

# THE COMPLETE, UNABRIDGED WHOLE

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"La vie en rose." Life in pink, or seeing life through rose-colored glasses. I remember the first time I heard this song was a cover by Cristin Milioti from the sitcom "How I Met Your Mother." I was in 6th grade, and I loved the song. I spent weeks browsing through different renditions, falling in love with each one. I loved it so much that I used the piece for several of my cello auditions through the years. The original piece, sung by Édith Piaf, describes the feeling of falling in love and seeing the world in a new light, a pink hue covering the world, making everything seem more wonderful. It felt like fate that it was played in one of my favorite shows, at a time when I would truly appreciate it and love it. How fitting.

## Piece 1: The Image



*Image of Webb's First Deep Field by NASA*

On Monday, July 11, 2022, NASA's James Webb Space Telescope delivered an image of the galaxy cluster SMACS 0723, also known as Webb's First Deep Field. It was "the deepest and sharpest

infrared image of the distant universe so far.” The image only covers “a patch of sky approximately the size of a grain of sand held at arm’s length by someone on the ground,” but it holds thousands of galaxies and stars.

People love the unknown, the mystique, the extraordinary. We’re drawn to what we don’t know. It’s how our brains are wired. It’s also why we spend billions and billions of dollars trying to explore the universe and find out the extent of what we don’t know. NASA spends upwards of \$20 billion each year attempting to grasp the idea of space and the universe, to keep traversing deeper into the dark and cold to find more pieces to the puzzle. We’re so desperate to make sense of the world, to make sense of something, even if we’re not sure what the full picture is.

According to “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” the meaning of life, the universe, and everything is 42. Douglas Adams might have meant it as a joke, but the desire to know the answer to everything is ingrained in reality. When we look for what’s beyond Earth, what’s beyond the world that we know, what exactly are we searching for? We have no idea what shape or form or number the answer will take on. We’re writing the question as we’re asking it, and trying to make each piece of the puzzle fit. But then again, if we have the whole picture, the answer to everything, do we stop searching? Do we only stop changing the question when we have the answer? Maybe the point of the exploration is never to reach the end but to keep coming back with more questions.

## **Piece 2: The Poem**

There’s a poem I love, from “Field Guide to the Haunted Forest” by Jarod Anderson, called “THE WHOLE.” He talks about wanting to understand the world around us, both past and present. “I wish I could know the whole, / so I could love it more completely.” This

desire to comprehend the world in its entirety so he can appreciate it more wholly parallels our yearning for the unknown, to explore, and to find the full picture.

But when we finally piece together “the whole”, whatever that may look like, maybe we’ll look into the meaning of it and what it does for us. I’ve heard the phrase, “the universe told me,” countless times, and I’ve said it myself too. Maybe it thundered while you were asking a question to the sky, or you bumped into someone from your childhood at a new job. These coincidences are often interpreted to mean something different. Something more. Instead of seeing something for what it is, we want a reason, a greater intention, or a bigger purpose, for why things happen the way they do.

### **Piece 3: The Show**



*Ted (Josh Radnor) meets the mother (Cristin Milioti) in How I Met Your Mother (2014)*

I’m a big sitcom person. Most people these days aren’t, but in a world where everything has irregularities, there’s something about the predictability and sameness of these shows that brings me

comfort. I binge-watched the entirety of “How I Met Your Mother” at once, over the course of a month. I stayed up a little later than I was supposed to and watched episode after episode, mesmerized by the stories and characters. Granted, I was pretty young and a lot of the jokes went over my head, but I loved it. The show tells one big story of how the main character, Ted, met the mother of his children, Tracy. Each episode was a smaller story that leads Ted closer and closer to meeting the mother, in the sense that each episode was a piece to a much larger puzzle. Every little thing had a ripple effect that ultimately guides Ted toward Tracy, the most notable being the yellow umbrella.

There’s the saying, “Everything happens for a reason.” In this respect, every effect has a cause. A yellow umbrella is an object that gets passed around between Ted and Tracy throughout the years, starting with Tracy leaving it behind at a bar after St. Patrick’s Day. Ted visits the same bar the morning after in search of his phone from the night before and gets caught in the rain, so he picks up the umbrella. Then after a series of events, Ted ends up dating Tracy’s roommate, leaving the umbrella at her apartment one day, returning it to its original owner. Years later, at a friend’s wedding, Ted bumps into Tracy, who was a part of the band playing, holding the umbrella, and finally, they meet. Of course, there’s a lot more that happens that leads up to that moment, but this is the main gist. I found it fascinating how the creators of the show were able to craft such an intricate web of actions that all had an effect on one another. While these singular events can be interpreted as coincidences, merely correlating with one another, the collection of all these near-chance encounters feels like fate.

#### **Piece 4: The Other Poem**

Webb’s image is also the inspiration for one of my favorite poems, written by Michelle Awad. She writes about finding pieces of

someone and a grander meaning to life when looking at the picture of the universe. “Maybe I’m foolish to see the universe so clearly / and think it has nothing to do with you,” I remember reading the poem for the first time and feeling entranced, overwhelmed, and in love with how she wrote and what she created. I loved how she boiled down the human experience. She articulated exactly how it feels to be small in a vast, boundless universe, grasping at every straw to find the true purpose of living. One specific line, “Maybe I’m hopeless. (The human urge to see patterns where there aren’t any.),” propelled me to think about how I try to find a reason, a pattern, for everything, to make it all make sense.

According to Wikipedia, pareidolia is “the tendency for perception to impose a meaningful interpretation on a nebulous stimulus, usually visual, so that one sees an object, pattern, or meaning where there is none.” It’s the way I find faces in everything I see, cars, lamps, my dinner plate, that one stain on the back of my favorite white t-shirt. Maybe that’s the reason they created the movie “Cars,” which I have never been the biggest fan of. I can see the faces too, but it’s something about the way the animators saw some cars and crafted a whole story, a whole universe, around them. I don’t hate it, but I don’t love it either. Maybe I don’t see the faces of people from my past, like Awad, when I see an image of the universe, but I am hopeless. And I am romantic, which by her definition is “the human urge to make out through the apocalypse like it’s a bad movie.” But I think for me, romantic is the human urge to make something out of nothing. Because seeing something for what it is, without relating it to some part of myself, is just impossible. I have the urge to find pieces of myself in everything I see so that I can be a part of everything that exists.

## Piece 5: The Movie



*John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale in Serendipity (2001)*

My Mom loves the movie “Serendipity,” the 2001 film starring John Cusack as Jonathan and Kate Beckinsale as Sara. As a child, we would watch it together all the time. The film explores serendipity, both as a concept and as the name of a restaurant in New York. Serendipity, as defined by Google, is “the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.” What my Mom loved most about the film was how the characters kept missing each other, just barely. She found it anxiously exciting how they passed one another on the street, in stores, in a hotel lobby, while unintentionally looking for each other. The characters visit places that mean something to each other in the rare hopes of finding the other, and in the end, they do. The characters reunited like they were destined to be, but they were intentionally visiting locations of nostalgia. Is it really serendipity, or was it just a matter of probability?

As Awad described, there’s “the poetic urge to manifest something so vast it never ends.” People’s ability to believe in destiny, fate, kismet, karma, serendipity, and every other word that

that means this elusive concept that there's a greater power orchestrating us like puppets. We need to create a reason when events and people merely correlate with, not cause, each other.

## **Piece 6: The Diagnosis**

Maybe we find ourselves in everything because we're all a bit narcissistic. We love to see ourselves in the world. Mayo Clinic defines narcissism as "a disorder in which a person has an inflated sense of self-importance." We make up reasons for things happening to us so we feel more important. So we are more important. So the world revolves around us. So bad luck isn't just bad luck but rather a karma for something we did. So something good is happening because we wished for it at 11:11. So we meet people at the right place, at the right time, because the universe wants us to be together, like Ted and Tracy, Jonathan and Sara. Because maybe when it pertains to ourselves, we're too partial to see events in an objective light.

In another way, it's also how we relate to love songs and movies, making them "ours" in a way. We put our own meaning onto the works, so they're no longer something common or universal, but rather "our song" or "our movie." We become too familiar, too emotional that we can't help but insert ourselves and what we know. Coming back to Awad, "Maybe it is just an optical illusion, maybe everything is just an optical illusion where if I stare at it long enough, and squint, and turn my head the right way, I'll see your face." Even with an image of stars and galaxies, she can't help but see something else entirely. Maybe she's narcissistic. But aren't we all the center of our own universe?

## Piece 7: The Philosophy

In "Meditations on the First Philosophy," René Descartes argues that there should be a distinction between the mind and the body. "All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses." What you think is not always true. What you perceive is not always accurate. What's real, what's there, is what you can gather from your senses. Sometimes we are aware that we're not right. That the reason we conjured up things happening in our lives is, in fact, just something we created. But it doesn't deter us from believing in it. We believe in birthday wishes and superstitions, even though we're fully aware of probability and hard work. We believe in serendipity and karma, in the universe and greater beings, in conspiracy theories and UFOs, even though we are able to see things clearly, exactly for what they are. Maybe we are hopeless, just as Awad said, seeing patterns where there aren't any.

## Piece 8: The Data

In addition to the image, Webb's telescope also collected spectra, which are data about objects' physical and chemical properties that can help researchers identify more details about distant galaxies. We are one step closer to discovering the full picture if we can piece it all together. Correlation does not equal causation, but sometimes we need to take a gamble, a hypothesis, as a scientist would call it, and tell a story. Because the data wouldn't make sense without a narrative. Numbers are numbers. What good do they do without a reason, an explanation, for their occurrence?

There's also the fact that the universe is expanding while we're trying to make sense of it. Wikipedia explains that "the universe does not expand 'into' anything and does not require space to exist 'outside' it." Webb's image captures the universe a few 100 million



years after the Big Bang, but The Big Bang was 13.8 billion years ago. The universe is ever-changing, so who knows what it looks like now? We're constantly playing catch-up . Writing and rewriting the question. Like Awad said, "Maybe I'm doomed." Maybe humans are doomed and hopeless and too romantic for our own good. Maybe we should take the number 42 and run with it. Maybe we should watch "Cars" and root for Lightning McQueen. Maybe we should watch movies about correlation and causation and serendipity and fate and dream of finding the same. Maybe in the process of trying to find a pattern in our tendency to find patterns, I'll discover there are none.

Maybe we'll never find out the full extent of the universe, this "whole" that we want to piece together, because the universe is ever-expanding. But so are we.