

Sunday Pub

The brew pub was half-empty, filled with the hum of muted televisions showing football and the low chatter of scattered patrons. Outside, the October light slanted through the windows, sharpening the reds and golds of the trees across the street.

Jon sat hunched over his pint, tracing condensation rings into the wood of the table. Ben leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, watching his friend with that mix of concern and curiosity that only comes after thirty years of knowing someone.

“You don’t have to,” Ben said quietly. “But I think it would help.”

Jon exhaled slowly, eyes still on his beer. “It’s not the kind of thing you want to put into words. Once you do, it feels like you’re admitting it was real.”

“That’s the point, man. You nearly died. If you can’t talk about it with me, then who?”

Jon finally looked up. His eyes were bloodshot. Not from drinking, but from far too many nights of restless half-sleep. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He paused, as if measuring the weight of his own thoughts. “Have you ever heard of the Boltzmann Brain hypothesis?”

Ben frowned. “That’s... physics, right? Something about entropy?”

Jon nodded. “Kind of. It’s the idea that instead of this entire universe being real, it’s way more likely that we’re just... a single brain floating in nothing. That everything, every single thing — memories, history, us sitting here right now — isn’t real at all. Just electrical signals firing into the void. One lonely brain imagining it all.”

Ben shifted in his chair. “That’s... bleak.”

“It’s worse than bleak,” Jon said, his voice tightening. “It means none of this is real. Not you, not me, not the beer in our hands. Just impulses in a brain that doesn’t even know it’s alone. No universe. No Earth. Nothing.”

Ben forced a chuckle, trying to soften it. “Okay, but that’s just theory, right? A thought experiment. You’re saying you actually... felt this?”

Jon leaned forward, lowering his voice. “When I was under... when they said my heart stopped... it wasn’t light or tunnels or some comforting vision of angels. It was exactly that. A sense of floating in the dark. No body, no sound. Just the thought that maybe I’d never been alive at all. That my whole life was just a story my brain had invented for itself. A desperate little trick to feel less alone.”

The bar noise seemed to fade as he spoke, replaced by the clink of glasses and the faint whistle of the wind outside. Ben felt his throat go dry.

“You’re... You’re serious?”

Jon’s fingers tightened around the glass. “Wanna know the scariest part? It made sense. I... I could feel it. That the universe was never here to begin with. Just me. Always me. Always alone.”

Ben shook his head, more forceful now, though his voice wavered. “No, man. No! You and I — we’ve been through too much together. Baseball cards, high school detention, your wedding... those things weren’t fake, I know it!”

Jon gave him a hollow look. “If the hypothesis is true, all of those memories are just part of the illusion. Preloaded into my head like files on a hard drive. You might not exist at all. Perhaps just a friend I dreamed up so I wouldn’t go insane.”

For a very long moment, neither spoke. A waitress passed, dropping off wings at the next table. A cheer went up from the TV as someone scored a touchdown. The world moved on around them, oblivious.

Finally, Ben leaned in, resting his elbows on the table. “Look, maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s all an illusion. But if that’s the case, then what’s the harm in living it out? Drinking beer, talking nonsense with me, pretending it’s real. If this is all you get — why not take it?”

Jon blinked, considering the words. Then he smirked, just faintly, and raised his glass. “To pretending, then.”

Ben lifted his own. “To pretending.”

They clinked glasses. The sound rang sharp and solid, almost like proof of... something.