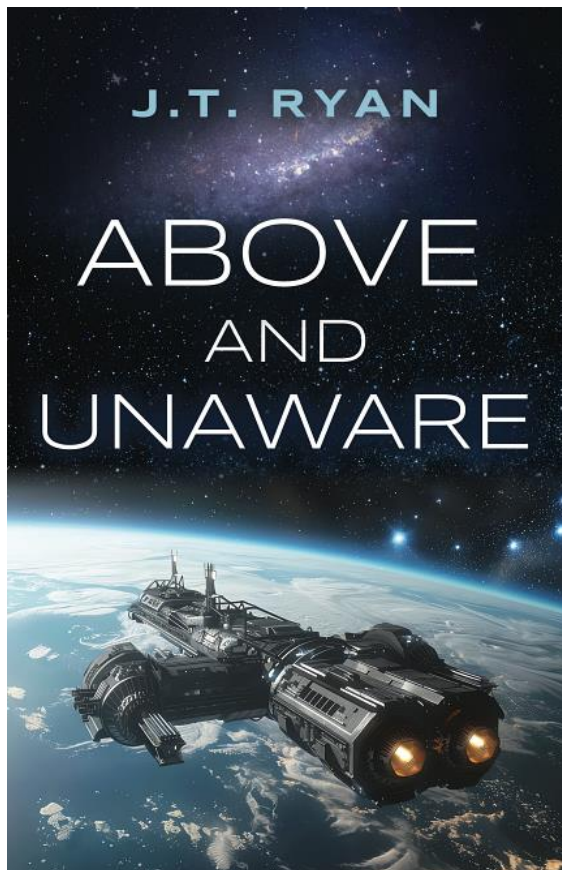




Story topics include: galaxies & astronomy, worm holes & portals, medical & clinical history, matter & antimatter, robots & AI, battlefields & reincarnation, superstition & black magic. Common theme: the gap between known & unknown.

Above and Unaware

By J. T. Ryan

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J.T. RYAN

ABOVE AND UNAWARE



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The End of the World

Above and Unaware

Author's note: *This story is titled after Skeeter Davis's song released in 1962. Lyrics of Skeeter's song address the emotions of a romantic breakup. This speculative science fiction story however, refers to an astronomical observation that may presage the end of the world!*

Scene & Background: *Palomar Observatory, San Diego, California, in the year 2042. This speculative, fictitious tale, involves astronomers detecting a slowing of galactic expansion, with serious implications from the Big Bang theory. Dr. Nicholas Asteroides (Nick), of Cal Tech, and his associate, Dr. Angelina Cosmolini (Angie) from Cal Berkeley, are evaluating their data. They've also consulting with Dr. S.Q. Longview ('Squinty') of Mount Wilson Observatory in L.A.*

"Boy - I don't know where we're going with this Nick, but I've lost sleep the last few nights, trying to contemplate what it all means."

"Wow - you can say that again - Angie! I've been on edge ever since we've observed the evident slowing of galaxies from their expansion mode. The possible implications are a bit disturbing!"

"Well Nick, here's the way I look at it – see if you agree. Galaxies appear to be no longer moving away from one another at an accelerated rate. Either the original expansion observations were in error, or this may authenticate the Big Bang theory. Astronomers have asserted that the Big Bang theory is the cause of galactic expansion, with the expectation of eventual slowdown and reversal."

“Yes Angie, that’s the way I look at it also. Several years ago, astronomers were amazed to discover that the rate of galactic expansion was increasing, rather than decreasing. The entire phenomenon was attributed to the ancient, massive energy burst or singularity, termed: the Big Bang!”

“You know Nick, I think the science community would now be hesitant to affirm either situation.”

“Uh yeah – Angie. When you say ‘either situation,’ I presume you’re talking about expansion versus contraction?”

“Yes, that’s right, Nick! Earlier predictions were that we would find indications of a slowdown, but instead, they found movement of galaxies away from each other and speeding up! Accelerated galactic expansion is now generally accepted by the scientific community, so it will likely come as a shock to discover a sudden reduction in the rate that galaxies are moving apart. This may signal the beginning of a return for all the galaxies back to their primordial center burst of energy!”

“Wow Angie, when we look at it that way, the implications are striking! The length of time for such a transposition may stretch well beyond our lifetimes – but I have to wonder, if the observed slowing and reversal might become a quicker contraction than predicted - given the enormous mass present in the universe?”

“See Nick – the consequences are more than a bit unnerving. In keeping with Dr. Einstein’s formula for converting energy into mass, several questions arise. For example, what enabled the conversion of so much energy into mass in the first place and what would bring all this expansion to a halt? Also - how long will the contraction take and what

will the ultimate impact be on our Milky Way Galaxy, along with its many star-centered solar systems?”

“Well Angie – you haven’t made me feel any better with your comments. I suggest we drive up to see our old pal - Squinty in LA. He always adds fuel to the fire, so to speak, often over a large pizza with a pitcher of microbrew cerveza.”

After a two-hour drive, Angie and Nick arrive at Mt. Wilson in LA to confer with their longtime collaborator, Dr. Longview, nicknamed ‘Squinty.’ Like the proverbial ‘peas in a pod,’ the three astronomers soon launch into a spirited conversation loaded with astrophysical idiom and terms meaningful only to veteran viewers of the endless skies.

“Ah hah!” shouted Squinty, as he adjusted his progressive lenses to better see his two, long-term cronies of a common culture from the not-so-far away southland.

“What brings you this day to my hidden habitat from the world? Certainly, it must be more than just my culinary skills cultivated in this treasure tower of scientific indulgence?”

“As a matter of fact, that’s exactly our motivator, Mr. Longview! Who could forget your superb recipes from far out of this world?” Angie quipped.

Astronomical premises at this hallowed institution in the mountains north of LA included a well-stocked food galley and dormitory space for visiting astronomers. One could easily get comfortable amidst such serendipitous surroundings.

“Seriously though,” Nick continued, “we’d like to treat *you* this time to a pizza parlor of your choice, with of course, an appropriate beverage to wash down your pepperoni toppings and such.”

“How could I not agree with you two, long-time mischief makers from San Diego, even though I well know that you’re likely to have a more ethereal agenda?”

“You know us too well, S.Q.,” added Angie, “and of course you’re right on target with your prediction that we may have something up our sleeves other than our bony, white elbows that haven’t seen sunlight over the past few decades.”

The three cohorts showed notable similarities in appearance, aptitude, and interests. Being of a similar age, they could also relate to the relentless markers of middle age creeping up insidiously among their facial wrinkles and graying locks.

Late afternoon, signaled by a glowing sky over the City of Angels, found the three cohorts at a local establishment featuring America’s favorite food – pizza and beer.

“Okay folks,” spoke the squinty-eyed Angeleno, “I understand from your email that you’re concerned about the ramifications from your discovery of a change in galactic migration. Apart from the fact that you guys had a lot to do with this observation and then reported on the slowing of expansion, let me just say ...”

At that the two visitors from the Palomar site shifted nervously in their seats.

“... Angie and Nick - I don’t think there’s much to worry about here. For one thing, even if there *is* a slowdown and contraction, this process may

take many moons! Also - keep in mind that astronomy has frequently been subject to revised interpretations. For example, some say *dark energy* causes the spacing out of galaxies – while others say it's actually *space* that's expanding - not galaxies!"

"So, as you may discern - you buddies from the border town - I'm not yet ready to throw in the towel. We're still quite unaware of the exact play out of this picture."

"There are a lot of what-ifs that could grow out of these recent findings," *spoke the pensive Nick as he scratched his wispy whiskers*. "What if – as Angie and I discussed this morning - the huge mass of the current universe causes a rate of compression that far exceeds predictions and calculations? Wouldn't we all be up that famous creek without an oar?"

"And," interposed Angie, "what if there's no escape route from this potentially disastrous compression? Might we all have little alternative other than to bend over and kiss our respective little butts good bye!"

"No!" argued the pizza perfectionist from LA. "I have to take issue with such cynical surmising! We need to view this matter in perspective. How often has the study of the stars led to bogus assertions over the years? All too often, methinks!

Over the next few days, Squinty conferred with one or two other associates from Caltech and similar institutions of astrophysical arts, then replied to Angie and Nick at Palomar, via video phone.

"Ya' know guys, you're right about the shift toward blue wave lengths in galaxy light detection, signifying a different dynamic for the universe. As you know, red shift indicates a stretching of the light waves or a greater distancing between us and our neighboring galaxies, whereas blue shift

indicates light wave compression, or a potential movement back in our direction.

I spoke recently to a couple old star-gazers, or should I say star-geezers, that I've confided with over the years. The most consistent estimates I received, on how long it might take for galactic reversal to return back to the big bang point of origin, still had a high degree of uncertainty.

At this, the gray-haired guru from tinsel town, peered over the top of his corrective lenses, assumed a kind of Clint Eastwood squint, and shifted to a more philosophical bent.

"Many people would be tempted to live life with abandon if they expected the early demise of our big blue marble! I'm reminded of an old song by Billy Mize from Bakersfield entitled: *Don't let the blues make you bad*. I wouldn't recommend losing faith in the overall balance of things physical in the universe. There needs be a responsible source for it all, you know, since it's not likely that so much something could come from nothing! I'm pretty sure we'd also have at least some agreement from Newton, Einstein, and Hawking on this point.

The bottom line though, is that there's no practical way at this time to determine an accurate time estimate for galactic recession, since we don't even know the full extent of the universe! Fudge factors and creative constants aside, I will tell you to just observe and let events unfold with the assumption that it's very unlikely anyone we know of will still be around to greet such a reciprocal big bang. Some things, Angie and Nick, are simply beyond our ability to estimate or act upon; but it's not necessarily the end of the world."

Doggie in the Window

Above and Unaware

Author's note: *This story is titled after Patti Page's song, released in 1953. "How Much is that Doggie in the Window," sold over 2 million copies and was one of Patti Page's biggest hits. Lyrics of the song tell of a person wanting to buy a dog from a pet store to keep company for her close friend while she's away on a trip to California. The song was intended to appeal to children but was also purchased by many adults in the USA and UK.*

The fictitious story that follows is a satirical or humorous speculation on how dogs have grown in popularity and monetary expense, especially in the USA. Readers may want to develop their own theories as to why this phenomenon has developed and implications for the future along this trend!

Scene: *The scene is a courtroom in California in the year 2042. The lawyer is presenting his case before the judge on behalf of his canine client. The dog, as a plaintiff, is suing his owner, through his lawyer, for breach of contract and failure to provide sufficient care and treatment.*

The lawyer replies, "Yes, your honor, that is my client sitting in the first row. For the record his name is Fido. He's the goldendoodle currently occupying the dog bed positioned on a seat in the front row. My name is Doug Helper, representing the law firm of Scratch, Sniff, and Nibble, from Beverly Hills."

“Well counselor, as I understand your complaint, your client is seeking restitution from his owner for insufficient care and treatment in accordance with the CRA (*Canine Rights Act*), of 2039.”

“Yes, your honor,” *Judge Poochlieber presiding*, “that is correct. Our purpose here is to demonstrate that Fido’s owner, a Mr. Katzman (Mr. K), of Los Angeles, failed to provide adequate services and provisions for my client, as required by the CRA law, that you cited.”

“You may proceed counselor to present your case, and Mr. Katzman’s defense will follow in rebuttal to your argument.”

“Yes - thank you - your honor. I’d like to proceed by calling to the stand - Dr. DeFlea (Dr. D.), veterinarian, from West L. A.”

The veterinarian is sworn in with the usual parlance of telling the truth and nothing but the truth, etc. Plaintiff’s attorney further identifies for the court, Dr. DeFlea’s credentials and qualifications while he’s positioning on the stand.

“Dr. D., are you familiar with the goldendoodle, named Fido, sitting at the front of the courtroom audience?”

“Yes, Mr. Helper, I’ve seen him on many occasions over the past few years.”

“So, tell us, Dr. D. - what’s your impression of the plaintiff and his state of health and treatment.”

“Certainly, Mr. Helper. I was called upon to provide initial immunizations when he was just a few months old and have continued to see him at random intervals over the following years. I will tell you right up front that I soon noticed certain symptoms that I advised Mr. Katzman about, but with very little responsiveness from said owner.”

“Dr. DeFlea, would you please tell the court exactly what you observed and the recommendations you made?”

“Yes Mr. Helper, I’m happy to share with the court my professional evaluation of your client, Fido, and the lack of response I got from Katzman. First, I indicated to canine plaintiff’s owner that Fido did not appear to be getting a proper balance of nourishment. Blood tests showed a deficiency of vitamins recommended for this breed. I also observed deficient dental treatment and psychological issues.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to add, Dr. D.?”

“Yes, counselor. Plaintiff canine showed certain indications of personality disintegration, perhaps due to insufficient outdoor activities. As you may know, we now recognize the importance of early puppyhood socialization for the stabilization of self-image of canines. Many persons are still unaware that dogs require a broad exposure to climate, location, and other members of their species, in order to fulfill their natural need to relate to ancestral wolf-pack intuitions.”

“Thank you, Dr. DeFlea. That’s all – you may step down.”

“Okay counselor - do you wish to call any more witnesses or testimony?”

“Yes, your honor, I would like to call the defendant – Mr. Katzman.”

“Mr. Katzman – would you be agreeable to taking the stand?”

“Yes, your honor, I have no problem in taking the stand.”

Defendant is also sworn in with the usual terminology and he agrees to tell the truth, etc.

“Mr. Katzman, are you aware of the charges being brought against you on behalf of your goldendoodle named Fido, who’s now sitting in the front row of the audience?”

Yes, I am, Mr. Helper, but let me say up front, I don’t agree with any of the allegations, and I intend to file a counter suit for payment of legal expenses and other inconveniences you’ve caused me.”

“Let me remind you, Mr. Katzman of the provisions of the CRA of 2040.”

“No need to remind me, Mr. Helper, I’m well aware of this Act.”

“Well then, Mr. K., how can you dispute the claims made known to us through the professional care giver for plaintiff, Fido?”

“Simply because none of it is true nor verifiable, Mr. Helper. We still don’t have a valid window into the cognitive processes of canines. In spite of the CRA, there is much to be learned in terms of how dogs view their accommodations and treatment. I for one, do not accept the premise that dogs share human values. The allegations in this case are, in my opinion, pure nonsense.”

“Okay, Mr. K, you’ve made your views known, but we will demonstrate to the court that your judgement is erroneous, and that you’ve failed to acknowledge scientific findings verified over the past decade or so.

That’s all I have to say to the defendant, your honor.”

“You may step down, Mr. Katzman, and we will take a brief recess.”

After a recess, the court is called back to order to proceed with the case.

“Okay, we’ve heard from the defendant, Mr. Katzman, plaintiff’s attorney, Mr. Helper, and testimony from plaintiff’s veterinarian, Dr. DeFlea. Is there anyone else anyone wants to call to the stand?”

Both the attorney for the plaintiff, Mr. Helper, and Mr. Katzman decline further witnesses.

“Fine, replies the judge. Court is adjourned until tomorrow at 10 AM when we will reconvene and I will render my verdict.”

All participants leave the court room per judge’s orders until the following day. The next day:

“All rise,” announced the bailiff, “Judge Poochlieber has arrived.”

“I’ve reviewed the facts and circumstances in this case. It’s been shown to the court, by his counselor Mr. Helper, that plaintiff Fido has been harmed by a pattern of insufficient care and treatment for said plaintiff. Defendant, Mr. Katzman, takes issue with Canine Rights Act of 2039, in defense of the allegations made by the plaintiff.

After careful and thorough consideration of the arguments brought before me, I find in favor of the plaintiff, canine Fido and his counselor, Mr. Helper. Evidence shows a pattern of neglect and disregard in violation of CRA, which calls for proper sentencing. I also have authorization to dispense the appropriate sentencing. Defendant and plaintiff’s attorney please stand.

I hereby sentence you, Mr. Katzman to 30 days in the State Pen. You will serve your time in one of the state-appointed dog facilities. Your meals shall consist of vitamin enriched kennel rations and milk bones. In addition, I sentence you to 30 days of community service. Said service shall consist of chores to include: cleaning fire hydrants, working in dog rescue kennels under supervision of a veterinarian, and assisting local humane societies in the capture and spaying of feral cats.

Court is hereby adjourned.”

Back to Old Smoky Mountains

Above and Unaware

Author's note: *Titled after Chet Atkins' guitar tune about the famous mountains in Tennessee, this song reveals Chet's fondness for the Smokies and especially his home town - Luttrell, TN. Chet was arguably the best guitar picker of his time, and also an accomplished music promoter in Nashville.*

The title and theme of this story imply a tendency to recall the best of the past and conveniently forget any troubles or annoyances. In this imaginative story, we view the dialog between a recent arrival to the afterlife, Jack Backtrack, and his newfound acquaintance, Julie Newview.

"Well Julie, I have to say, there are some things I miss from my days on the good ol' blue planet."

"Really, Jack? How can that be? I mean, for Pete's sake, how could you miss all the aches and pains, sorrow and disappointment, frustration and agony?"

"Ah – you see Julie – that's where we see things differently. Back there, meaning when I was as a human on planet Earth, there were daily adventures, not knowing what would be coming next. Wouldn't you have to say it was stimulating to live in such a challenging milieu?"

"Not at all, Jack. You seem to be overlooking all the scrapes and falls, failures and misgivings, hurts and heartaches."

“I’m not even sure what you mean by heartaches – Julie? In my recall, there was this wondrous sense of meeting each new day with renewed possibilities and the challenge of making it all worthwhile.”

“Well Jack - all I can say is - you seem to forget how during your sojourn on the third planet, you never knew where you came from, why you were there, and perhaps most important – what your future would be like afterward! How can you have nostalgia for such a dysfunctional existence?”

“But - that’s exactly what I’m talking about! Don’t you see Julie - souls on earth live in this perpetual sense of wonderment and curiosity? It’s the ever-present mystery of each day that creates opportunities to do something special and amazing – like working in unsculptured clay!”

“Well Jack - what can I say? You obviously don’t see the incredible advantage that comes with your new state of being – as an elevated human soul and spirit. You’ve finally made it to a state of existence where you’re no longer in near total ignorance, yet you long for the practically blind life you had before! It’s like you’d prefer to stumble along without a clue, rather than appreciate your new status.”

“Uh huh – and so says you, my new friend Julie. However - you forget what it was like being a free spirit in a human body on that lovely sphere called Earth. Sure - we didn’t know where we came from, nor what we were doing there, but that was the beauty of it! Each new day was an adventure - of surprise and delight!”

“The way you describe life on earth Jack – it sounds like a Vegas slot machine or a gold miner. Sure – you might win the jackpot or strike gold panning in a river- but what’s the likelihood of such a favorable outcome? Panning for gold, for example, put miners within easy reach

of rattlesnakes, poor nutrition, disease, accidents, etc. Do you know what percentage of miners ever found any significant amount of the infamous yellow stone? Many ended up selling shovels or running bars in town in order to harvest a small measure of gold dust from the few who did have a lucky strike. The rest just faded away.”

“Actually Julie, I came along well after the California gold rush, like a hundred years or so. In these later days, it was much easier to earn a few bucks and invest your profits in such a way to enjoy the fruits of your labor.”

“Oh – okay Jack, I see what you’re saying - regarding the relationship of the time period you lived in versus opportunities available in those circumstances. I myself came from an earlier era – nineteenth century America – complete with the Civil War, a scarcity of decent medical treatment, and food of dubious quality.”

“Yeah Julie – you guys really *did* have it tough compared to us twentieth century dudes! But of course, we had challenges too: World War II, the depression, the dust bowl, civil rights, labor-management disputes, conflicting interpretations of the Constitution, etc. For the most part though, I avoided such strife. I was more into fishing, hunting, and watching baseball games with beer and burgers.”

“Well – that explains a few things, Jack. I have a pretty good idea what you’re talking about though since we had folks with a similar outlook in the 1800’s. Mark Twain, of literary fame for example, skippered a river boat, and then took off for the silver mines of Nevada and gold in California. He left the Yanks and Rebs to fight it out themselves in the East.”

“Ya know what else, Jack? I think had you lived in the 1800’s, you would’ve been a Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett type guy. What I mean is - you’d be off fighting Indians or on some such adventure. So – I think what we’re really talking about here are personality differences. Anyone who prefers the kind of unscripted excitement you favor might have no need to answer basic questions such as – what’s the meaning of life or the destiny of human beings beyond this life?”

“Um – okay. If you put it that way, I suppose I’d have to plead guilty, Julie. It’s probably true that I never questioned very deeply the rhyme or reason of my purpose in this world. Instead, I just went along with my life from day to day.”

“And Jack – don’t think you’re the ‘lone ranger.’ As it turns out, most folks take for granted their appointed stay on planet Earth. Like you, they just focus on where their next burger and beer are coming from! You might say there’s even a concerted effort to dodge the big questions and instead get back to ‘changing the oil and mowing the lawn.’ I can see the advantage of that too – after all, the big questions of life present a conundrum for humans. Without the likelihood of finding an acceptable answer, it’s easier to presume that the correct answer is unknowable. Therefore – what the hell – why even bother? Right?”

“Yes Julie - dumb as that sounds – but it might be the only workable alternative! For example, how could I, in my meager lifetime, trace my existence, were there any such thing, before I was born? Other than various bizarre theological models, how could I figure out what the afterlife might be like? Maybe the smartest thing to do on such questions - is nothing! It saves a lot of time and turmoil.”

“The only problem with that approach Jack, is that it disregards the tendency of humans to seek out explanations for things – especially

pertaining to the purpose of our life on Earth. Many of us are ‘hard-wired’ to search for solutions to the big mysteries of life - once we become aware of them.”

“It sounds a bit like you’re impugning my intelligence, Julie, since you’re saying that some folks try to solve such mysteries, implying that the other lazy and dumb guys pay them no mind.”

“Oh no - I’m not saying that. I’m only saying there’s a diversity of personality types. Some persons are more inclined to think about or discuss philosophical and metaphysical issues. It’s like how one person might prefer to read a book, while another to take a hike in the woods. Both activities are beneficial and meaningful, but they reflect different aptitudes or interests.”

“Okay Julie - of course you’ve been in this exalted state of being – heaven if you will – longer than I have, so I understand how you’ve adapted to drastic changes in your way of thinking.

I suppose it might be likened to a person who grew up on a farm, but later moved to the big city for employment opportunities. From time to time, the former farmer is apt to nostalgically recall his earlier, seemingly carefree days - fishing in a creek, hunting squirrels, harvesting apples, etc.”

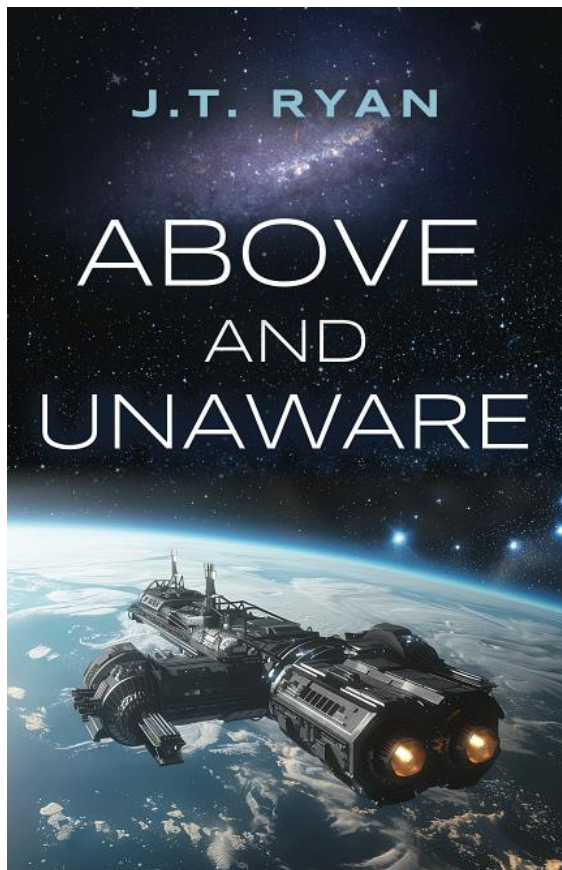
“Yes - Jack, I think that is a good comparison. For example, I grew up in rural Virginia, but moved to D.C. as a young adult and often harbored dreams of someday going back to the friendly hill country close to my old home. Back home in the country, there was a relaxed acceptance of other folks. You could let down your defenses and concerns about what others might think of you. In the big town though, I always felt like I had to be on guard from competition, even to the extent that I could never

completely relax. Perhaps that's why alcohol consumption is so high in cities like Washington D.C.?"

"Uh huh Julie, it sounds to me like we're now on the same page. From what you've said – it may well be that a newbie arrival here is apt to recall with fondness his or her earlier, superficially happy years. In the process of longing for the 'good ol' days,' they conveniently erase from memory, the pitfalls, scrapes, and suffering that was part of their life on Earth. Some folks might refer to this as looking at life in hindsight, or 'through rose-colored glasses.'

Humans really don't like change, huh Julie, even though we might imagine otherwise? Change can be uncomfortable, upending, and potentially threatening. Even great adventurers like Columbus probably spent many nights in his creaky old sail boat wondering how watertight the wooden joints were, whether his crew might stage a violent mutiny, or if there really were a landfall worth striving for? All these qualms might occur after months of rancid rations, limited drinking water, rough weather, and agonizing labor."

"You know Jack, I had partly forgotten, perhaps mercifully, the painful lessons of life on Earth. But that's what it's all about, huh? You might say life is like a test or a proving ground, to see if you have 'the right stuff' to move up to the next level."



Story topics include: galaxies & astronomy, worm holes & portals, medical & clinical history, matter & antimatter, robots & AI, battlefields & reincarnation, superstition & black magic. Common theme: the gap between known & unknown.

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