



## STUDYING TO BE CLARK KENT

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I have a theory.

Let's say I take a hundred cats and lock them in a room with my credit card and access to the internet. Eventually, one of them will defraud me.

Anything is possible.

Take two dozen elk and fire them from a cannon into space. At what velocity would I expect them to escape the Earth's gravity? Not sure. Worth a try.

Possibilities for things to happen are endless. As infinite as the universe. It's expanding— like a balloon, although it depends on what theory you follow. It might not even be like a balloon, it might be a piece of string. Because string theory is the next big wow god-type theory that is going to tell us everything. Ha!

I don't think so. No, no, no.

It's bigger than that. I could go round and round in circles about relativity and blah but when I was talking to Kaleem once, he was on a buzz about eleven dimensions and Buddhism all rolled into one giant life-shattering quantum ball of tripe.

‘All these dimensions, yeah, they are all in the same place at the same time, overlapping, like infinite transparencies,’ he said. ‘There’s four dimensions we know about, up-down, in-out, left-right and time. Yeah? And there’s all these others.’

‘You been to one of those seminars again?’

‘No, Ralph, no. No.’

‘I deduce that to mean a yes.’

‘No, listen. It was inspiring. I never thought about how it all fits before, it made sense.’

‘This is not what I expected from you, Kal. Give it up. It’s a waste of time.’

No less than eleven, eleven, dimensions. That are yet to be proven to exist. What a load of winsome rubbish. If I didn’t know better I’d have thought Kaleem was on something but he seemed calm. Like he hadn’t been to a single lecture for weeks.

‘Can I say something?’

Kaleem shrugged.

‘Is it really your intention to send me into a fit of manic reading over your delusion that science and religion are inseparable? It’s bad enough living in this dump, no double glazing, no heat, living hand-to-mouth...’

‘Come to the seminar with me, yeah?’

‘I need a pinà colada to think about it.’

He fluttered his eyelids at me. The girlie wuss. ‘Please, Ralph?’

I should have known it would be held in the Humanities block. Nothing scientific about it: nothing. Room 666, and a shabby printout on the door: ‘String Theory and Eastern Consciousness, Mr Adams and Mr. Lee.’ I expected a black hole to engulf us both, so the room number was inspiring.

In the middle of the darkened room was a model of the universe, lit from below. And some smart-arse had stuck loads of those fluorescent stars on the walls and ceiling. Giving a delirious sense of being inside a jellyfish. Or similar.

'Hey, Ralph!' It was Baboosjka. Some girl Kaleem knew.

'Yes? What?'

'Why don't you and Kal sit with me?'

Say no, say no, say no.

'Alright, then,' Kaleem said.

'This better be good,' I thought.

I engineered it so that Kaleem was sitting between Babs and me.

'Ladies and Gentleman, thank you for joining us today to explore String Theory. Or M Theory. In relation to Buddhist and, or, Eastern thoughts or philosophies.' The lecturer mostly wore his glasses on his head. 'You are invited to ask questions throughout the talk. Mr. Lee will be happy to give a brief overview of Buddhism at the end.'

Mr. Lee could've been a distant relation. Small eyes, small beard. Bad hair. Lovely teeth. Strange-looking, basically. Like looking at a fairground mirror.

'Ralph, there's a seat over here,' Babs whispered.

I crossed my arms and stared ahead. Got eye contact with Mr. Lee who seemed to be disappearing. Trick of the jellyfishy lighting, no doubt. No. He was disappearing. Eyes shut. Ya-a-wn.

'It is theorised that the Universe as we know it may be just one of an infinite number of universes... Gravity, electromagnetic forces and strong force are 3 different forces, acting only (or mainly) in their domains i.e. mega-, meso- and micro-domains. Hence, each domain must have its own 3-dimension. In summary, our universe must have nine spatial dimensions. Because of a continuing relationship between those domains, the other dimensions, like time, are required as change-over indicators...'

He could just as well have been asking to be taken to my leader in Swedish.

'Kal? What does this have to do with Buddhism?' I wasn't looking at him directly or I might have noticed he wasn't there. Most of the group had gone.

It was me and Mr. Lee and the joyless voice of the lecturer. Oh, and Babs and two beanpole students sitting behind us.

‘And that concludes our discussion... on—’ Mr. Adams squinted around the room. ‘Ah. I see we have lost a number of people from the floor. Ahem, well, you there. What’s your name?’

‘Ralph.’

‘And what are your thoughts on String Theory?’

‘We’ve had how many decades of quantum theory now? And it all gets lumbered with eastern mysticism. And that’s it?’

‘Not quite, Ralph. But I can understand your hesitance—’

‘You’re turning my friends’ brains into mush. I’m going.’

I could just make out where the door was. Time to leave. There’s the door. Let’s go. I could hear Babs biting her freakish nails.

‘The interconnectivity of all things relies primarily on faster than light communication,’ Mr. Lee said.

‘And?’

‘That is the nature of the quantum soul.’

‘And?’

‘It means that all things affect each other at speeds greater than the speed of light.’

Wonderful, there’s the door. Babs followed me.

‘Ralph, wait.’

‘Could you leave me alone?’

So, nothing. And Kal, that apple juice guzzling little hypermaniac, was sitting on a bench outside the Humanities block.

‘You abandoned me, bitch,’ I said.

‘I got a bit scared.’

‘Of Buddhism?’

‘No. Of how everything fits. It’s like, reaching Nirvana is like becoming more aware of the dimensions. It means I’m not aware.’

‘You’re blithering now,’ I should’ve hit him. ‘All this thinking isn’t doing you any favours. Let’s go home, Babs is following me.’

I turned around to go and— what utter joy and utter happiness— there she was.

‘What’s the matter, Ralph?’ She smiled at me.

‘What?’

‘You going to the May Ball?’

‘No, Kal’s my date. We’re going to the pits of hell instead.’

She went away. A bit too slowly, but at least she went away.

‘You should go after her.’ Mr. Lee was standing behind me.

‘Why?’

‘Because.’

Why were people being so enigmatic? Why had all the god-botherers decided to hold science in captivity like a majestic Siberian tiger in a small cage just to defend their wacky versions of truth?

Science was pure. How dare they mess with it?

‘She likes you, Ralph.’ Mr Lee went on.

‘So? Let’s go,’ I said.

As Kaleem and I were walking home, we heard sirens coming up Hill Road just outside the campus.

‘Probably a hit and run, Kal. Let’s just go home.’

‘I want to see.’

We headed up the steep road. Two ambulances, loads of police cars. A fire crew with cutting equipment and lots of debris. Some boy-racing nutter probably.

There was a gawping crowd forming when we finally got there. We mingled with them and eventually popped out to the front.

‘It’s Babs,’ Kal said.

She was sort of there and not there. I could see her chest going up and down and her eyes were open. Really wide. Her body seemed the wrong shape now. A paramedic was putting a mask on her face but he didn’t move her much.

Kal stepped forward and knelt down beside her. He held her hands.

‘It’s okay. You’ll be fine. Look, look at me. Don’t worry about anything, yeah?’

The paramedic started asking him some questions.

‘Should we go with her to the hospital?’ I asked.

‘We have to wait for an air ambulance.’

‘Why?’

‘She has a lot of internal injuries and there’s a high risk that she’s injured her spine. Are you her boyfriend?’

‘Em, no. I’ll get the campus to call her mum. Actually, her mobile. The number should be on it.’

So, I walked away. As I did so, I noticed a black Ford Fiesta wedged in between a cab and a plumber’s van. Fire fighters were cutting into it. I wondered why they were bothering. It looked like it was too late anyway.

I heard Kaleem opening the front door in the morning. I sat on the staircase.

‘She died,’ he said.

‘Sorry, Kal.’ I meant to say something else. Something with more impact.

‘Her mum couldn’t make it in time. I’m going to bed.’

She was just a girl. Just a fact. Now the fact was no longer a fact and that’s it. Her body would break down into its component parts and transfer energy back into the universe where it belonged. There’s just no logical argument for her having a soul.

I didn’t go to the funeral. Kaleem tried to make me.

‘It’s respectful.’ That was the best he could come up with.

‘Of what? Just shut up.’

‘Do you know what, Ralph?’

‘What?’

‘I can’t stand you right now.’

I went to a lecture instead. First time in two months. I stayed away from Kaleem for about a week while he left hints about my apparently heartless interior. Things like an egg with the word 'fragile' on it left on top of my bookcase. Why couldn't he just hit me like a proper man? No. That's because he wasn't a proper man, just a weedy philosopher.

I was tucking into a concoction of minced beef and tomato when he put on his collection of Dean Martin songs.

'Kal, do we have to listen to that?'

*You're nobody 'til somebody loves you. You're nobody 'til somebody cares...*

'Just listen to the song,' he said.

*You may be the king. You may possess the world and its gold. Ah, but gold won't bring you happiness when you growing real old.*

*The world still is the same. You'll never change it... as sure as the stars shine above. You're nobody 'til somebody really loves you... so find your somebody to lo-ove.*

All the while, he was moving around the room like he was arranging it to redecorate. He got up on a chair and hung a length of twine around the light fitting.

'What's got into you?'

'I'm going to hang myself, yeah.'

'You're more likely to bring the ceiling down. Just stop this self-abuse, Kal.'

'Not even going to try and stop me?'

'Stop it, alright? I get the message. It's me, okay? I am a heartless bastard and I deserve to die so just piss off going on about that girl.'

*Sweet, sweet memories you gave... one girl, one boy, some grief, some joy—*

I put down my plate and I switched off the stereo.

I didn't do anything. I didn't hurt anyone. I didn't wake up the day of the accident and decide I was going to be a ratty-scummy-shitty bloke to everyone. Why was he playing all these mind games with me? I didn't

run her over, did I? I hardly even knew the girl. She was just a girl. I was just honest with her. At least I didn't play her along like some blokes would. I just told her to leave me alone. If people can't see that I wasn't mincing my words and wrapping it up in rosey-rosey crap, it's not my fault, is it? I can't pretend I cared about her or all the spiritual crap.

'Kal, you're turning into a Greek chorus, alright? Just piss off.'

And I shoved him.

He fell backwards. The chair swayed and fell over and he started to struggle. He was choking and I stopped thinking. I got hold of his legs and tried to support him. He was grabbing at the light fitting and then his neck. I tried reaching the chair with my leg but if I moved, he'd choke. Shit. What had I done?

'Hold on, Kal. Help! Can anyone hear me? Help me! Shit, help!'

I saw the plate I'd been eating from and tried to reach for that. It was too far. Come on, come on. Reach it! Come on. And with my left hand, I managed to touch it and then I got it between a finger and thumb and scraped it slowly towards me. I threw it at the window. It smashed.

'Help me! Please help. Kal? Can you breathe, Kal? Shit, can you breathe?'

There was some plaster falling from the ceiling. The light fitting was coming loose. 'Oh, good. Good. Good. Come on. Kal, can you hear me?'

He was still choking. I tried to look up at his face.

'Help! Kal, I don't know what to do. I don't know how to get you down. Shit, what have I done?'

They couldn't resuscitate him.

I still don't think he was completely right. We have an ongoing debate about whether I'll change my mind. Sounds crazy. Course it would, coming from me. I didn't tell anyone about shoving him. He knew. Or knows. And that's enough.

I didn't go to the funeral. His family wanted a quick thing. But Mr. Lee turned up outside a lecture once, enquiring about my health.

He said that in another dimension, there were infinite numbers of me. All different. Or all the same, or both. Even here and now, there were infinite versions of me doing infinitely different things with only the smallest detail altered.

‘Everything is possible,’ he said.



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