a dialogue, because I'm talking about the world. Everything I know is a dialogue, even if there's just one person talking. Maybe there's something wrong with me. I can't think in terms of actions, only discussions.'

'What the hell am I doing? I can't do this. I hate books that have no story. I need a story. But there is no story. The world just is. No story. How can I tell a story about actual levels of reality? I hate the Matrix people, ruining it like that.'

I sat down again. Head in my hands, staring at the table. 'I really like writing. Maybe that's my problem. I like writing, I like that when I write other thinking beings don't get in the way and I can fool myself into thinking I'm coherent. Maybe I just like writing, but I don't really have something to say. But I do like writing. The sound of the fountain pen on paper. The letters forming. I love writing on paper. With a good fountain pen. The smell of the ink. impractical. can't move it around easily, can't send it to Joe, can't...but I do like writing on paper.'

I got my pen and some paper. 'I do like to write...there's that blue line. just a blue line, curling away. not curling. not flowing. something away. the blue line, making letters, making words. it's thicker in places, thinner in other places.'

it can end abruptly, it can end in a long thinning curl. dots here and there. the blue meaning. letters, words, but meaning. the whole world, there in the line on paper. white paper. final paper. not final, whole. and blue lines, filling the whole.' Meanings don't have colors.

'Most meanings don't have colors. We don't think of them in terms of colors. Except for meanings of colors. Most likely, we are not explicitly aware of thinking of the colors of meanings. But it's natural to think of meanings as colors. Mixing.' Making up the world.

'There IS no story to the world. There are truths. I think, therefore I am.' Reality is there in the meanings. Somewhere. 'I have to write about this. Our minds work with meanings, but meanings are just colors and shadows in reality.' Reality just is. It doesn't ask, it doesn't reason.

'Like it or not, once you throw the dice, you can't tell what numbers you'll get.' Reality is particularly funny that way. 'I have to make them understand. You know when you're in school, and you have a test, and you'd like to go through the book once more. Reality gives you that. You have everything it has. And still you can't get the result. Quantum physics is a nice theory. You can check that it works. There's no reason for it to work. It's just the simplest thing we've got that works. Not that it's that simple. And quantum physics says that if you have certain objects, you get atoms and you get chemistry. And you can see that there's biology built with that chemistry. How the hell do you get from atoms to biology? Worst than the dice thing. Reality is all there, but you can't put the pieces together.'

Why did I want to put the pieces together? 'It's not a problem. People go on. Not putting the stupid pieces together, they still go on. And it doesn't make sense. They don't know where they are. They can't prove reality is real. There is some reality, that's obvious. But the pen, the paper, the ink. The flowing ink. The meaning. Is it real?'

'People should know this. I had to write it down. I had to make them understand. You throw the dice. You have your atoms. You have your chemistry, your biology. ok, let's make it simple. Assume these are objective. People...are they meaning, are they the sum of their parts? Are the meanings real?'

'something dies. the body is still there. It is it, but it is not it. It's easy to see why religions get so much money. The mind works with meanings. The meanings aren't all objective. What's objective about classical physics, except that it's a good approximation? But an approximation is not exact. And the meanings. The people. They need to know. They're not real.'

I woke up the next day with the feeling that I had forgotten something that was worth remembering. Sometime during the night I had gotten awake enough to move to the bed, but that was about it.

It was almost late. "Bye mom, I'm going to school." 'I wonder if I'll still say it the same when I'm a grownup professor.' The truth is, all the other students were just as childish as I was. Fourth year of math at the university or highschool, they felt the same to me. Just that less time is wasted on useless subjects in the university. And I had seen some of the PhD students around...if it feels like going to school, I'll call it school.

I got to class, and sat down. Jill wasn't there yet. I just stood staring out the window. 'Am I inlove with Jill?'

"G'morning, sunshine."

"'mornin', Jill."

"I see you've saved me a seat." And she smiled. Nobody else came to this lecture but the two of us. Not this early, anyway. She sat down next to me, and started taking out her pens and pencils. Her many pens and pencils. "So what d'you do last night?"

"Not much. Got home at two in the morning, bravely fighting off the stray dogs to my door."

"I don't get it how you can walk around talking so much. And you two are so much alike, I would get bored with someone agreeing with me all the time."

"But we don't agree all the time"

"Hey. I've sat between you for three years of my life. You're like identical twins sometimes, in the way you talk." I've known Joe from highschool. We both wanted to study physics afterwards, and we met Jill the first day, the first lecture. Actually, Joe had already met her once before, that's why she sat down between us then. This year Joe stayed in the physics department, but me and Jill betrayed him for math. "So, did you start writing that book?"

"Jill, I really need to write it all down."

"I know, I know."

"I go to sleep thinking about it. I want this stuff out of my head."

"When's the teach getting here?" she checked her watch. "But what about everything you write in between classes?"

"It's easy to write short things, you know. I've just read Frankenstein."

"Where d'you find that?"

"The Gutenberg project. They have a lot of good stuff. Anyway, I assume you haven't read it."

"Nope." She had already started to draw. She liked drawing these complicated patterns. They didn't really make sense, but she liked putting in a lot of details to details, and fitting everything together in some obscure way.

"I've just read it. It's pretty bad. I thought it was childish. I then realized when it was written, and I started being better impressed. But the point is that everyone speaks the same way."

"What do you mean?" And she looked at me. I don't usually look at people when I talk to them. Jill isn't your typical femme fatale, but she is beautiful. It's

just that she had her smile.

“The words they use. You know, different people speak differently. They might use different words, different intonations. Some use short sentences, some use short words. And we have typical mistakes that we make, and so on.”

She kept looking at me, waiting for me to finish.

“Well, when I read Frankenstein, the only clue I had about who was talking was the fact that she had written the names of characters next to their lines. The author. And I was really dissatisfied, you know...I kept hearing a lot about this book, and then I read it, and it's not a good book.”

“So what's your point?” She had gotten back to her drawing. There's something about someone leaning on a paper drawing or writing...The hairs on their forehead do something. I don't know how many people realize how intense this image can be in real life. And I can definitely understand why so many directors try to capture it.

“I don't want my ideas to be wasted in a bad book. I saw the Frankenstein movie that had DeNiro as the monster. It's a great movie. And it's way better than the book. I don't want my ideas to be lost in a pointless book that sounds like an old bored teacher dictating.”

She laughed softly, and started making a series of tiny circles inside a square.

“I want to write a book that I'd like to read, you know? And for that I need to have more than the idea.”

She looked up. “You made me curious. Maybe you can *tell* me your idea at some point.” And then she put away her drawing, because the teacher had just got through the door. ‘I'd like to tell myself my idea at some point.’

“Do you know what he did?” Our morning lecture was over, and we had just met Joe. We were walking toward the greek bakery. “He called me after he got home. I had almost fallen asleep.”

“Jim. Do you have something to tell us about your feelings toward Joe?”

“It's not funny, Jill. I don't like getting woken up by the phone.”

“I said I'm sorry.” ‘I don't even remember why I called you.’ “It's this thing, you know...I really want to be able to explain it.”

“Oh, yeah. Tell me what you want to write about.”

We were almost at the bakery, we just had to cross the street to get there. There was a fastfood close by, and the cafeteria wasn't very far. But we had gotten used to buying the cheap stuff at the snack bar. The fat rude lady was at the counter today.

“Do you have change?” I asked. “She doesn't like it when we don't have change.”

Joe was going through his pockets too. “Found some change.”

“Another quarter. Jeez, you guys suck at math.” Jill was holding the money,

and she took the quarter as we started to cross the street. Sometimes we didn't wait for the light, but there was a lot of traffic today.

"Well, it's not really an idea. It's a lot of ideas, but they're all connected." 'It's the whole damn thing, you know... life, the universe and everything, like the book says.' "And not just that, it's the fact that meanings and reality don't have a very clear relationship."

"Jim, I think you don't have a clear relationship with your own ideas."

"That's it. I can't even spell these things out properly." Jill had given the money to Joe, and he was getting the pretzels and tiropitas. We all loved those hot tiropitas. Well, out of the food that was available to us during our first year, we loved them... and we never thought about getting something else afterwards.

"No! Jim, wait at least 'till we cross the street." Jill liked to start eating after we had found somewhere to sit.

"I feel what I want to write. Like the topology stuff the old guy told us about today. There are these problems that we can't solve. But still, a six year old can understand the questions. And we don't understand it."

"You wanna write a book about topology?" We had crossed the street, and were almost at the bench. I liked that we had the benches close to the bakery. I guess I'm not the only one who likes to eat under a tree...

"Don't tempt him."

"Joe, I'm not gonna write a book about topology."

"Yes, Joe, don't be a meanie. I'm a girl, I'm allowed." We sat down and took a tiropita each.

"Not about topology. The fact that we can't solve these problems. We can state these simple problems that we can't solve."

"And how is that a book?" She was blowing on the tiropita. We were all blowing on them. "This happens all the time."

"AAa'gh! I bu'nth my thongue!" Joe had jumped up and was breathing heavily to calm the tip of his tongue. "There's nothing funny about hot cheese on the tip of your tongue.' He would probably be getting a blister.

"That's what you get for rushing like an idiot."

"Ith noth my fau'th I'm hung'y!"

"This! You see? He can't speak properly. In kid's books, there are these characters that have speach problems, so it's easy to tell who's speaking. It's also easier to get away with a simpler vocabulary, while still keeping the illusion that different people are speaking."

"He hath thith ithea thath he needs dia'ogue and he wanths tho have differ-enth peop'e..."

"Chill, Joe. Have some." And she handed him her bottle of juice. "He told me about Frankenstein this morning. You know, it's true. If you were to write a book about you and Joe, it would be hard to tell which is which."

"I can't write about me and Joe. Something has to happen in this book, otherwise people won't read it."

"Jim, I don't think you're going to write one of those books you like to read."

"But Asimov could write about stuff happening, and still keep it smart." 'I mean deep.'

"You're a student. You need to pass your exams. You don't have the patience to finish your sentences when you talk."

"I don'th 'ike ith when I geth hoth cheeth on my thongue."

He was so sad, Jill and I burst out laughing. He started again, this time tearing a small piece with his hand to eat, like Jill always did.

"But something has to happen."

"Last I've heard, all writer wannabes start by writing about themselves."

"So what would I be writing about?"

"Well, you could write about how beautiful I am."

"I thought I wasn't writing fantasy..." She hit me in the back of the head. "I remember seeing a movie where an old writer tells a young writer that he had always written about his life, and he had always been honest. And, as an old man, he had no friends." They both looked at me. "If I write about myself, who are the characters?" 'I know who they are.' "I mean, how can I make them be different from me?"

"Well, we are different."

"Yeth, we a'e."

I stared at them. 'But it's so obvious...' "But if I write the book, I write the dialogue. I can't speak for all the characters, especially if I'm one of them. It will all sound the same, it won't be a story."

"Hey, I just told you what I've heard. And I've heard that a lot of people write about themselves."

"Welcome to the exciting life of Jim. He's twentytwo, hungry student of mathematics. Living in his parent's house, because it's closer to campus than the student places."

"Jim..."

"No, let me finish. He is passionate about numbers, and understanding the universe. He sleeps, attends lectures and seminars, eats, talks to his friends and then sleeps again."

"My tongue is too sore to explain that he's an idiot. You do it."

"Things happen, you know. Like Joe burning his tongue." She was really watching me. I don't know why I felt scared.

"I have no idea why you two talk to me about this stuff. I've never heard about other people talking like this. I wouldn't read a book about me." 'I don't think I'd read a book about me.'

"Well, you could talk about your deep blue eyes..."

“I have brown eyes. While we're on the subject, I did think people would read anything if it was written using a font made from naked ladies.”

“Indeed.” Some driver was late in leaving from the stop, and he got a few honks. We'd finished the tiropitas, and we had started on the pretzels.

“You know, this food isn't very healthy.”

“Yes, we saw you burn your tongue.” “You changing the subject, out of all people...I can't write about myself.”

“We're young and healthy. When else can we eat deliciously disgusting junk food?”

“You do look good.”

“Joe, is there something we should be telling Jane?”

“Oops. Time?”

“Half past.” I kept my cellphone mostly instead of a watch. When I had a watch, I developed the annoying habit of checking it every minute. Now I was checking the phone every minute.

“I still have five minutes.”

I couldn't help myself from smiling. “You have a girlfriend.”

“Yes, Jim.”

“What is it with you two and girls?”

He'd met Jane a few weeks earlier, and they had been seeing a lot of each other. “Well, there's nothing with me and girls.”

“We were geeks in highschool too. You keep forgetting you're really weird for a girl.”

“Well, yes. I'm friends with two geeks who keep reminding me I'm weird.”

“I'm gonna spend the rest of the afternoon with her, so I'll be seeing you guys tomorrow.”

“Why didn't you tell her to get here earlier. Doesn't she like our food?” He was looking cornered. She smiled. “I like your Jane.” I couldn't think of anything to say.

“Well, go. Leave me with the young and restless poet/writer/mathematician wannabe.”

“What do you mean *mathematician wannabe*?”

Joe got up and grabbed his bag.

“Tell her we said hello.”

“Bye, Joe.”

“Bye.”

She looked at him walking, and then turned to me: “He's so cute when we talk about her.”

“I still don't understand how he has a girlfriend.”

“I can see that.”

“What?” “If I had a girlfriend, what would I write?”

“Wanna go inside? It's getting cold.”

We got up and started walking toward the entrance.
“He’s seeing her every day, you know.”
“Every day?” We went inside.
“I can barely talk to him.”
“Is poor Jim feeling neglected?”
“I don’t understand what they can be doing all this time.”

“Why are they all sitting here?” she barely whispered when we reached the stairs. Most of the stairway was occupied by first years, reading their notes importantly.

“I have no idea.” ‘I wonder how much more fun it is to watch them for teachers.’ “Were we this funny back then?”

“Indubitably.” I smiled. She did that sometimes. We carefully started climbing through them. I find it easy to get lost in my own thoughts when I’m concentrating on something. Like avoiding hands, bags, feet and clothes. At least they tried to act as if they didn’t hate us.

We got to the classroom, and we sat down. “When I think about it, it is exciting, you know? I feel it. I can’t really see myself writing about it, but I want to.”

“So just start writing it.” She got her pens and pencils out. I sat down opposite her, and got my fountain pen and paper. We had another hour until the seminar, and we usually killed time in there, drawing, reading and writing.

“I can’t just write it, because I don’t really know what it is.”

“Really?”

“Well, reality”. She was making a shadow now. Patiently moving her pencil from side to side, and gradually changing the pressure. She had these tiny pencils she insisted on using until they were smaller than the tips of her fingers. “I want to write about how reality is complicated.”

“Well, it’s not that complicated. It just is.”

“Exactly. But it is complicated. Like the simple problems. They’re there, but we can’t fix them.”

“I don’t see how reality is complicated.”

“Well, I…” ‘What am I trying to say?’ She was starting another shadow.

“Why did you choose math over physics?”

“I wanted to understand.” ‘what does that even mean?’ “They were skipping too many steps.”

She looked at me with large eyes. “I came with you because I assumed you knew what you were doing.” She then spoiled it with a smile. “Why do you think Joe stayed?”

“Well, he figures he shouldn’t mix work and pleasure.” ‘I didn’t mean it to come out that way.’

“Well, that's stupid.” I sometimes thought she drew all the time to avoid looking at people. But she looked up at me the moment I had waited too long.

“I don't really know. He said something.” ‘work for money, hobby for pleasure.’ “He wants to work eight hours a day, period. Not get his life mixed up with work.”

“But how is he gonna want to do something that he doesn't want to do?”

“Well, it's not really that he doesn't want to do it. It's just that he's not passionate about it.”

She had started a series of tiny lines. ‘write about myself. what would I be talking about? Nothing ever happens.’ I wasn't really watching her anymore. I do that sometimes, stare at something, get my eyes out of focus. ‘But I am enjoying this. Standing here watching her. Why can't I put this feeling in a book?’

“Do we ever talk about something important?” She was still making tiny lines.

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. What are grown up people supposed to talk about?”

“Well, from my experience, prices, politics, sports...”

“Don't you sometimes think they just do that around us?”

“Yes. It's all a great conspiracy.” ‘Maybe it is a conspiracy. What is she drawing?’ She didn't say anything. I started playing with my pen. ‘Why is it that I find it more important to prove that quantum field theory works, rather than trust the fact that experiments confirm it? But the universe should make sense. Should it? Well, we're here and we make sense. Most of the time. Most of us. I think.’ I started tracing lines over the paper, from side to side. ‘I do like the blue lines. I should write this. *Jim like the blue line. Jim like the color. Jim go potty all by 'imself.* It would sell like crazy. *Mathematician goes insane! Read all about it!* They could make it into a movie like the *beautiful mind* people. Maybe I should learn something about game theory.’ “Do you think I can do it?”

“What?”

“Write a book about what I like about the world, but still keep it readable?”

“I guess you could do it. I don't know if you really want to do it.” ‘what does that mean?!’ “People don't want to read about what other people want and like about the world. The most popular writers just make up stories where people can read about themselves.”

“And you think I can't do that?”

“I don't think you want to.” She looked up at me, smiling. “You told me you think of math as a language for the world. For the general population, that is weird.”

‘Well, the general population is made up of idiots.’

“Yes, you told me they're idiots. But they're not.” She got back to her drawing.

‘No, they're not.’ “But why don't they want to learn? I can't understand that.”

“Ask Darwin. Me, I have no idea why I'm here.”

‘Darwin. People are the way they are because that's the way that worked.’

Well yes. If all you care about is being popular, you do get more mates. I would like to be more popular myself.' "I can't bring myself to talk nonsense, so I'm not popular, so I'll be the last of my line."

"Possibly." I could hear her smile.

'How did Joe get a girlfriend? He's even intimidated by Jill sometimes. I'm intimidated by Jill sometimes. I wonder if other people think like this. I wonder if other people think at all... Oh, solipsism, my old friend. *But how can you prove they think?* It's about trust and faith.' I laughed out loud.

"Yes, you will meet a girl one day."

"I've already met several girls. It's just that they didn't meet me."

"You can be really creepy sometimes." She was still smiling.

'But seriously now... A mind for every person. Independent thought. It's the simplest explanation for what I experience, so I'm going to use it. But illusions are independent for schizophrenics too. Wonderful machine, the brain. It can make several personalities, and even have them interact without realizing that they're in the same brain. Or maybe it's bugs in the simulation machine, putting two minds in one brain.' "Do you think this is it? Reality?"

She looked up at me. "Subtitles."

'how can she turn this into something fun?' "Well, you're not me." She raised her eyebrows. "I meant something like the Matrix. Well, not the Matrix, because that turned out to be pretty stupid in the end. But there's a webpage *Are you living in a computer simulation?*"

"Well, any idiot can make a website."

"This guy's a professor of philosophy." I couldn't help smiling with her. "No, this is serious. If you think about it, as long as the simulation is good enough, you can't prove or disprove it."

"If it's not falsifiable, it's useless."

"But it's a relevant question. If it turns out that we can simulate a universe, then the probability of being in a simulation is exactly one."

"But we can't simulate a universe."

"But we don't need to simulate a universe. We just need a good enough model."

"But Joe keeps saying that the only model good enough is the universe itself."

"Yes, the computational equivalence stuff." "That Wolfram guy did put his mark on the world." "But what do we know about the mind?"

"Not a lot."

"It makes up most of the world."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, can you see Joe with Jane?"

"No."

"But if you think about it, they're together now somewhere."

"And I know that because I deduce it. It kind of makes sense."

"Do you know what I'm thinking? I mean... Do you know what I'm feeling?"

“Well, I can see your face.”
“And because you associate your expressions with your feelings, you associate my expressions with feelings that I supposedly have.”
“So you don't feel what I think you feel?”
“That's the point! I have no idea what you feel when you do stuff, I just assume it's something specific that I'm familiar with.”
“So you could be smiling out of exasperation?”
“It's not... I really do want to tell you.”
“Don't worry about it. You've told me.”
“What did I tell you?”
“You have no idea what life is about. And you want people to know.”
“I have no idea what life is.”
“Don't worry. We're not taking biology, so you're safe.”
‘School. Damn.’ “I need to take a look at my notes.”
“Have fun.” She got back to her drawing.
‘Greek letters. Everybody uses Greek letters for math. Even the Russians. I wonder what it's like to do math if you're Greek.’ “You know, I like this σ -algebra stuff.”
“Yes, can't have measure theory without it. I remember.”
‘And can't have statistics without measure theory.’
“And can't have probability without measure theory. Now say it with me.”
She was smiling again.
‘I feel bad doing this.’ “And can't have science without probability.”
“That's right. Now get to work, you're bothering me.”

The phone rang. “You're not online.”
“I went for a walk.”
“Good. Pick me up in ten minutes.”
“But”
“Ten minutes. See you then.” And she hung up.
‘Damn it, Jill. Well, I'm gonna be late, because I won't run.’ “So there.”
Twelve minutes later, she was coming out the door.
“You're late.”
“Sorry.” She looked at me. “You ran? Where were you?”
“Wait for me to finish the *but* next time.”
“So where are we going?”
“Dunno. You called me.”
“Well, what do you do when you meet Joe?”
“We get a bottle of coke, walk around the park, and sit down from time to time.”
“Let's go then. There's a store in the corner.”

After coming out of the store, we walked in silence for a while. What I like most about november is that it gets dark earlier. 'I like it better when it's dark. The combination of lights and shadows...'

"Still thinking about your book?"

"More or less."

"I found the website you told me about."

"And?"

"First of all, I hate that people actually get paid to do that sort of thing."

"Good point."

"And that's it."

'But you said first of all.'

"Anyway, I forgot why that was related to your book."

"I don't know now...what were we talking about? Book." 'reality. dream. meanings. simulation.'

"I like computer animations."

"You mean like Farmville? Why you dirty closet facebooker you."

"I mean like Shrek."

"I know that's what you mean. Explain."

"I once thought that you can make movies from games. And in some games there are AI characters that do stuff themselves."

"So your big plan is to create some semiautonomous characters that you can *film* and then make movies?"

"It's not my plan. But we can think about it. As a reasonable plan."

"That's your big simulation?"

"Hey. The rise of computers happened because kids wanted to play games. And the rise of the internet happened because of porn."

"How much do you really know about the internet?"

"It is conceivable that we are just AI in someone's game."

"But that's not what the Matrix was about."

"I don't care about the Matrix." 'I didn't mean to be that loud.' "The point is that what we see, what we experience...It doesn't tell us these things."

"And how can you write this book and still keep it interesting?"

"That's my question."

I opened the bottle. We walked in silence for a while. 'What is she thinking about? Who was that who read the other guy's thoughts by looking at their walk? Poe wrote it...'

"Why not write about yourself?"

"That again? That would be boring."

"Is this boring?"

"What, this could be a book?"

"First you say we're some stupid AI in a computer game, and now you're calling me a book character?" I smiled too.

"Yes, I'm calling you a book person. We're in a book right now."

“So who's writing it?”
“Well, if I'm to write about myself, I could be writing it in the future.”
“So you're gonna write a book about two people talking about being in a book? You should market it to teenagers, you'll make millions.”
“And then they could make it into a movie.”
“Where you play yourself, and you talk to yourself because you're in the audience. And I play myself, and I'm on the front page of all the magazines.”
We stopped at the red light. Across the street ‘Joe. Joe and Jane.’
“There's Joe waving. Try to hide, maybe we can make Jane think we're spying on them.”
“Jill, be nice.” The light changed, so we went to them.
“Hi.”
“Hi.”
“Hi.”
“Hi. Jim was telling me all about how we're in a book now.”
“So who is the book about?”
Jane picked it up pretty fast. “Maybe it's one of those modern books where one of the characters is an inanimate object like the street.” We all stared at her. “You know, the street being a street. Born, then different cars passing, getting familiar with certain cars, curious about the barely felt humans...”
“Jim, you suck at talking about books. I should be on a date with Jane, not you.”
‘Is this a date?’ She went straight for Jane, grabbed her by the arm, and walked off. I started after them with Joe. He was looking worried.
“What do you think she's saying to her?”
“Probably all about how she's stealing you away from us.”
“What are you two doing together anyway?”
“I was out, and she called me. Told me to pick her up, and here we are.”
“Do you think she planned this?”
“I have no idea.”
“Jim, Jane says you're not allowed to hold Joe's hand.”
‘Why are girls allowed to do that?’ She had shouted that from fifteen feet in front of us. “What do you think they're actually talking about?”
“I suppose I could ask Jane later.”
“They could be saying anything.”
“They might...”
“So what are you two doing here?”
“We're walking.”
“Walking her home?”
“Something like that. But what about you and Jill? Are you actually on a date?”
“I don't know why she said that. It's not a date. I told you, she called me.”

“And you decided you were in a book.”

“If I do write a book about myself, I could put this in it.”

“And who'd read that?”

“I know!” I was looking at them. It seemed like they had a lot to talk about.

“You could make it a scifi, you know?”

“What's fictional about reality?”

“You could write about yourself, but say that in the future there are these computers. Plug in, and you're in a world where there are several people you can talk to, just that they're different aspects of yourself.”

“Smooth. *Are you a loser unable to make friends? Try out our mind amplifier. And in tiny print: We're not responsible for people making out with themselves.*”

“How come the xkcd guy can be geeky and popular at the same time?”

“He's probably faking the geeky part.”

“And it's a nice idea! And, being inside your own head, you could also put in adventures and stuff.”

“And I could make it so that they have no idea if they're in the machine or not. The movie came out in the summer.”

“What is it with you and originality? People have been writing for thousands of years. You can't possibly claim to write something truly original.”

“But I can at least try to avoid the obvious stuff. I hate it when I find that a good idea's been already used.”

“Well, I just thought it was a nice idea.”

“I think this is a problem with the both of us. Science doesn't really need fiction to be interesting, you know?”

“I know. Just look at the humongous number of people passionate about science.”

“It's really tempting to just call them idiots, you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

‘I assume it would be good therapy, talking to yourself but not feeling like you're talking to yourself. And it's easy to talk about reality and the meaning of awareness when you're dealing with simulations. Stupid Hollywood people messing up good ideas.’

Jill and Jane had stopped at the corner, and they were waiting for us, to cross the street. It's a small park, but it's pretty private. There's a big old building right next to it, like a tiny castle or a huge villa. It has a nice complicated roof. In late autumn, seagulls sit on that roof sometimes. The sea is pretty far, so it's strange, but I always thought of them as seagulls. We sat down, and passed the bottle around.

“So, Jim, what do you want to write about?”

I hadn't really talked to Jane before. “I don't know. Reality, understand-

ing...us understanding reality.” ‘Why is she asking me this? Me and Jill. Why are we here. Why isn't she asking that? That's what Joe's asking himself.’

“Jane, you have to understand that with Jim everyone needs subtitles. Jim, you're not saying anything.”

“I don't...If I were to write something now, I would write about how learning is interesting.” ‘Where did that come from?’ “Yes. We were talking about being in a simulation, and about being AI, and I started thinking that this is a big problem in programming. Making good AI.”

Joe breathed heavily. If he did that, it meant he hadn't understood. ‘But it's obvious that I mean...’ Jill hit me in the back of the head.

“You don't get it.”

“No.”

“Well...”

“No need to be polite, Jane.”

“We were talking about all this, and I wondered what would be the hard problem when actually building the simulation. And the hard problem is making something that can learn. And that's the sort of thing I'd like to tell people about in my book. It's a hard problem, and, with all the math we have now, we can't solve it.”

“Actually, it's easy to make thinking machines, Jim.” Jill always had a way with words. “Just get a healthy young couple and keep them out of sight for a while.”

“Yes. But there are enough books about that.”

In the meantime, Jane was giggling, because Joe seemed somehow stuck.

“If we were in a simulation, the most exciting thing that could happen wouldn't be a fight between karate experts” ‘or sports or a concert or a carcrash’ “exciting would be” ‘kid learning to speak, kid learning to ride a bike’ “a kid learning to read and write. Yes, write.” They were silent in a strange way. ‘babbling?’ Sometimes when I babble people think I'm tense, and they get tense. “I mean...” ‘looking at the big picture, more things happen when a kid learns to write. It's the fact that that person...lines will have meanings, but they were lines before.’ “OK, let me put it another way.”

They burst out laughing.

“What?” ‘What did I do? This hasn't happen in a while. I must of done something...’ “What did I do?”

“You said *I mean...*”

“Then we were waiting for you to say something...”

“And then you said *let me put it another way.*”

“But I was gonna put it another way.” ‘I was. Well, at least I got them to laugh.’ “The point was that if I want to talk about meanings, and understanding, and our relationship with reality, a thinking being learning something is probably the most interesting thing I could write about.”

“OK...” When Joe said it like that, I knew I had to explain some more. The OK is better than the heavy breath.

“There are all these layers between us and reality.”

“The computer doing the simulation?” I could hear her smile.

“Meanings, layers of meanings. I look at you, and I see girls and boy, clothes and stuff.” ‘not atoms’ “But that's not exactly reality, because I can't see the atoms. I don't think of the atoms when I look at you.”

“So that makes it less real?”

“It's not less real. It's just that reality is everything. We're made up of these real, physical objects and some real, physical processes are taking place.” “But the meanings that we think.’ “The meanings are on top of that, they're just a part of reality. They're an approximation of a part of what's really there. Layers.”

“I think I'm missing something...”

“Well Jane, what the babbling genius here is trying to say is that we are very complicated physical objects, and our minds transform these complicated things into simpler things, idealized, models of what is really there.”

“And the models are meanings in a way. Like when you see a stick figure and you can still think of it as a person.”

‘I guess we're three twins.’ “The meanings come in layers, and our understanding comes in layers. It's the concept of analysis. We take the whole, real object, and we deal with pieces of it.”

“I still don't get what the kid learning to read and write has to do with this”

“I was trying to say that for the kid, in the beginning, the letters are just lines. Some random shapes, put together by adults for mysterious reasons. But then he learns that there are meanings associated to these lines. And *his mind changes*. He sees lines, and they are really lines, but he perceives the meaning” ‘the model’ “the letters.”

“And then words directly. There's this study that shows we mostly read the first and last letter, and then even if the middle letters are mixed up, we can still read just as fast.” Joe had a way of cutting right through my train of thought.

“But how do you write about a mind understanding something like that?” Jane sounded sincerely curious.

‘Why does this feel so good?’ “I don't know. It's easy to say Eureka! when you get the answer to a question, but letters instead of lines...that's not a question.” ‘months of work.’ “It's gradual, long, and boring. But it's fascinating, you know? It's another layer. The mind gets further from reality.” “That sounds weird.”

Nobody said anything. ‘What is it about the way I say things that gets people this way?’ It felt awkward. I took the bottle.

“Joe, I never knew.” Jill did have a way with words. “You could have said something. We could have shared the burden.” I wanted to hug her.

“I have to ask. Are all technical people like this?”

“Nope. Others drink alcohol.” Jill got up and grabbed my hands, pulling me up too. “I think we should get going. Have fun smooching, you two.”

“BYE, Jill.” Joe didn't like to talk about *smooching*.

‘Maybe I'll understand someday.’ “Bye Jane, Joe.” ‘It's not just the words. The way they're put together. The intonation. The volume, the pauses... Why can't I do that?’

“Thanks.”

“What for?”

‘For getting me out of there.’ “For... fixing the weirdness.”

“What're you talking about? Relax, Jim.” She was smiling.

“It felt weird.” ‘How come I can tell her this?’

“It was weird. Good weird. Sort of. You're really passionate about this.”

“I guess so.”

“And you're honest about it. We're used to it, but it's still... You have your moments.”

“Sorry.”

“Relax.” She laughed softly and took hold of my arm as we crossed the street.

“They're good moments.”

“What did you talk to Jane about, anyway?”

“Yes.” She was smiling.

“I hate it when you do that.”

“Yes.” Still smiling.

“Another mystery to solve after I figure out the universe.” ‘Is this a date?’

“So, you've been doing this with Joe since forever?”

“It feels like we're still in highschool.”

“So forever.”

“It's what we do.”

“It's weird. It's like you took it out of a manual or something, but it doesn't feel fake.”

“Why would it feel fake?”

“Young men, trying to understand the world, walking around town, oblivious to the world.”

“It sounds fake.”

“Good weird, I told you.” She let go of my arm to pick a leaf from a low hanging branch.

We walked in silence. ‘How much did they really understand? How much do they think is babbling and weirdness? Does any of this matter to them?’ There are these moments, when walking feels like step after step, hypnotic. ‘Does any of this matter to me? And why did I say further from reality? It's just adding another layer. Layer after layer, making up the mind. world?’

“You would like it, wouldn't you?”

“What?”

“One of us coming to you one day, telling you that you passed some test and you could come out of the simulation.” She wasn't smiling.

I smiled. “Indubitably.” ‘why did she have to plant THAT in my head?’

She smiled too. “Indubitably. Well, here I am. Thank you, kind sir, for a delightful outing.” And then she smiled again “Relax, it wasn't a date. See you tomorrow.” And she went towards her building.

“See you...”

‘Is this what baffled feels like?’ I was heading home. ‘Well, if there can be any proof that I'm not a lone brain in a jar, being fed a simulation, the fact that I can feel like this...But why did she say that? I wonder how long it will be 'till I can think of something else. Being in a test. Training for the real world. And it would make sense, too. If we had the technology, we'd probably do it. Much cheaper than to train and pay an army of teachers. Probably. If we had the technology.’

I usually take these walks to clear my head. The sounds of the city, the cool night air. ‘She did it on purpose. Was she punishing me for something? Or maybe she doesn't know how I can't help myself to think about this. How can she do that? *you'd like us telling you your world isn't real.* And she leaves me like this. She can't know. She thought it was a joke. But I am here. Wondering if my world is real. Much deeper than the movie. This is the kind of thing I need to make people think. They should know. True questions. Questions about the universe. What we are. Is this it. Reality, our minds and reality.’

‘But if someone did tell me I've just passed a test, and I could get out...Am I more real than my friends? If I can feel that I'm not alone, and then they tell me I'm alone, am I alone or not? We're all fake, in the end. Patterns on top of reality. Maybe I'm the simulation, and Joe's the brain in the jar. or Jill. I can't even talk right. Maybe I'm an accident in the simulation. *Why do people need drugs to get high?* I like that I can get out of myself to talk about myself. talking about myself. I should learn the math that can do this consistently someday.’

‘But why am I so excited about this? Passionate, she says. The simulation, waiting for me to be ready to get out. *why can't I put this in writing? why can't I explain this feeling? Come one, come all! Jim is here to tell you that...you're not real! All the excitement of understanding that you can't understand it!* It sounds so stupid. But how can I talk to people about this, if they've never experienced it? And how can I possibly make them experience it, if I can't talk to them about it?’

Step, after step, after step. Walking alone in the night, ‘wanting to scream at the universe.’ I saw this girl on the other side of the street, walking alone, like me. Step after step. ‘after step.’ She didn't look sad. She didn't look happy. ‘Going home from a friend's house. Doing homework. Highschool. Started talking about boys, forgot about the time. Rushing to get home. Or maybe a boy is waiting on facebook. or maybe the cows need to be clicked on facebook.’

'I should write about how I hate facebook. A book about not knowing whether life and reality ...hating facebook and second life.' I smiled.

'I should write this down. I have to write it down. To make them understand.' Step, after step, after step. 'Learning to walk. It's all atoms, in the end. Combined in molecules. Combined in macromolecules. Cells. Tissue. Blood flowing. Heart pumping, lungs breathing. Brain thinking and controlling the walk. At the same time. Our best science can't replicate it yet. And the mind on top of that. *I want to go there*. And the atoms all get there, part of their molecules, part of their cells...Layers and layers. And it might not be true. Somewhere, there might be a fake layer, between me and the simulation. I might not be here. Or I may be the simulation. I think there are atoms, but they might not be. The greatest mystery ever. I might not be.'

Step, and step again, and step again. 'I have to get it through somehow.'

When I got home, I sat myself down to start writing.

Outside, it had started to rain.

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