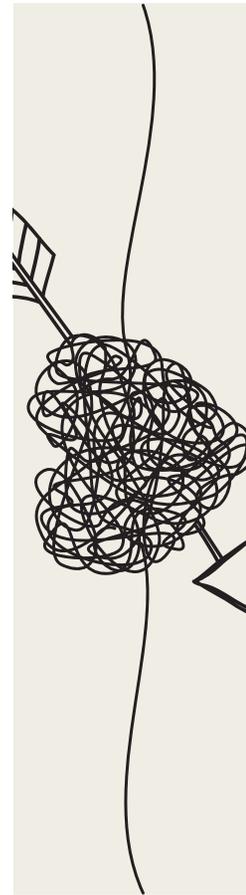
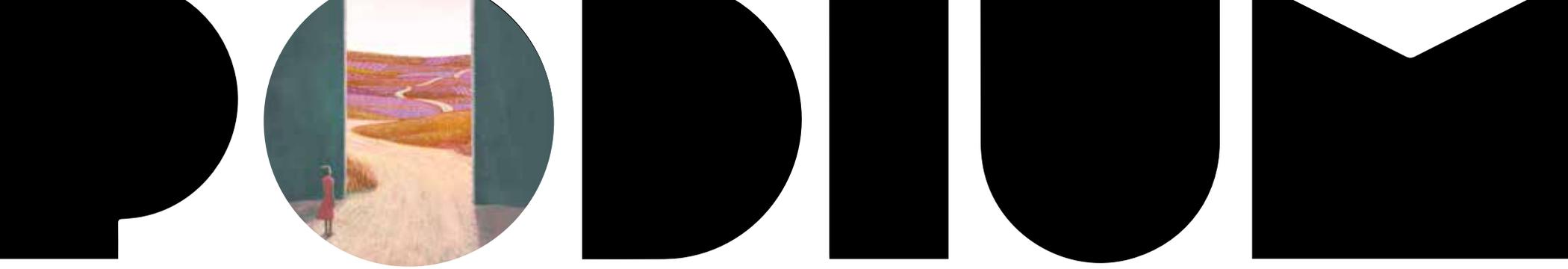




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the
CHANGE ISSUE



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CHANGE



by RaJAHNÉ HARRIS

My biggest fear.
I pray everyday before work that the roads will be clear,
so I don't have to take a new route.
I think about all possibilities, so I can be prepared for any curve balls
because if I'm not prepared,
I am a ticking time bomb.
Fearing change is having your partner's number on speed dial
in case you need help calming down.
It's fearing someone teaching a new way to do my job
because it will mess up a system.
I'm comfy in routine,
sometimes bored,
but grateful.
I once heard a song that started off with "Change is inevitable,"
and that's a terrifying phrase.
Yeah, growing is nice, but why grow
when I can stay in my comfy flowerpot with the same
amount of sun and water as before?
I can count on it.
I can stop worrying about the possibility of not having.
Change, the scariest word I have ever heard. ●

An abstract painting featuring several faces in profile, rendered in a variety of colors including deep blues, purples, reds, and greens. The faces are layered and overlapping, creating a sense of depth and complexity. The style is expressive and somewhat somber.

FRIENDSHIP, DEGREES OF SEPARATION, AND A QUESTION

by **TRISTAN WYNN**

Imagine you are walking on a tight-rope a few hundred feet above the ground, teetering on a rope thinner than your big toe. How many of you could do it without a safety net beneath you? I know I couldn't, especially since I'm terrified of heights. A safety net is important, not only in real life but also socially and emotionally, and the importance of one's support network cannot be overstated enough. Humans have evolved as a social species, and as such, benefit extremely from having a close-knit group of others like themselves to both confide in and enjoy their time. Everyone needs at least one person to support them, be they blood relatives, a family built of close friends, or just that one special person they can always run to when life just becomes too much. It doesn't matter, as long as that person does the job for them and gets the same service in return. Friendship evolved for cooperation not just for hunting and gathering but to also help individuals cope with the rising strain our rapidly increasing brain sizes created.

Recently, I've been having a hard time mentally, a combination of annual depression and my job turning into a 10-hour shift has left me in a very interesting mental space. I have to go to bed at 7 p.m. each night so I can wake up at 1 a.m. This leaves me very isolated during the work week, as most of my friends are awake most of the night, go to sleep in the morning, and then wake up around 4 or 5 p.m.. I don't have as much time to spend with them compared to before the shift change, and this has seriously affected my mental state and motivation.

Something amazing has begun to happen, however. All of my friends have expressed missing me too, and in an effort to spend time with me, they've decided to spend the night in our Discord server's voice chat until I wake up for work. Imagine my surprise when I woke up to a bunch of messages on the server telling me to wake up, and then seeing them all in a voice channel talking. Admittedly ▶▶

at first, I was a bit sad to be left out due to my sleep schedule, but then, it made me happy to know they all get along without me being around. I have a poor track record merging friends together, so waking up to see my group of idiots waiting for me made me happier than anything I've ever experienced first thing in the morning. Without them, I don't know where I'd be right now. Sometimes, I go back in my mind and think about how I met each of them and how simply the server itself started.

As with most stories of change, this begins in my senior year of high school. I'd meet the first two of my best friends, Fefnir and Miles, during this year.

Fefnir and I had economics together, and we bonded over our mutual hatred of it and love of Pokémon. Eventually, he dropped out, but we kept in touch. As for Miles, remember how I said humans evolved to be social creatures? That comes into play here. Due to previous decisions I made involving school, I had no

close friends in my school anymore, and due to a breakup that followed, I was in a depressed mental state. To find my sense of purpose, I decided to finish a Pokédex for the most recently released Pokémon games. One issue though, with no friends, I had nobody to trade with to finish it. As with anyone who has a problem in the 21st century, I turned to the internet and joined a national dex completion group on a random chat app. Only one person responded, Miles, and naturally we became friends. After finishing our dexes, we moved onto shiny hunting and playing other games. At the time, I knew several other people who wanted to start a Discord Server for Pokémon, so Miles and I created what



would eventually become known as "Sadchamp" and added Fefnir to it. Over time, Fefnir brought his girlfriend Muffin to the server, and we became an amazing squad. We all share similar backgrounds, and as such, are in unique positions to help and support each other when our lives decide to try us.

After founding Sadchamp, we added friends periodically. Some would stick around with the main group, Mei being one of them. He's a really dumb guy, but he's got a big heart and is a bit too innocent for his own good sometimes. Together, the five of us formed a micro group, Team Asumo (the name being a reference to a fan game I have in development). Around this time, I started playing Dungeons and Dragons with a few old friends on their server. Here, I also met many new friends and dragged them into Sadchamp to join us in our degeneracy. Tye Dye, Darman, Zavala, Detective, Alynor, and my current partner Zyl Dorf all arrived from this server and the people I met in it.

Why did I tell that long drawn out story? Simply put, explaining how my little online family came about hopefully gets you thinking about your friend and family groups, and how they came to be. Ask yourself the question, "How did I meet everyone I know and love?" Then, write it out. Trust me, it'll make for an interesting web of people. There's a name for that web: the seven degrees of separation. It only takes, at max, seven people to connect you to anyone else in the world. For example, I know Darman because of an old friend who knew Zavala, who knew Darman. Ask the people you know who they know, and ask those people who they know. You'll be surprised. ●

HEAVEN'S

by TRACY FLEMING

Life, death, good, evil; everything falls upon a cycle, eternally spinning and spiraling to evoke change across the vast cosmos. No matter how hard you, or anyone, can run from it, such a symbol will always be with you. It is embedded into your very being, your body, soul, your very flesh and blood. You cannot run or hide, for the shape in itself is what you would call omnipresent.

You've seen it before, right? What am I saying, of course you have. A spiral, a twist, a spin; it's what you people refer to as a vortex, or a helix. More scientifically savvy creatures would refer to this phenomena as the "Fibonacci Sequence." It is the very essence of both creation and destruction. For example, you build your material things with screws, and you can find it in every living being via your DNA; there it lies in creation. On the other hand, you have your tornadoes, hurricanes, and cyclones, with drills and buzz saws cutting and severing anything they touch; destruction. Like I said, it is an omnipresent symbol, one that is the idea of life and death. Look no further than what you humans call the Yin and Yang, along with other ancient symbols. Yes, even the dreaded swastika is a vortex. As I said before, **you can't escape it.**

Much like being within a vortex yourself, you will be sucked in with no hope of escape. This is why such a symbol is commonly associated with one being in a trance. Your galaxies, solar systems, and even atoms. They say that God created us in his image. Well, after everything I've told you, it would seem that this symbol is the very symbol of God. Something my people like to call **Heaven's Helix.** ●



by KAVIN JACKSON

I am sorry this story will never be told to the person it was meant for, I am sorry that it took me so long to write it, and I am sorry this story starts off with me apologizing so much in the beginning of it.

I feel like you always knew that I would tell stories. You'd watch me play in the backyard of that green house. Let my imagination run wild as you'd smile.

That was a happy memory.

I heard a sound that whispered gently passed my ears, and I turned around thinking it was you. I went up to the top of the cliff we used to go to and sat on the edge. The sun was a few hours from setting. We used to just sit here and watch the sheriff fish with his son, the father and son who ran a junkyard and their adventures. Together, we watched an endless amount of characters as they passed by.

I remember the gramophone that you played music on, and the gospel hymns, the old school jazz, and the rock that would ring through my head and make me smile. Some of the stories you used to tell though those frames have faded from my memory.

I remember when you heard my first treble clef, and when you saw my first masterpiece on display. I remember how it felt to hug you. I remember...you. As the sun sets on the horizon of the cliff, we used to wonder.

I am sorry that this story will never be told to the person it was meant for. I am sorry that it took me so long to write it, and I am sorry that I couldn't make you proud of me. My love for you never wavered when you left; it only grows because of it. *I love you, Nana.* ●

A STORY I'LL NEVER GET TO TELL



by DAERON BACON

GOLDEN WOUNDS BOUND BY PURPLE BLOOD

Sometimes I look back and wonder if it was all worth it. It's hard not to nowadays. Sometimes great things come at a great cost, and the worst of accidents bears the most fruitful knowledge. But now, it's becoming increasingly difficult to fathom whether this knowledge was a blessing or a curse from God himself. All of the deaths; all of the fighting. As a man of science, I was always fascinated by the supernatural. Ever since that day.

The day I hurt someone, someone very dear to me. Ever since then, I've been trying to recreate that accident, as is the duty and honor of science to replicate the experiment and obtain the same result. Life is useless, even detrimental, when suffering is abundant. The ancients referred to the process of eternally living through immense suffering as "hell." Years ago, I would have scorned the concept of hell even existing in the same way I rejected the notion of a god. But now, after everything, after I have proven the existence of incorporeal soul matter, an afterlife indeed must exist.

Where do lost souls go? What lies beyond the threshold of death? I didn't know, and so, I aimed to prove that death simply didn't exist in order to escape my fear of it. That death was a fabrication, nothing more than an archaic view of morality based on primitive human assumptions. This universe is critically misunderstood. Seldom is anything created, nor destroyed. Matter changes form constantly but never ceases to exist or come into existence on its own. We were not created either. We merely changed forms, as all matter does.

Once, I found the secret of immortality. I looked far beyond, and I found out where we came from. With this knowledge, I could abolish the concept of death and morality from mankind itself. That would be my legacy, the joy of creation. I never considered

my victims "dead," merely set free from a cruel and miserable reality. I did not anticipate or desire my own family to become part of my experiments; however, the end result of their fates was fascinating and an eventuality I had not considered.

It was all very fascinating. Witnessing a human possess a puppet and manage the ability to guide souls from the other realm into a new body, thus giving them life. Managing the ability to repossess my own corpse out of desperation and experiment on myself freely without dying, I could feel myself becoming closer and closer to realizing my legacy. Others saw my work as heinous, and they tried to stop me. Even my own son tried to end what I had started. *Why can't*

they understand what I'm doing? Why would you not support and join me, Michael?

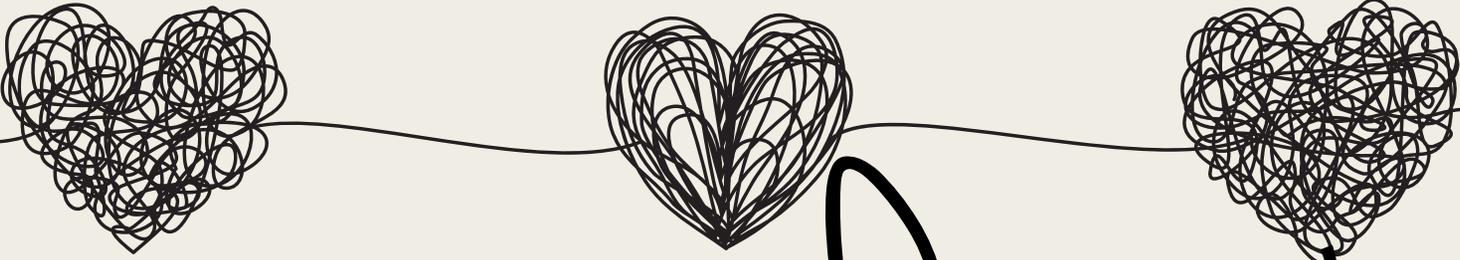
It does not matter now. They have stood their

ground, and I have stood mine. I've come too far to give up now and will not be deterred. Once I gather enough souls, I can produce the machine I had hoped to build from day one to bring me and my family back to humanity. A machine that can successfully take people from one realm to another and back again.

Soon, I aim to no longer be in this realm. Life as we know it will change, and you will have me to thank for that. I will make the impossible possible. None of you can even understand what is happening right now. You must know that summoning me will only cause problems for you, Michael. I can sense that he has sent you here. Don't even bother answering. I already know this is all just one big lie, just a cover up that will end in you trying to kill me again. *So, this is how you want it to all end, huh? Well, I welcome you to try, but you must know I won't go down without a fight. It's pointless of you to even try at this point. After all, I always come back.* ●

- William Vincent Afton (Salvaged Deadline)

Where do lost souls go? What lies beyond the threshold of death?



Love application

Name: Damon Scott

Age: 21

Location: Rich Somewhere across the East Coast

Likes: Late night, Video games, Anything creative

Dislikes: Being alone, The cold, Loud noises, 3 a.m. thoughts

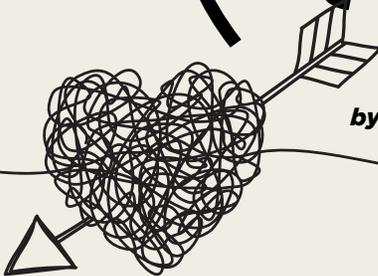
Love Language: Quality time & Physical touch

Bio:

I'm not sure how to start this, so I guess I'll just jump in. I'm looking for love, if that wasn't obvious enough. Well, I'm new to all this, like dating and such, but I'm looking for someone special. By that I mean someone I can talk to and go on and on about any random nonsense that popped into my brain. Someone who watches me light up when I talk about my interests.

I want to get to know who you are and learn all the things about you. I want to know your coffee order, so I can make it for you in the mornings. What are all of your favorite foods? Do you like chocolate or vanilla more, or maybe you're a strawberry kind of person? I want to sit under a tree while the leaves rustle in the breeze with you right next to me, as we watch the sunset in summer. I want all the inside jokes and pranks and the laughter to fill our place like I see my friends do with their loves. I see them dance like it's just the two of them, and I want that too.

The thing is, we always look at the good parts of love but never the bad side of being in a relationship. You know, like the heartaches and growing pains as two people try to understand each other. The time it takes to get comfortable with each other, and even the days where it seems you fall out of love or when you just can't stand to be around that person. But the truth is, I want that too. I want the days when you wake up mad at me because I forgot to do something the night before. I want to have screaming matches over the dumbest things, where we have to walk away because of how annoyed we are at each other. I want to yell at you about something I know I'm right about, even if I'm wrong, but I'm going to keep arguing because I'm a Scorpio, and I hate being wrong, even though I often am. Or, just the days you can't stand being around me, when you want your space from everything.



by KAVIN JACKSON

I want you to come home mad from work and not want to put up with my bullshit, just so I can kiss your forehead and tell you everything is going to be better now. I want you to know when I'm upset and to just cuddle me to help me feel better without having to say a word. I just want all the good and all the bad that come with being with someone.

I want to see you follow your dream, so I can cheer you on. I want to be your support, so you don't have to worry about falling because I'll catch you and make sure you'll be alright. I don't want you to worry about the little thing, so you can focus on your end goal. And when you're ready, maybe we could have kids like my friends. All my friends are married with kids, with houses and pets, and living in the suburbs with real jobs. Maybe that lifestyle isn't so bad. That's what everyone says I should want.

My family keeps asking if I have found someone and when am I going to have kids. I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead, and I don't think I can. I've tried to, but nothing seems right. Everyone tells me about how my life should be and to think ahead, but I didn't think I'd make it this far, so what now? Should I keep trying to find someone, or just wait for it like every love song says? My cousin thinks I can just go and pick up girls like it's nothing, but I don't want that. I can't just sleep my problems away. If I find someone, I want a real connection to them and not just some fleeting moment. I get attached and feel hurt when things end. Should I just try to be what they want from me, or do what my friends are doing? They seem happy, so why can't I? I don't even know why I'm filling out this application.

I Just...Maybe...Maybe not.

Delete Application. ●



LIFE, LIBERTY,
AND THE PURSUIT OF

PASSIONS

by TRISTAN WYNN

No matter how pointless it may seem like trying has become, you can't give up. No matter how little anyone stands up to support you, or how pointless they tell you it is to try, keep going...

A few weeks ago, my grandmother asked me what my goals in life were, so I told her the following, "In no particular order: Earn my degree in zoology, spread the love of animals as far as I can through education and proper care, help in the conservation efforts of endangered species who don't get the attention they deserve, and to finish making a game of some kind." I shared my passions and primary life goals, those I will reach no matter what gets in my way.

For her response, she shared, "Humans are roadblocks to the good things people like you want to accomplish. Greed, selfishness, and plain lack of love exist, and no human can change that. Now, if you can change humans, the problem is solved! Since that is impossible to do, either a higher power is needed, or you can continue to catch the wind; one of which is futile." This is the sentiment I grew up hearing day in and day out: if you try to do it without God, you will fail.

Regardless of if you believe in God or not, listen to my next words very carefully and take them to heart. You can accomplish anything you set your mind to given enough ambition and research. No matter what, do not give up on your passions just because someone decides it is pointless or if you've been told all your life that you can't or shouldn't. This is something I had to learn for myself, and now, I am here to pass that wisdom on to you. Find your passion. You could be 10 years old and really like race cars or 75 and really into scrapbooking. It doesn't matter what it is, just pursue it and take it as far as you can. Make your mark on this world, no matter how large or small it may be in the end.

Whenever I tell people about my goals, they always say, "Oh, so you want to be the next Steve Irwin, huh?" There is some truth to that, but it is not the whole story. I don't just want to be the next Steve Irwin; I want to MAKE the next Steve Irwin. I want to be that level of inspiration for the next generation just like he was for me as a child. Don't just seek to be the best you can be at a hobby, job, profession, or goal. Inspire others to follow in your footsteps. If you

want to do something, don't just take from it. Give back and bring new people into the field. No matter what your passion is, there is someone you've met, watched, or heard about that inspired you to start, and probably continues to inspire you to this day. Become that person for someone else in the future.

Inspiring the next generation keeps our passions alive while also giving them a source of reference to learn from. As I started to grow more into my reptile keeping and study, my uncle Shug has been an amazing inspiration for me; someone who has helped me with many of my animal questions as well as with acquiring new supplies and a few animals. He has a saying, "Pay it forward and spread the love." I try to live by that saying no matter what.

With all passions, things go through highs and lows, and remember that those changes are okay. Sometime around July of last year, I hit a rock bottom period, both in life and in my passions. I had no drive to pick myself up and work on them, and due to a life situation, I was forcibly pulled away from them. Now, I'm as into them and driven as ever. Just ask any of my friends. I never shut up about the stories I'm writing, the games I'm working on, my animals, or Zoology. It's okay if you lose the drive for your passions for a while because it will come back eventually. Give it time and don't panic.

I began this article with a reflection about my grandmother trying to tell me I would not accomplish my goals because of the obstacles in my path. Will it be an easy path? No, it won't be. She has a point that people are obstacles in my path, but her flaw was that she instantly jumped to my goals being futile. That's a problem I see my generation encounter a lot with older generations. Regardless of religion, there is this sentiment of "Don't waste your time on something I don't think you can do." Well, I think I can do it, so I'm going to. We are all going to. My friends have dubbed me the "Lizard King" and that's just who I'm going to become. Just as you, my readers, will become the kings, queens, or rulers of your respective passions. ●

"What is my purpose?"

ask myself as I sink into my boyfriend's carpeted floors. It feels like my life has started to completely unravel. My mom is in the hospital, my job is stressing me out, and I am moving away from home. There is so much piling up on me, and I cannot carry it all anymore. I feel like a robot, just working myself to the bone for everyone else, and I have nothing to show for it. On top of everything, my car breaks down. My old, beat up '96 Honda Accord (aka: Sallie) gives up on me in the middle of the road while pouring down rain. Is the universe just trying to break the last shred of humanity I have left? I start to cry in my car in the middle of the night, and then, it all just hit me like a ton of bricks.

Everything is falling to pieces, and I feel like I have nothing left, but now is also the perfect time to build something I am proud of. I'm 19-years-old with a full-time job, who recently bought a car, and is moving out. Most importantly, my life is starting. Every time I think I have life figured out, there will most definitely be a curveball. It will be consuming, but I am learning that my purpose doesn't have to please everyone. I can be whatever I want to be and be my own biggest cheerleader at the same time. No matter what this journey leads to, I know that I can catch any curveball heading my way. ●

by RaJAHNÉ HARRIS

