

THE SUBJECTIVIST'S LAMENT

The funeral home looked strangely cheerful as we parked outside. Eventually, we made it in, where I saw my distant cousin, John. We had been childhood friends, but hadn't met in years. Eventually, after hushed greetings to relatives and friends, I found John. He was sitting in the viewing room, somber and depressed.

After initial greetings, he began to cry. We began to talk about John's son, Wade, who was lying there in the casket.

"I remember when he was a little boy," John painfully grinned between sniffs. "He was so full of questions, so full of life. Oh God, what went wrong?"

"He used to hug me and tell me he loved me. He could never get enough love. He always wanted me to love him—he always wanted to be sure. 'How much do you love me?', he would say. 'This much,' I would say." Here John spread his arms wide to indicate the whole universe.

"I don't know," John went on. "As he got older—twelve, maybe fourteen—he started asking weird questions. I guess it started one night when I was fighting with Helen, and I got mad and told her something like, 'You know, Helen, what's it all for, anyway? Why should I fight with you? For all I know, you could just be a figment of my imagination!' And Wade had such an active mind, you know, he couldn't just let comments like that lie. Eventually, you know, he read all of my books on ESP, and transcendental meditation, etc. Don't think they helped him much. He had a thirst for knowledge, sure, but the more he read, the more confused he became.

"And he read those books a lot more closely than I ever did, when I was young.

"So one day, Wade came up to me and said, 'Dad, do you really think I'm just a part of your imagination?' And I said, 'No, of course not, son.' Then he started saying things like, 'But how do you *know*, Dad? From these books of yours, I don't see how you could ever be 100% sure of *anything*.' And he was so persistent—he had read those books *good*, you know?—that I mumbled one time, 'Yeah, that's true.'" Here John looked at me with very tired eyes.

"And that's when he blew up at me. He started crying and becoming hysterical. He started yelling at me and accusing me—and I had been a good father—just because I couldn't know things 100%. He told me, 'Dad, are you telling me that you actually believe that I might not

even exist? That I might just be some figment of your imagination, some part of one of your dreams? How can you sit here and tell me this?' I tried to explain to him how nothing is ever certain, and how we can never know anything for sure—that's not my fault, is it?—but he just glared at me like he hated me.

"And he said to me, 'Dad, how can you love me? I mean, how can you sit here and say to me that it's a fact that you love me? You don't even believe I exist! Or that you exist, much less that you're my father!' And it started irritating me—I didn't like thinking about things like that—so I got mad too and told him, 'Well, you're right, Wade. I *do* love you—but of course that's *assuming* that you're really my son Wade. That's *assuming* that you're not really an agent of Satan in disguise, out to trick me. That's *assuming* that you're not really an alien from outer space.

"That's *assuming* that my whole life is not just a delusion. Now, Wade, I don't know any of these things for sure, but there's nothing else to do but to act as if all this is true.' He looked at me, and said, 'You actually think I might be an alien . . . ?'

"We used to have lots of arguments like that. For a while he wouldn't talk to me. But he kept reading the books, and he learned some things in college, and eventually he came 'round. Never did act right though, like he did when he was younger. He started hanging around with a different crowd, changed his major from engineering to general studies, started dressing shabby. And then he started to get into drugs. I couldn't believe it. And every time I confronted him about it, he would give me the same old line. 'What does it matter, man?' he would say. 'Hey! Dad, I'm not really here, remember? Nothing matters, remember? For all you know, there's really no such thing as marijuana. You know, I could fry my brains, and it wouldn't matter—I mean, how do I know I have brains? I could even slit my damned wrists, and you know as well as I that it wouldn't matter one damned bit. Nothin' in this stinking universe matters. So get off my case, man.' And, God help me, what could I tell him?"

John started to cry softly. "God help me, he was right!"

I didn't know what to tell John. But when I left, I walked away knowing, with absolute certainty, that John was wrong, and that Wade was dead.