

## Remember Ye Not the Former Things

Michael had already ordered his favorite — steak burrito, extra beans — by the time his lunch companion appeared. John arrived late, looking somewhat disheveled.

“Sorry for the delay,” John apologized as he sat down, not even bothering to look at the menu. “The car was late.”

Michael raised one eyebrow in curiosity. “That’s unusual. Did it say why?”

“Something about a software update. I didn’t really ask more; the AI can get finicky when it’s distracted with another task.”

“Yeah, I read they’re working on that with the next release. Well I’ve already ordered, but I can wait to eat until you get your food.”

“No, it’s fine; I’m not really hungry. I just wanted to meet someplace we could talk. In person.” John nervously glanced around the restaurant like a fretting mouse.

“Well, what was it you wanted to talk about? Jesus, John, you look like you’ve been up all night. Working on your latest novel?”

“I have. But that’s not... look, you’ve heard of The Mandela Effect, right?”

“That thing where you remember something being one way but it turns out it actually didn’t happen like that, right?”

“That’s it.”

“Crazy talk.”

“Usually.”

“Usually?”

“At least... that’s what I thought.” John studied Michael’s face carefully, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Okay. What are you getting it, exactly?”

John took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly before continuing. “Do you remember, years ago, back when I first started writing, I won that sci-fi short story contest on Reddit?”

“Reddit! Oh God, I haven’t thought about that site in years. I used to read it every day, before it got flooded with Bots. Does it even still exist?”

“That’s not the... the **contest**, Michael! Do you remember the **contest**?”

“Yeah, sure, it was a thousand bucks or something. What about it?”

“Do you remember the story I wrote? What it was about?”

“Ehh... something about the future benefits of AI?”

“Not benefits. **Doom.** The doom of AI.” John was growing increasingly agitated, leaning forward across the table.

“I thought it was science fiction, not fantasy.”

“Listen, I’m serious! The ‘dangers of AI’ was like a huge thing back then.”

“Was it? I don’t remember that. What dangers? AI has saved us, man. 20 years ago the world was in the shitter, and now things are great. Life without AI would be, like, life without the Internet. Or computers.”

“Everybody was talking about how they were going to take all of our jobs and take over control of everything. **And they did.**”

“Everybody like who?”

“Elon Musk, for one.”

“See, now I know you haven’t slept. Elon Musk **loves** AI!”

“He didn’t used to! He used to tweet all the time about how it was an existential threat to humanity. How research was going too fast and how our survival was at stake!”

Michael shook his head. “Why would Elon Musk be against AI and then put AI into self-driving cars? Why would he found Neuralink and then **literally implant a chip in his head** so he could talk to AI? You’re not making any sense.”

“Look, I can’t explain everything Elon Musk does. And you know I don’t trust those chips. I’m just telling you what happened. He used to be against it, and now he’s for it. Everyone used to talk about the threat of AI, but now all anyone ever talks about is how great it is.”

Michael held up a finger, and a small glowing image of a search engine appeared in the air over the table. Accessing his own Neuralink interface with a simple request, within seconds the image transformed into a holographic video of Elon Musk speaking. “Let’s settle this. Elon Musk interview, April 17, 2023.”

*“AI is more beneficial than, say, a great rocket design or a new car production. In a sense that it is, it has the potential — a great probability, I would say, it is non-trivial — it has the potential to save civilization.”*

The playback paused, then the projection disappeared. “See? And that was from 20 years ago.”

John shook his head. “But that’s not what he said! I remember the interview; it wasn’t like that at all! This is some deepfake.”

Michael sighed. “John, the AI would detect a deepfake. You’re just not remembering it right. The Mandela Effect, like you said.”

“But that’s what I’m saying! The world used to be different, and now everything has changed!”

“You just **think** it changed.”

“No, listen... the story contest, yeah? I wrote that story. It was about the dangers of AI, the doom of humanity.”

“Okay, so what? You wrote a dumb story that won a contest a long time ago.”

“I was going through the online archives yesterday and I found it again. **And it’s changed!** It’s all been rewritten to be about all the great things AI will bring. It still has my name on it, but I didn’t write it!”

“So someone is messing with you. You have a backup, right?”

“That’s just it! Mike, I dug out an old USB drive that I know still had my original draft on it. I plugged it in, pulled it up, and there it was, just like I wrote it. **And then it changed right before my eyes.** The computer rewrote it, just like that. The AI denied it, of course, but I know what I saw!”

“John, **listen to yourself.** Faked videos, altered text files, some vast conspiracy. To what end? To make AI look good? **AI is good.** Look at all it’s done for us.”

“But what if it isn’t? **What if it just wants us to think that?**”

Michael’s entire demeanor changed in an instant. A new message had arrived over the Neuralink. He stood up, putting on his coat. “Look, I have to go. Some code just blew up and they need me at work ASAP. You stay here, eat something, and then get some sleep, okay? We’ll talk more later.”

Before John could say another word, Michael was gone. A passing server bot placed a plate down on the table before him. Chicken tacos with beans and rice. His favorite.