Reader's Digest

JUNE/JULY 2026

America the Tasty

Breakfast Faves from Every State

Hanging by a Limb
A DRAMA IN REAL LIFE

The Truth About Health Trackers
By BETH WEINHOUSE

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RYAN JOHNSON

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DEAR READER

The Breakfast Club

DINERS HAVE ALWAYS felt like home to me. When I was growing up in New Jersey, my family's regular spot was the Reo Diner in Woodbridge (currently celebrating 98 years in business). The Reo was the one place where my parents, my sister and I could all order something different—which, before the age of food courts and Grubhub, felt truly radical. (Chicken parm, pancakes and matzo ball soup all served together?!)

As I got older, I continued to spend countless hours at diners, meeting up with friends and drinking way too many free coffee refills alongside my standard order: two eggs, sausage, toast and fries.

The magic of shared meals at diners was the inspiration for the cover of our "America the Tasty" issue. This year, starting on page 42, writers Emily Goodman and Emily Tyra salute the breakfast foods that define our 50 states. We're serving up culinary inspiration, from huckleberry pancakes to Spam musubi to beignets, often with a fun fact or two on the side.

A celebration of the USA is woven through the rest of the issue as well. To mark our country's 250th anniversary on July Fourth, we asked readers to share moments they've felt most American (page 64)—and the variety of experiences within the 300-plus personal stories we received illustrates the best of what our country is and can be.

We're also honoring Father's Day—from the Dad Games, a field-day-style event creating community in Maryland (page 96) to the Dad Letter Project, a volunteer program sending fatherly advice all over the world (page 14).

Together, these stories are a reminder of the small, meaningful ways we show up for one another, wherever we are. However you're spending your summer, I hope it includes good food, good company and a place that feels like home.

Leigh Belz Ray,
HEAD OF EDITORIAL

Write to me at letters@rd.com.

MARK DERSE (LEIGH). EMIKO FRANZEN (BREAKFAST)

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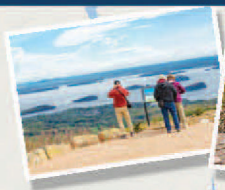

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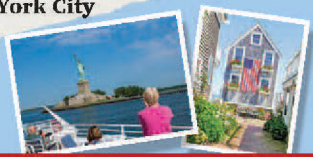

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World of
GOOD
REASONS TO SMILE

MARK BUSCH/SHAW MEDIA

No Lemonade Here

WHEN ETHAN WARGO set up "shop" in his front yard in Sycamore, Illinois, last summer, he offered refreshment in the form of free compliments. (Because charging for them didn't feel right to the 9-year-old.) Sitting beside his twin sister, Claire, who operated a separate stand selling her artwork, Ethan doled out dozens of kind comments like "Your name is so unique" and "I like your green running shoes." All his compliments were genuine: Ethan asked his "customers" to tell him about themselves so he could make a more meaningful remark. "Chatting with people is my favorite thing to do," Ethan told the *Washington Post*. "It makes people feel good. It also makes me feel good." R

EVERYDAY HEROES

Under the Sweltering Sky

A retired firefighter knew that a delirious hiker was close to death in the 100-degree heat. Could he coax the much larger man down the mountain and save both their lives?

BY *John Rosengren*

On a Wednesday morning in May 2024, Colt Johnson, a 26-year old electrician on vacation in central Arizona, set out to hike a remote trail in the Superstition Mountains by himself. Accustomed to hiking the shaded, cooler trails near his home in Blackfoot, Idaho, Johnson was undone by the brutal 100-degree heat of Arizona's naked sun. After five hours, he found himself lost and out of water. Lightheaded and dizzy, he texted his wife, "I need help."

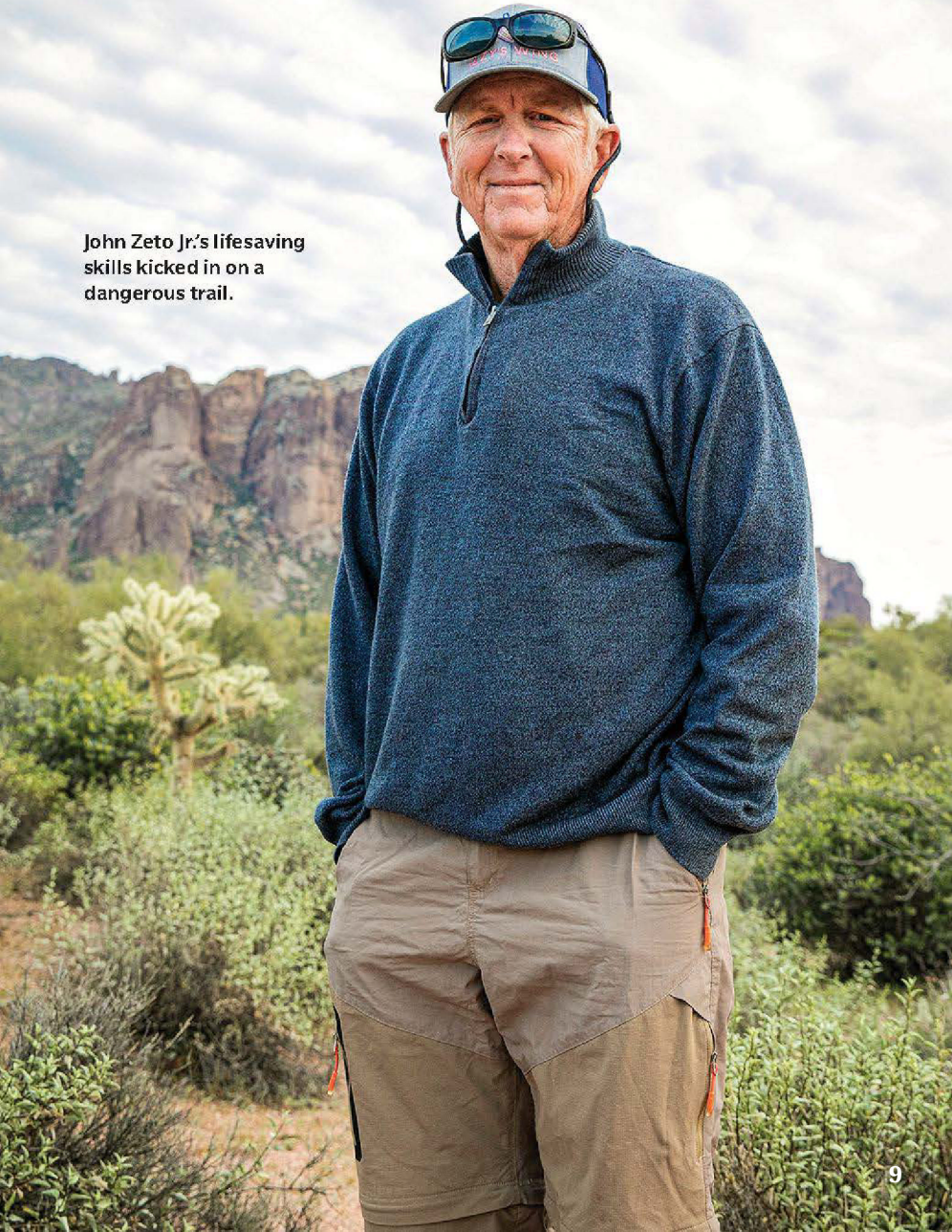
But his text didn't go through; his phone had no service. Johnson nibbled some gummy worms, fearing they would be his last meal. He thought of his wife, Malia Johnson, five months pregnant, and their 3-year-old daughter, Della, hoping that he would get to see them again.

Desperate, he fired a distress signal from the 10 mm handgun he carried to fend off bears—a last-ditch call for help.

The sound carried across the rocks and mesas to John Zeto Jr., a 57-year-old retired firefighter from Tampa, Florida, enjoying his new hobby—hiking mountain trails in Arizona. He'd passed a sign banning target practice, so he thought the pair of shots might be someone shooting at an animal. But when he heard another pair about half an hour later, his instincts, honed over 30 years responding to calls for help, told him the repeated shots must be a distress signal.

On previous hikes, Zeto had come across other hikers in need. There was a

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Marion Rhoades Photography*



John Zeto Jr.'s lifesaving skills kicked in on a dangerous trail.

Zeto hiking in the Superstition Mountains

man who fell and bloodied his head, a woman who broke her leg. As a result, he'd started carrying extra supplies in case others needed help. He hiked in the direction of the shots, and about 45 minutes later, cresting a ridge, he spotted gear scattered off the trail. Soon he came across Johnson, lying on his side.

He could tell that Johnson was confused, disoriented and in rough shape. Zeto gave him some of the extra water he'd packed along with an electrolyte gel. In his delirious state, Johnson rambled on about Malia and Della.

"Where's your car parked?" Zeto asked.

Johnson mumbled something about a lake. Must be Canyon Lake, Zeto figured, looking at a photo of the map on his phone. It was about 3 miles away. "Let's go," Zeto said firmly. "We're wasting time."

It was around 2 p.m. when they got moving. Johnson was woozy but could put one foot ahead of the other. Zeto knew the situation was urgent and wanted to take advantage of what strength the younger man had while it lasted.

Within half an hour, Johnson had finished off Zeto's 3 liters of water. But still, he grew weaker. Shivers shook him, likely brought on by an elevated body temperature. Soon, Zeto had to support Johnson so he wouldn't stumble and fall. Zeto, 5 foot 7 and 155 pounds, draped Johnson's arm over his shoulder to help support the sagging man's 6-foot-5, 210-pound frame. "If he'd fallen, my job then would have been to run and get cell service so I could call for help," Zeto says. "I can't lift him."

It made for slow going. When they'd reach a boulder, Zeto would push Johnson up from behind, then scramble around to help guide him down the other side.

They took several short breaks in the shade of the rocks. Zeto was tiring from the effort but remained standing. "If I

sat down, it would mean it was over for both of us," Zeto says.

But during one break, Johnson sat, closed his eyes and refused to move.

If they didn't get off the mountain, Zeto figured Johnson could probably make it through that day but not the next, not in that heat with his core temperature already dangerously high. Zeto's experience rescuing people in Florida's heat told him that Johnson's symptoms—the wooziness, the chills, the mumbling—meant he was heading toward a stroke unless he got help soon. And even though he'd hydrated in advance, Zeto, parched, was also in need of liquids.

He had to keep Johnson going. He got in his face: "You got a daughter? Want to see her again? Then get off your butt! You're putting us both in danger."

That got Johnson moving. But next time they took a break, he again didn't want to get up. "C'mon!" Zeto barked.

This scene played out several times. Slowly, they made their way down, carefully picking their way along the switchbacks that cut through the steep terrain, taking care not to slip on the sharp shell rock that lined the trail. Zeto knew that a twisted ankle could sideline them both.

The more Johnson slumped against Zeto, the heavier he became. Tired as he was, though, Zeto was determined to get them both to safety. "The hills weren't easy for me either, but I was able to muscle over them," he said.

At around 4:30 p.m.—after almost three tedious hours of trekking and climbing and stopping—Zeto and Johnson finally made it to Johnson's Toyota Highlander, parked by a trailhead near Canyon Lake .

As Johnson slipped in and out of consciousness, Zeto found his car keys, shoveled him inside the Highlander and drove the half hour to Apache Junction, the closest town.

Zeto then helped Johnson out of the car and into an air-conditioned souvenir shop. They sat down and poured Gatorade down their throats. After a spell, Johnson began to feel more like himself. Zeto could tell: His voice was more distinct, his words no longer gibberish.

Eventually, the two drove back to the trailhead. Johnson assured Zeto he was well enough to drive back to his family in Casa Grande, Arizona, roughly an hour and a half away. After they parted ways in their respective cars, Zeto checked in periodically by phone to make sure Johnson arrived safely.

It wasn't the last time the two men spoke. In fact, they've stayed in touch ever since, with Zeto spending five days in Idaho with Johnson and his family, which now includes another daughter, Scottie, about 1½ years old.

Like a lot of heroes, Zeto downplays his role in the rescue. "I was on a hike; this guy needed help," he says. "I got him down the hill. Now we're friends."

Johnson sees things differently, saying: "He definitely saved my life on that mountain." RD

LIFE IN THESE *United States*

"It's from the HOA. We have to get rid of the shell."

It was the journey of a lifetime: My 14-year-old grandson spent 20 days canoeing in a secluded part of Canada, along with 10 other boys plus counselors. On his return, my wife asked what he had learned from the trip.

My grandson responded: "Don't be annoying to people you're going to spend 20 days with."
—JAMES WALPOLE
Lewes, DE

Overheard in a clothing store: "That's a pretty top. I'd never wear it, but it would look good hanging in my closet."
—BONNIE HAWKS
Christiansburg, VA

My mom and I never forgot hearing a woman tell the announcer on a local call-in radio show: "I'm the one who called in yesterday in response to the person who wanted to know how to keep squirrels out of her rosebushes. I suggested spreading peanuts on the ground around the bushes. I'm calling back now to find out if it worked."
—KEN WESTHASSEL
Medford, MA

I consider myself reasonably intelligent, but I cannot process how to play complex board games. You all sound like, "And then if you roll a level-up glitter cabbage you get 6.5 ergometric points, which can be used every fourth turn as long as no one has zorped the Cones of Dunshire."
—𝕏@SEWISTWRITES

Two things I learned yesterday:
I'm not too old to sit in a beanbag,
but I am too old to get out of one.
—𝕏@SIXFOOTCANDY

CARTOON BY *Jim Benton*

Massachusetts asked the public to recommend a new state motto to replace "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty." A date to announce a winner has not been decided, but we'd be fine with any of these submissions:

- "Witch-free since 1693"
- "Massachusetts: We Made Your CEO"
- "In Cod We Trust"
- "The Gateway to New Hampshire"
- Massachusetts: Providing Spelling Bee Fodder for the Ages

—MASS.GOV

Last night, my friend changed all my contacts in my phone. I have been texted by Batman, Donatello and Hermione Granger. I have no idea who they are, and it doesn't upset me at all.

—TEXTSFROMLASTNIGHT.COM

Confined to a hospital room following my open-heart surgery, I had nothing to do but read or watch TV. After a week, I was bored and miserable. When my doctor stopped by on his rounds, he asked, "How's it going?"

"Honestly, I'm depressed," I said.

He nodded understandingly and advised, "Stop watching the news."

—DAVID ELTON
Lewisburg, PA

Dad, ever the strategizer, decided it was time to prearrange funeral plans for himself and my mother. On his way out the door to the funeral home, he asked if she wanted to come along. "You can pick out your own casket that way," he explained excitedly.

Mom, who wasn't as gung-ho about the project, replied, "No. You do it. I want to be surprised."

—KEN WENDLE
Alton, IL

YOUR FUNNY STORY *about friends or family could be worth $$$. For details, go to page 2 or* **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

HE WRITES IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS

You can't say God doesn't have a sense of humor after reading these signs found outside churches:

- "Lord, help us to be the people our dogs think we are."
- "Forgive your enemies—it messes with their heads."
- "Live your life well so we don't have to lie at your funeral."
- "Cremation is your last chance for a smoking-hot body."
- "Acting perfect in church is like dressing up for an X-ray."

—BOREDPANDA.COM

TOM WINDEKNECHT/GETTY IMAGES

LIFE WELL LIVED

“Love, Dad”

Need a shoulder to cry on?
Maybe a gag to get you through the day?
The men of the Dad Letter Project are happy to oblige.

BY *Kyle Melnick* FROM **THE WASHINGTON POST**

On a whim, Rosie Paulik posted on TikTok about her father, who had reached a point in his life where he was "wondering what to do next," she wrote in the caption.

"He loves writing letters more than most people love their kids," she added, explaining that he has written her a letter every day, through "college, camp, adulthood."

"Would you want a letter from my dad?" Paulik asked. "Or know someone who could use a little kindness from a retired professor with a killer signature and a fountain pen?"

That was in July 2025, and Paulik expected a few people to respond. Instead, hundreds did.

"My dad is so excited," Paulik said of her father, Buz Ecker, who lives in southwestern Ohio with his wife, Betsy Ecker.

Buz and other dads Paulik has since recruited to respond to letter requests have spent hours writing to strangers who are looking for a pick-me-up, including many whose fathers have died. Paulik named the volunteer-run group the Dad Letter Project and started the website dadletterproject.com, which describes its mission this way: "Mail That'll Make You Smile (or Cry, in a Good Way)."

"It's very gratifying to be people's fathers who don't have one," Buz says. "And it's very gratifying to write a letter to people who have never gotten a letter from a father."

An ocean away, Amy Woods was scrolling on her phone last year, trying to take her mind off the four-year anniversary of her father's death, when Paulik's TikTok appeared.

Woods sent Paulik her address in Chatham, England, and a blurb about her father, though she says she didn't expect she would get a letter. But a few weeks later, an envelope arrived from abroad. Woods cried when she read the note, written by a stranger almost 4,000 miles away in Michigan.

ILLUSTRATION BY *Ryan Johnson*

"It really reminded me of how much—oh, I feel like I'm going to cry saying it now—of how much love I have for my dad," says Woods.

Buz grew up receiving letters himself. His mother, Peg Pyne Ecker, wrote him hundreds when he went to sleepaway camp and when he studied English at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, in the late 1970s. When it was time for Buz's three children—Paulik and her siblings, John and Annie—to attend sleepaway camp, Buz wrote them letters, too, like this one to Paulik in June 2005: "HI ROSIE!!! I LOVE YOU AND I ALREADY MISS YOU A TON!"

Paulik received so many letters that summer that any day one wasn't delivered, she figured someone at camp wasn't doing their job.

Wherever Paulik went, she was assured a handwritten letter. Her dad wrote to her when she was a teenage counselor at a wilderness camp in International Falls, Minnesota, and when she studied strategic communication at the University of Kentucky in the mid-2010s—even as many people shifted to texting to communicate. Then Paulik moved back to the Cincinnati area, about a 20-minute drive from her parents' house, and Buz still wrote her letters every day.

He typically wrote about mundane things, like what kind of sandwich he ate for lunch. Or more exciting events, like when a swarm of hornets attacked him. Sometimes he took breaks from telling narratives to include live dialogue with Betsy, writing, "Hold on, she's talking to me." Paulik still has these letters, a few thousand in total, which she keeps in a red bin at home.

Of course, writing to your daughter is very different from writing to a stranger. People who request letters tend to be dealing with a variety of issues—like grieving a loved one's death or a bad relationship with their dad. Some have recently become dads themselves and don't know what to do, while others are stressed from work, feel lost or are recovering from a breakup.

Buz wakes up around 4:30 a.m. to write for about four hours each morning. He tells stories about his parents and his grief when they died. But he also includes light anecdotes, like how his dogs, Pearl and Piper, love to escape and cover themselves in burrs and mud at a nearby river.

ROSIE PAULIK VIA WASHINGTON POST

AMERICAN GOLD RESERVE

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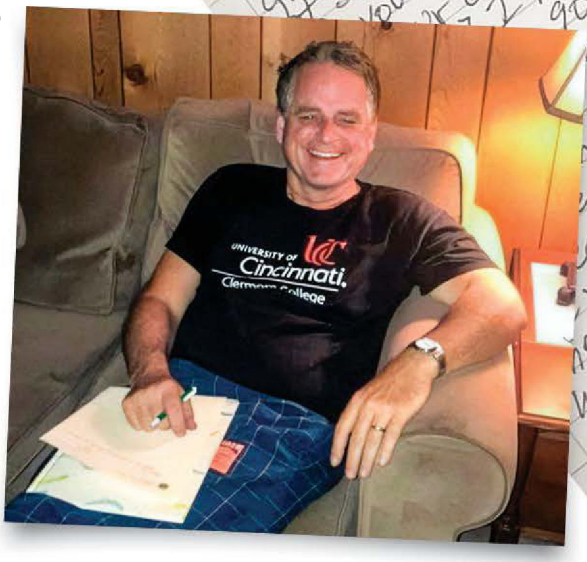
He has struggled to respond to some problems. When he wrote to a woman whose child had died, he told her about his grandmother, Evelyn Sherwood Pyne, having a stillborn child in 1919.

Buz doesn't know how much money he's spent on postage and stationery for the project, saying the costs are less than the "gratification that people receive and that I receive out of writing the letters." Last August, after he received his first of a handful of thank-you letters from requesters, Paulik's mother texted her "You made your father's day."



Opposite page: Rosie Paulik holding some of the letters her dad, Buz Ecker, (above) has written to her over the years.

Paulik, who works in communications, has found about 30 other dads to help Buz. The dads have now mailed out more than 4,500 letters. One of the dads is Darren Timmeney, her friend's father in Kalamazoo, Michigan, who used to drop encouraging notes into his son's and daughter's lunchboxes before school. After retiring from his banking career last June, Timmeney was seeking a new hobby.

Now, he says, "I wake up in the morning a little bit more motivated."

Timmeney wrote the letter to Amy Woods in England, including the line that made Woods cry at her kitchen table: "As a dad, I am proud of you and think you wondering and thinking about your hippie artist dad is really special."

Woods says she had a complicated relationship with her father, David, who died in September 2021 after suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The letter she received was written in a laid-back tone similar to his.

Woods stored the letter in a box with other mementos that remind her of her family. But how long will it stay there?

"Forever," she says. "Without a doubt." ■

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ROSIE PAULIK VIA WASHINGTON POST (2)

WHEN YOUR NEW BOOK HAS YOUR AFTERNOON BOOKED UP AND THE CLOCK STRIKES DINNER.

Stouffer's

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IZERVAY is the most prescribed choice for patients new to geographic atrophy (GA) treatment*

izervay
(avacincaptad pegol intravitreal solution) 2 mg

*Based on Symphony data from 3/24-12/25. May not represent entire patient population.

SLOW GA with IZERVAY

IZERVAY is proven to slow GA progression, which could help preserve your vision longer

IZERVAY significantly slowed GA progression by 18% to 35%, compared to those who were not treated, in 2 clinical trials evaluating 624 people with GA.

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION AND USE

Do NOT receive IZERVAY® (avacincaptad pegol intravitreal solution) if you:

- Have an infection in or around your eye
- Have active swelling in or around your eye that may include pain and redness

IZERVAY can cause serious side effects including:

- **Eye Infection and Retinal Detachment:** Eye injections like the one for IZERVAY can cause an eye infection (endophthalmitis) or separation of layers of the retina (retinal detachment).

- **Wet Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD):** There is a risk of developing wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD) with IZERVAY. You should report any symptoms (visual distortions such as straight lines seeming bent, deterioration in vision, dark spots, loss of central vision) to your healthcare provider to monitor.
- **Increase in Eye Pressure:** IZERVAY may cause a temporary increase in eye pressure after the injection. Your healthcare provider will monitor this after each injection.

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have redness of the eye, eye pain, increased discomfort, worsening eye redness, blurred or decreased vision, an increased number of small specks floating in your vision, flashes of light, or increased sensitivity to light.

Before receiving IZERVAY tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions including if you:

- Have a history of seeing flashes of light or small specks floating in your vision and if you have a sudden increase of size and number of these specks.
- Have high pressure in the eye or if you have glaucoma.
- Are pregnant or breastfeeding, think you may be pregnant, or are planning to have a baby, ask your doctor for advice before taking this medicine.
- Are taking any medications, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Tell your healthcare provider about any medicine you take.

What should I avoid while receiving IZERVAY?

- Your vision may be impaired after receiving an eye injection or after an eye exam. Do not drive or use machinery until your vision has recovered sufficiently.

What are the most common side effects of IZERVAY?

- Blood in the white of the eye
- Blurred vision
- Increase in eye pressure
- Wet AMD
- Mild corneal irritation
- Eye pain

These are not all the possible side effects of IZERVAY. Tell your healthcare provider about any side effect that bothers you or that does not go away.

Call your healthcare provider for medical advice about side effects. You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.fda.gov/medwatch, or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

What is IZERVAY?

IZERVAY is a prescription eye injection, used to treat geographic atrophy (GA), the advanced form of dry AMD.

Please see next page for Brief Summary of full Prescribing Information.

Visit IZERVAY.com
or scan this QR code to learn more

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MAT-US-IZE-2026-00080 03/26

Prescription Drug Facts *Rx Only*

Active Ingredient *Purpose*

IZERVAY (avacincaptad pegol intravitreal solution).....Geographic Atrophy (GA) Treatment

Use

IZERVAY (ahy-zer-vay) is a prescription eye injection given by an eye care professional. IZERVAY is used to treat geographic atrophy (GA), the advanced form of dry age-related macular degeneration (AMD).

Do not receive treatment with IZERVAY if you:

■ have an infection in or around your eye ■ have active swelling in or around your eye that may include pain and redness

Warnings

Before you are treated with IZERVAY, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:

■ have a history of seeing flashes of light or small specks floating in your vision and if you have a sudden increase of size and number of these specks ■ have high pressure in the eye or if you have glaucoma ■ are pregnant or breastfeeding, think you may be pregnant, or are planning to have a baby. Ask your doctor for advice before taking this medicine. ■ are taking any medications, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Tell your healthcare provider about any medicine you take

Serious Side Effects

■ Eye injections like the one for IZERVAY can cause an eye infection (endophthalmitis) or separation of layers of the retina (retinal detachment). ■ There is a risk of developing wet AMD with IZERVAY. You should report any symptoms (visual distortions such as straight lines seeming bent, deterioration in vision, dark spots, loss of central vision) to your healthcare provider to monitor. ■ IZERVAY may cause a temporary increase in eye pressure after the injection. Your healthcare provider will monitor this after each injection.

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have redness of the eye, eye pain, increased discomfort, worsening eye redness, blurred or decreased vision, an increased number of small specks floating in your vision, flashes of light, or increased sensitivity to light.

What should I avoid while receiving IZERVAY?

■ Your vision may be impaired after receiving an eye injection or after an eye exam. Do not drive or use machinery until your vision has recovered sufficiently.

Most Common Side Effects

■ blood in the white of the eye ■ blurred vision ■ increase in eye pressure ■ wet age-related macular degeneration ■ mild corneal irritation ■ eye pain

Tell your healthcare provider if you have any side effect that bothers you or does not go away. These are not all the possible side effects of IZERVAY.

Call your healthcare provider for medical advice about side effects. You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.fda.gov/medwatch, or call at 1-800-FDA-1088.

This information is not comprehensive. For more information, talk with your eye care professional or visit www.izervay.com.

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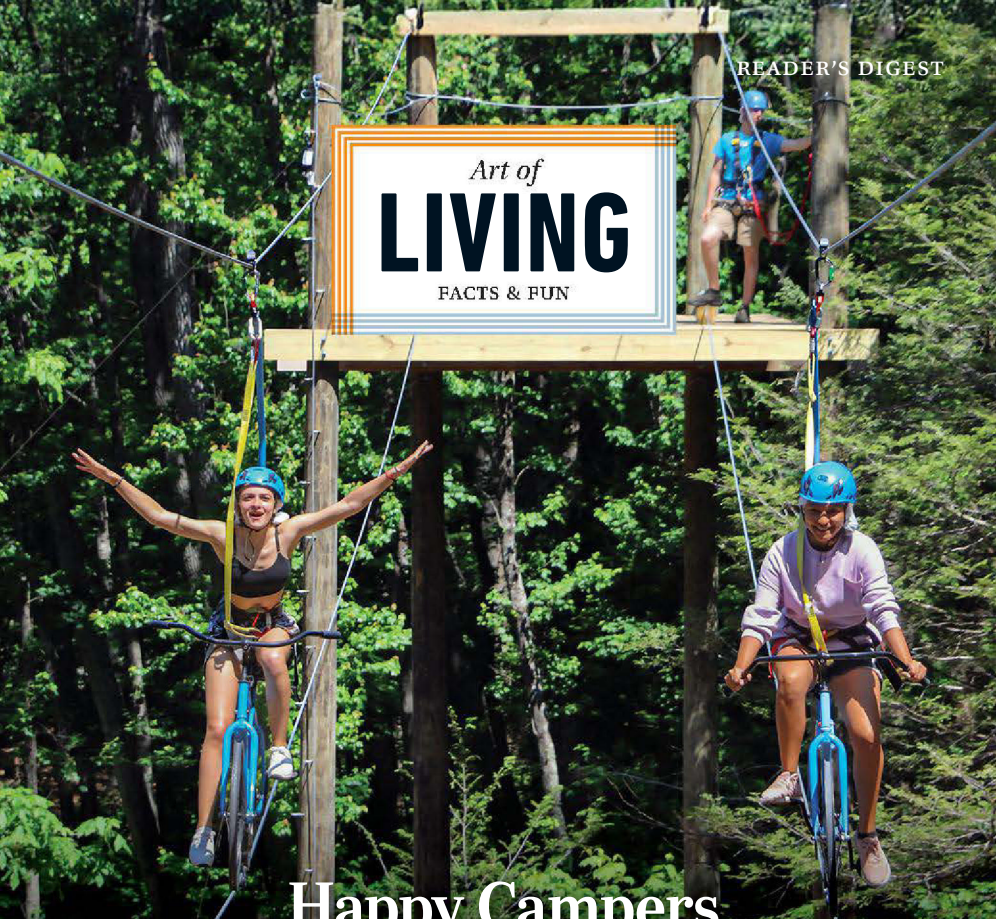
Art of
LIVING
FACTS & FUN



COURTESY OF CLUB GETAWAY

Happy Campers

ADULTS ALL OVER the country are sending themselves to summer camp. These often all-inclusive weekends feature rock climbing, zip lining and watersliding—activities designed to feed your inner child while nurturing new friendships. Many places, like Club Getaway in Connecticut, where this photo is from, welcome kid campers during the week. Others cater solely to grown-ups, like Camp No Counselors, which operates in California, New York and Texas. Programs can get pricey—most fall between $750 and $1,000 per person—but given that about half of American adults crave community and connection, the consensus is that the camps are well worth it. At Camp Social, an all-female adult camp in Pennsylvania, organizers say that 99% of their participants arrive solo, and 100% leave as friends. R

Off to the Races

BY *Moira and Tom Fanning*

1 THE TRIPLE CROWN is one of the most elusive titles in sports. To achieve it, a Thoroughbred must win three races: The Kentucky Derby kicks it off the first Saturday in May at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky. Two weeks later, the Preakness Stakes takes place at Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore, Maryland. And three weeks after that, the Belmont Stakes is run at Belmont Park outside of New York City. (The final two legs will be held elsewhere this year as Pimlico Race Course and Belmont Park undergo renovations.)

2 ALL THREE races have existed since the 1870s. But it wasn't until the 1930s, when *Daily Racing Form* sports writer Charles Hatton started referring to them as the triple crown, that the term became popular. It became official in 1950, when the Thoroughbred Racing Associations retroactively awarded the title to Sir Barton, the first horse to win all three races (in 1919).

3 THE KENTUCKY Derby is often called the most exciting two minutes in sports, but only two horses have finished it in that time. Monarchos ran it in 1:59.97 in 2001, and Secretariat put up the best time of 1:59.4 in 1973. Only three fillies (female horses) have won, and the biggest long shot to pull it off did so at odds of 91-1. Americans bet more than $10 billion on

ILLUSTRATION BY *Serge Bloch*

horse racing each year. Churchill Downs saw $349 million in wagers last Derby Day alone.

4 ARGUABLY THE greatest racehorse of all time, Secretariat is one of 13 horses that have won the Triple Crown. He won 16 of his 21 races, and placed lower than third only once—in his very first race. In its list of the 100 best athletes of the 20th century, ESPN put him at 35th, just behind Lou Gehrig. Secretariat isn't the only racehorse on the list, but he's the highest ranking by a mile—a familiar feeling for him.

5 SECRETARIAT'S HEART weighed about 22 pounds, nearly triple the average of 8½ pounds, which greatly aided his stamina. It's said that none of Secretariat's sons inherited his huge heart, but some of his daughters did. All 19 entrants in last year's Kentucky Derby were his descendants.

6 UP TO 20 horses can compete in the 1.25-mile Kentucky Derby and race for its $5 million purse, which is spread across the top five finishers. Owners usually collect 80% of their horse's winnings; the jockey and trainer split the remaining 20%. Both the 1.19-mile Preakness Stakes (with up to 14 entrants) and the 1.5-mile Belmont Stakes (up to 16) boast $2 million purses. The Belmont Stakes usually has the fewest entrants since it's the last and longest race, making it the hardest to win. Thoroughbreds get just one chance at the Triple Crown because only 3-year-old horses are eligible for its three races.

7 A HORSE'S height is measured in hands, a unit of about 4 inches. To measure, hold your hands horizontally and count as you stack from the ground up to the bony ridge above the horse's shoulder blades, an area called the withers. Thoroughbreds usually stand 16 hands and weigh 1,000 pounds.

8 JOCKEYS TYPICALLY stand between 4 foot 10 and 5 foot 6. John "Red" Pollard, who rode the famously undersized Seabiscuit, was considered big for a jockey at 5 foot 7. It may seem that the horse is doing all the work, but jockeys are amazing athletes. Try holding a low squat for an entire race. It's hard enough in your living room, let alone atop a half-ton horse thundering along at 40 mph.

9 IN HARNESS racing, horses either trot or pace while pulling drivers behind them in lightweight two-wheeled "sulkies." Trotting horses move their opposite fore and hind legs forward at the same time, while pacers move the legs on the same side of their bodies simultaneously. Since pacing is faster, pacers and trotters race separately. The sport's

biggest event is the Hambletonian Stakes in East Rutherford, New Jersey, a 1-mile trot for $1 million.

10 THE NBA'S Indiana Pacers are named in part for the pacing gait, as their original home court was across from the harness racetrack at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. The Pacers aren't the only crossover between the two sports: Denver Nuggets center Nikola Jokić spends offseasons at his harness racing stable in his native Serbia. "That's kind of my secret goal, to be a driver ... and race horses," he said on the *Curious Mike* podcast.

11 HIP-HOP LEGEND MC Hammer owned a horse named Dance Floor who placed third in the 1992 Kentucky Derby. Owners get creative when naming their racehorses because no two can have the same name. The Jockey Club keeps a registry and has rules, including a ban on vulgarity—though somehow the name Hoof Hearted slipped by. (Say it out loud.)

12 EVEN IF you don't follow horse racing, you may tune in for the fascinating fascinators many attendees wear. The colorful hats are the vision of Churchill Downs founder Meriwether Lewis Clark Jr. (yes—grandson of the explorer William Clark, as in Lewis and Clark), who admired the pageantry of European races. Once the Kentucky Derby started being televised in the 1960s, hats became extra extravagant as spectators sought to stand out in the crowd.

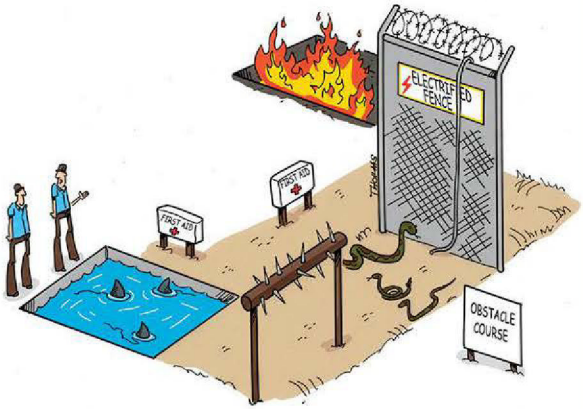
13 EACH TRIPLE Crown race has a signature cocktail. The Kentucky Derby's mint julep (mint simple syrup and bourbon poured over crushed ice and garnished with fresh mint) might be the most famous. But the Preakness Stakes' black-eyed Susan (vodka, elderflower liqueur, pineapple juice, lime juice and orange juice, shaken and garnished with an orange wedge) and the Belmont Stakes' Belmont Jewel (bourbon, lemonade and pomegranate juice, garnished with a lemon twist) also offer refreshing respite on a hot day at the track—or in your living room. Cheers!

Move Over, Spot!

Luna is now the most popular dog name in the United States, followed by Bella, Charlie and Max.

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

HUMOR *in* UNIFORM



"Is it me, or are the obstacle courses getting harder?"

My friend's military role takes him around the world, sometimes at the last minute. His wife is understanding, but she reached her limit when he announced a quick trip to Azerbaijan. "If you want a weekend away with the guys, just tell me," she said tersely. "You don't have to go making up countries."
—CYNTHIA WHITE
Rhinelander, WI

Did you know that flour tortillas are served on the International Space Station instead of bread? It may or may not have something to do with astronauts John Young and Gus Grissom. Feeling noshy on their Gemini 3 flight in 1965, Young pulled out a contraband corned beef sandwich that he'd snuck on board inside his spacesuit (evidently, the freeze-dried menu was not up to snuff). Grissom took a bite, and bread crumbs began to orbit them, threatening to get wedged in sensitive equipment. That ended the meal.

Sandwichgate caused such a furor back on Earth that Congress held a hearing, leading a NASA official to assure everyone, "We have taken steps to prevent recurrence of corned beef sandwiches in future flights."
—NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

Struggling with a report he was writing, an Air Force base commander asked my father and a few other subordinates, "Do we have an English major in this outfit?"

While others strained to think, a helpful voice answered, "No sir, but we do have an Italian captain."
—STEVE SCARANO
Vista, CA

YOUR FUNNY MILITARY *story could be worth $$$. For details, go to* **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

CARTOON BY *Bill Thomas/Thomas Toons*

ALL *in a Day's* WORK

During a physical therapy session, my client's daughter asked what her mother could do at home to help maintain her progress once therapy was completed. I suggested the patient sign up for tai chi classes.

"Tai chi?" said the patient. "Wasn't that what we had to drink last week?"

Her daughter shook her head. "No, Mom, that was chai tea."

—MARY NICHOLS
Chesterfield, VA

Our band was performing at the Indiana Women's Prison, and even though our lead singer, Laurie, was nailing a ballad, the audience was giggling. And then it dawned on me. Laurie, 8 months pregnant, had just sung the lyric, "I never met a man I called a stranger."

—NELSON GOUD
Indianapolis, IN

"You're joining the company at a very exciting time."

For adventure guides, the real adventure comes when tourists ask questions like these:

- "Has the ocean been sprayed for sharks?"
- "Does the water go all the way around the island?"
- "At what age does a rhino turn into a hippo?"

—OUTSIDEONLINE.COM

People don't understand the purpose of online ratings. You'll see a review for a pair of shoes and it'll be like, "Great shoe. Even cuter in person. Just perfect. But I ordered the wrong size so I had to give it 1 star."

—𝕏@LATKEDELREY

YOUR FUNNY WORK *story could be worth $$$. For details, go to page 2 or* **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

CARTOON BY *Tom Toro/CartoonStock.com*

Breyers CarbSmart

SUGAR: 4G
CALORIES: 100*
NET CARBS: 4G

CHEAT DAYS USED: 0

NOW THAT'S SOME SWEET MATH

*All nutrition claims shown are per 2/3 cup serving. Net carbs are calculated by subtracting total dietary fiber and sugar alcohol from total carbohydrates.

DEPARTMENT OF WIT

Dear Pet Sitter ...

The most eccentric care instructions, indulged

BY *Judith Newman*
FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

When I left my golden retriever, Monty, with a pet sitter, I thought my four pages of single-spaced instructions were perfectly reasonable.

"He thinks his real name is 'What do you have in your mouth?'" I wrote. "So please check frequently, or you will end up spending the night with Monty in the ER."

There's something about writing out pet-care instructions that shows just how much these animals rule our lives. During his long life, Monty racked up thousands in medical bills because of his passion for eating my underwear, which meant I had to be very explicit in the directions I gave his caretakers. This, it turns out, is surprisingly common.

"When I was a kid, my parents would drop me off at the babysitter, and their instructions were like, 'Make sure she stays alive,'" says Fei Fei Friedman, a graphic designer and dog sitter in Manhattan. But dog owners today? "Their instructions are as complicated as a Tesla owner's manual."

In Reddit communities and on TikTok accounts, pet sitters often swap stories of over-the-top care instructions for animals, like dogs that need to hear Frank Sinatra to poop, or kittens that attack if their food isn't microwaved.

"My boy will not get out of bed in the morning unless you say 'Good morning, Mr. President,'" reads one post. "He needs his green monkey to sleep," reads another. "Don't be afraid if he keeps the tail down his throat for more than a minute. He knows what he's doing."

"Do not say 'Jake Gyllenhaal' or she will start freaking out," reads a third.

Kii Cash, a pet sitter in Orlando, Florida, was once warned to keep the knives locked up, or the cat she was watching might pick one up in its mouth and try to stab her. "I laughed," she says. "Guess what happened." Cash assured me in an email that the cat had dropped the knife before there were any casualties.

While these stories may seem outrageous, there are perfectly logical reasons why owners explain, and overexplain, instructions for their pets' care, says

ILLUSTRATION BY *Lucas Burtin/NYT*

Nancy R. Gee, the director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction at Virginia Commonwealth University. For one thing, she says, animals can't entirely grasp the concept of time, which can make a simple trip to the store feel like abandonment.

"You can explain to a young child that you are leaving and coming back," says Jane Greer, a family therapist in New Jersey who runs an Instagram account for her Coton de Tulear, Riley. "But with a dog? They don't know."

"YOUR PET MAY BE THE ONE NONJUDGMENTAL BEING IN YOUR LIFE."

That may explain why guilt-ridden pet owners leave long lists of what Reddit pet sitters call "enrichments" to distract from the owners' absence, whether it's a T-shirt that smells like the owner, or favorite music and TV shows that must be played on repeat.

"Brenda the Accountant has a screen addiction," Rennie Weller, a jewelry designer in Los Angeles, says of her Maltipoo. She tells sitters her dog needs plenty of TV time and instructs them to go to YouTube, search "dog videos" and give Brenda hours of squirrels.

According to a 2023 Pew Research Center study, 51% of U.S. pet owners say their pets are as much a part of the family as any human member. And, Gee says, when people are asked to name those they trust most, "pets will often be closer in their inner circle than family and friends."

Many pet owners also feel a strong sense of emotional debt to their animals, adds Greer.

"Human relationships are very tough," she says. "Your pet may be the one nonjudgmental being in your life. They'll love you even if you're not a very good person."

Maybe that's the reason we indulge our pets' eccentricities and fears, no matter how absurd.

Carol Mithers used to leave excruciatingly detailed instructions about her scrappy chow mix, Casey, including this warning: "If you see or hear the Goodyear Blimp, grab the leash tightly and get home as fast as you can." Casey was terrified of blimps.

"Once I had to literally lie on top of him to keep him from running into a busy street," says Mithers, who is the author of *Rethinking Rescue: Dog Lady and the Story of America's Forgotten People and Pets.*

Rational or not, elaborate pet instructions are clearly a projection of our love, Gee says.

We owe our pets and adore them, even when they are diabolical. That perhaps accounts for one ominous instruction left for a pet sitter who later shared it on TikTok: "Jasper cannot be trusted. Good luck." R

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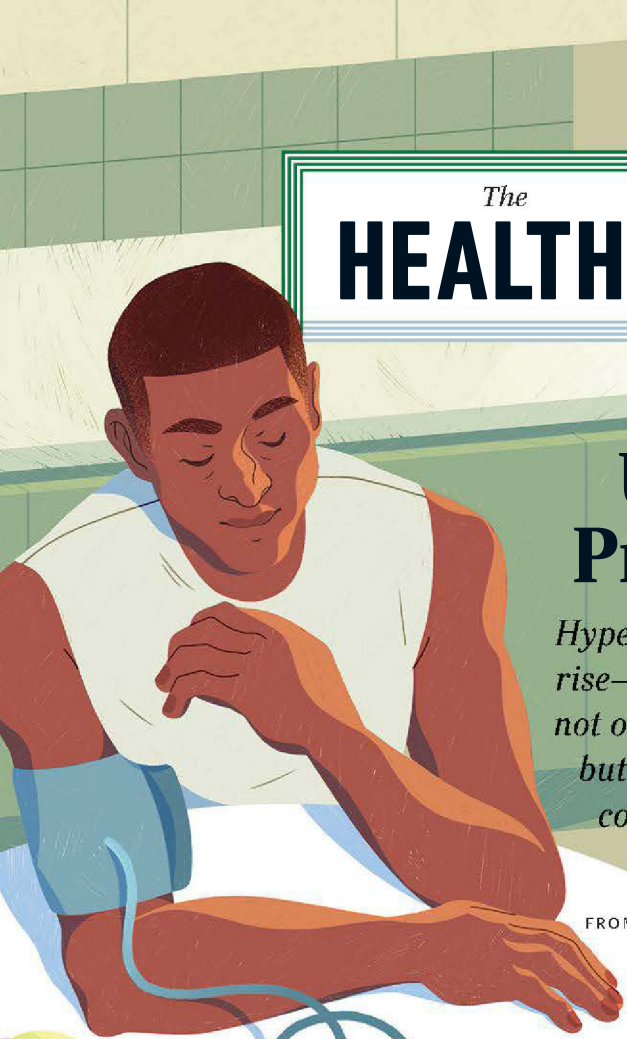
The
HEALTHY



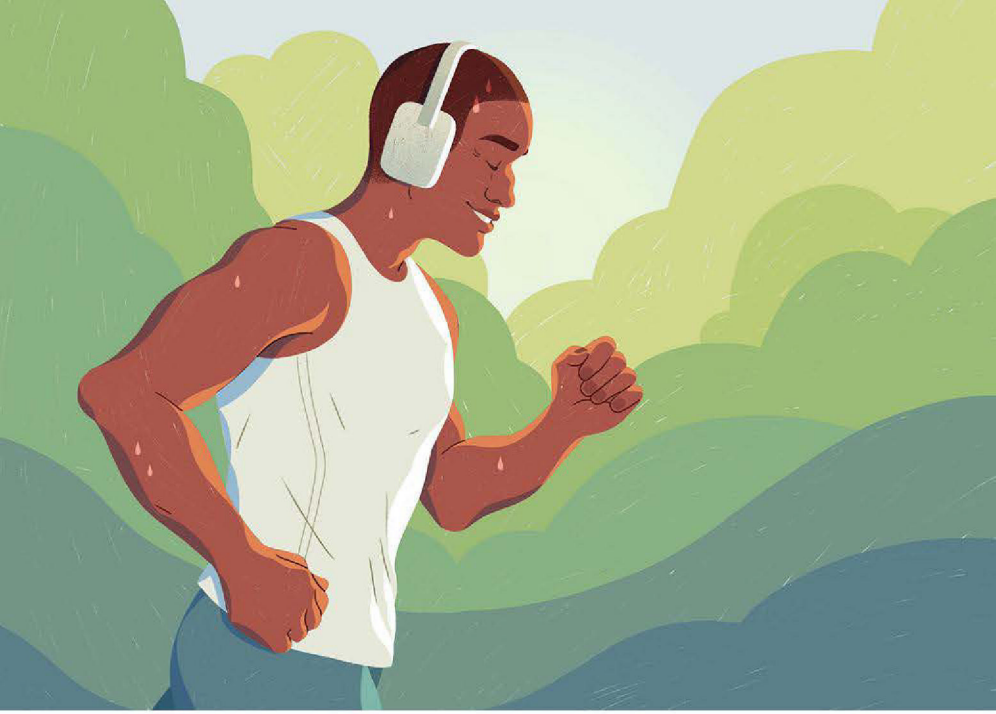
Under Pressure

Hypertension is on the rise—and it's linked to not only heart disease, but also stroke and cognitive decline

BY *Nina Agrawal*
FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

IN THE UNITED STATES, nearly half of adults have high blood pressure, or hypertension. Known as a silent killer, the condition can contribute to heart attack, stroke and heart failure without ever causing symptoms. Although it was once thought to affect mostly older people, research

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Kate Traynor*



now shows that an increasing share of people ages 35 to 64 are dying of heart disease related to it. "Hypertension matters so much because it's the most modifiable risk factor for cardiovascular disease, stroke and now, the evidence suggests, this may be true for cognitive decline," says Eduardo Sanchez, MD, chief medical officer for prevention at the American Heart Association. Lifestyle changes and medication can help bring blood pressure down, which "changes the trajectory very, very dramatically" when it comes to heart attack and stroke, he says.

Even simple steps can help get your blood pressure in check. It sounds obvious, but just knowing your blood pressure is a great place to start. More than half of people with uncontrolled hypertension aren't aware they have it, according to some estimates.

Blood pressure, the force that blood exerts on your arterial walls, is measured in millimeters of mercury (mm Hg). It is given in two numbers: The top number, systolic pressure, measures the force when blood is pumped out of your heart; the bottom number, diastolic pressure, measures the force between beats, when your heart is filling with blood.

Normal blood pressure is below 120/80 mm Hg. Above that level, Dr. Sanchez says, damage begins to occur to blood vessels and the organs they

supply, including the kidneys, heart and brain.

It's important to have your blood pressure checked at least annually, says Jennifer Cluett, MD, director of the Complex Hypertension Clinic at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Make sure it's measured the right way: with the right size cuff and when you are sitting with both feet flat on the floor, have your upper arm supported at heart level and are not talking.

"The typical setting in a busy primary care clinic—where somebody's sitting on an exam table with their legs dangling and their arm not supported, while somebody is talking to them—is not the right way," Dr. Cluett says.

Up to 30% of patients also may experience "white coat hypertension," which is when blood pressure levels become elevated at the doctor's office. For this reason, blood pressure management guidelines recommend checking at home, too, to confirm a diagnosis and manage the condition.

It's important to understand your personal risk. There can be many causes of hypertension, says Fátima Coronado, MD, associate director for science in the division for heart disease and stroke prevention of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The condition develops over time as a result of both genetic and environmental factors, including smoking, excess weight and poor sleep. People whose parent or grandparent suffered a heart attack or stroke can be at increased genetic risk for high blood pressure, she says.

Age influences risk because our arteries stiffen as we get older. Additionally, hypertension is more prevalent among men than women, and more common among Black people than among White, Latino or Asian people, according to CDC data.

Some women develop high blood pressure during pregnancy, which can be dangerous to the mother and the fetus. Martha Gulati, MD, director of the Davis Women's Heart Center at Houston Methodist Hospital, says the condition should be treated during pregnancy, and women should be followed by a cardiologist afterward because they are at increased risk of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

Diet also plays a major role. You've heard it before: Eat healthy for your heart. Specifically, among 22 lifestyle changes and stress-reducing techniques for reducing blood pressure, the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan was found to be the most effective, according to an analysis of more than 100 studies.

One reason may be that it centers foods rich in potassium, an electrolyte that helps your body get rid of sodium and that relaxes your artery walls. Sodium causes the body to retain water, increasing the fluid—and the pressure—inside blood vessels.

Bananas aren't the only easy source of potassium: An avocado or 1 cup of diced cantaloupe contains even more

of it than a medium banana, and citrus fruits like oranges are also rich in the electrolyte, as are leafy greens like spinach and Swiss chard.

You can lower your blood pressure further by reducing your sodium intake, Dr. Gulati says. The American Heart Association recommends that people consume no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day—and ideally, much less. In the United States, most of the sodium in people's diets comes from restaurant meals and processed foods.

DROPPING EXCESS POUNDS CAN ALSO HELP REDUCE BLOOD PRESSURE.

Cutting down on these foods—swapping a frozen dinner or a slice of pizza for the salad bar, for example—or making small changes in your food shopping can make a big difference. Look for low-sodium versions of sauces. Rinse canned beans and vegetables, which are often stored in salty water for preservation, before eating them.

Alcohol intake is also associated with increased blood pressure. Doctors suggest aiming for total abstinence. The benefits of cutting back seem greatest for those who usually consume more than two drinks per day.

Aerobic exercise, which strengthens your heart so it can pump with less effort, was the second most effective intervention after the DASH diet. Isometric resistance exercise—when you contract muscles and hold a position, such as a wall squat or a plank—was the third. Isometric exercise can help blood vessels dilate, which improves blood flow. Exercise also reduces stress, as can meditation, yoga, prayer and other types of religious practice, says Dr. Sanchez.

And while exercise is beneficial even if you don't lose weight, dropping excess pounds can also help reduce blood pressure, says Dr. Cluett.

The goal of treatment is to keep the blood pressure below 130/80 mm Hg, though under 120/80 mm Hg is even better. Often, that requires medication. There are several effective generic options that doctors can prescribe.

Patients may need to take multiple types, which doctors say can sometimes be a deterrent. Single-pill combinations that include two or more blood pressure medications in one tablet are easier to take. While some medications may cause side effects like frequent urination or leg swelling, doctors can tweak drug regimens to mitigate those.

Even if you're on medication, changes to your diet and exercise can still help—and can lower your odds of all sorts of negative health outcomes. As Dr. Cluett puts it: "Lifestyle changes help more than just your blood pressure number." RD

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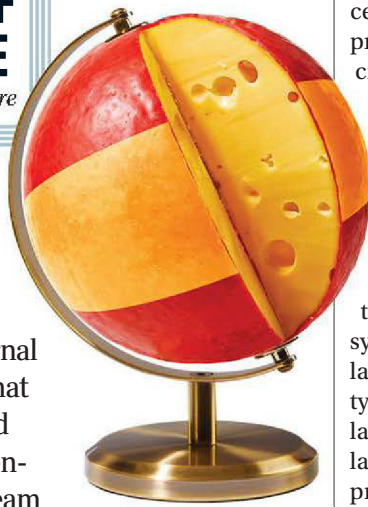
News FROM THE
WORLD OF MEDICINE
BY *Kristine Gasbarre*



SHARP MEMORY

A study in the journal *Neurology* found that eating cheese could play a role in dementia prevention. A team of researchers from Sweden's Lund University found that among nearly 28,000 Swedish residents over a 25-year period, more than 3,200 ultimately developed dementia. However, those who reported eating 1.7 ounces or more per day of high-fat cheese (defined as having more than 20% fat, such as cheddar, Brie and Gouda) were 13% less likely to develop dementia than those who ate ½ ounce or less daily. The protective association appeared strongest for people without a gene variant called APOE e4, a genetic risk factor for dementia. In contrast, low-fat dairy showed no meaningful link to lower dementia risk.

Shot at Prevention

Only a handful of cancer types are currently preventable by a vaccine—and an aggressive breast cancer may soon be joining them. Anixa Biosciences announced in November 2025 that it had secured a patent for a vaccine that trains the immune system to attack alpha-lactalbumin, a protein typically present during late pregnancy and lactation, and also expressed in the majority of triple-negative breast cancer cases. The idea was first developed at the Cleveland Clinic, where Phase 1 of the trial is projected to be completed this summer. If additional trials confirm its efficacy, the vaccine could be available by 2030, with priority given to those with genetic dispositions.

Power Trio

Falling is now the leading cause of injury-related deaths among

TMB STUDIO. RESEARCH BY LAUREN GRAY

PHOTOGRAPH BY *Emiko Franzen*

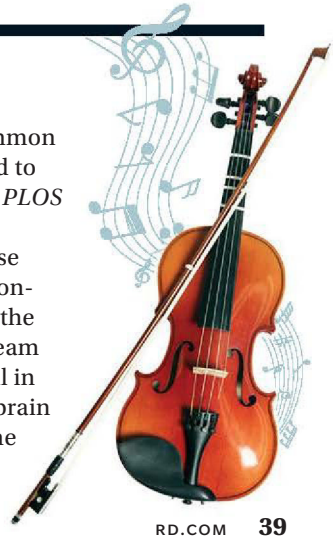
adults 65 and older—a result of muscle loss that begins around age 50. But a study by sports science researchers in China has shown a promising way to counteract natural declines. After analyzing studies involving more than 7,500 participants, the team determined that resistance and balance training effectively preserved muscle for everyday functional movement, like rising swiftly from a chair. Meanwhile, resistance training plus protein supplementation led to the largest increases in strength and muscle mass. And combining all three (resistance training, balance training and protein) led to the largest improvements in other measures of functional health, such as grip strength, gait speed and skeletal muscle index.

Craving Connection

Keeping a seat at the table for friends or family can improve key markers of healthy aging, while eating alone showed the opposite effect. After reviewing data collected across 10 countries, Australian nutrition researchers determined that those who routinely ate alone consumed less food—specifically, fewer fruits and vegetables and less protein. Part of the research suggested that those who consistently ate alone were more than twice as likely to drop significant weight—a risk factor widely linked to higher rates of chronic illness and increased mortality in seniors. Cooking for (and eating with) others naturally encourages better habits, the team theorized, because "social cues can be beneficial in facilitating eating behaviors."

Eye Got Rhythm

Dancing, swaying or finger-tapping to music is a common voluntary response that speaks to the power of sound to move us. But a recent study published in the journal *PLOS Biology* showed that our brains may be involuntarily syncing to the beat as well. Researchers at the Chinese Academy of Sciences played classical music to 123 nonmusicians and measured their spontaneous blinks—the ones our eyes perform without our awareness. The team found that the participants' blinking involuntarily fell in line with the beat. The effect may highlight how the brain processes, predicts and adapts to sonic patterns in the environment, even when we're unaware. R



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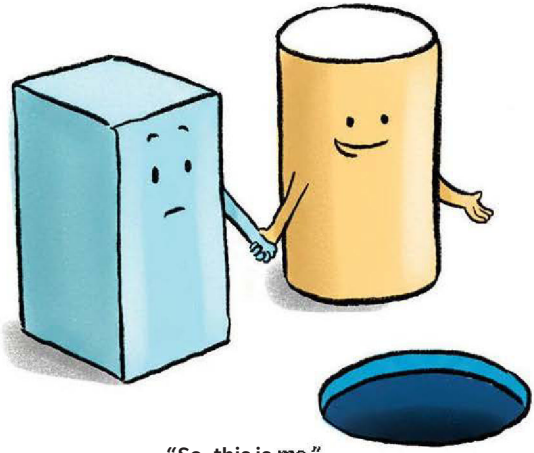
LAUGHTER
THE BEST *Medicine*



"So, this is me."

To bide their time on a long train trip, three priests agree to share their darkest secrets.

"Once a month," says the first priest, "I go on a bender and get blind drunk."

"I've gotten into gambling online," admits the second priest. "Worse yet, I use Sunday collection plate donations to fund my bets."

"And you," the first priest says to the third, "what's your chief vice?"

"Me?" says the third priest. "I'm an inveterate gossip."

— Submitted by GARY KATZ *Long Grove, IL*

When a wealthy businessman began to choke on a fish bone at a restaurant, a doctor seated nearby sprang up, performed the Heimlich maneuver and saved his life.

"Thank you, thank you!" said the businessman. "Please, I insist on paying you. Just name the fee."

"OK," said the doctor. "How about half of what you'd have offered when the bone was still stuck in your throat?"

—FACMEDICINE.COM

The worst job I ever had was as a forensic pathologist for the United Nations. I remember uncovering the mass grave of 1,000 snowmen. Fortunately, it turned out to be just a field full of carrots.

—Comedian MILTON JONES

I called the tinnitus helpline, but it just keeps ringing.

—Submitted by DAN CUSATO *Tustin, CA*

I am woman, watch me fit 94 bottles of shampoo and 15 different body washes on my shower ledge.

—𝕏@KRYZAZZY

What happened when two silkworms got into a fight? It ended in a tie.

—Submitted by ALICE MURRAY *Niceville, FL*

CARTOON BY *Will Santino/CartoonStock.com*

Internet headlines from the 19th century:
✦ "Women near you want to show you their ankles! Click here!"
✦ "Why your bourgeois boss hates Karl Marx (and you should too)"
✦ "Arsenic: The miracle chemical in future medicine!"
✦ "10 signs your corset is slowly killing you (No. 7 is terrifying)"
✦ "This one simple trick cures milk leg, dropsy and the vapors!"
—REDDIT

A fisherman shouted out to a man wading in the water, "Can I rent a boat on this lake?"

"Yes," the wader yelled back. "They're $10 or $25 an hour."

"Would you recommend the $10 boat?"

"Absolutely not! I'm standing in one."
—Submitted by
GENE NEWMAN
Parsippany, NJ

My husband got stung on his forehead by a bee. He's in the ER now, his face swollen and bruised. He almost died! Luckily, I was close enough to hit the bee with my shovel.
—THE PODCAST *HOW TO KILL AN HOUR*

After visiting her husband in prison, a woman stopped a correctional officer and laid into him. "You shouldn't make my husband work so hard," she said. "He's exhausted!"

The officer laughed. "Work? He doesn't do anything but eat, sleep and sit in his cell!"

"That's strange," said the woman. "He told me he's been digging a tunnel for months."
—Submitted by
DAVID MITEFF
Lafayette, IN

GOT A FUNNY JOKE?
It could be worth $$$. For details, go to **RD.COM/SUBMIT.**

YOU SAID A MEOWFUL!

Cats have a knack for knocking things off counters. To honor that adorable—albeit messy—trait, here are knock-knock jokes from *The Impawsibly Good Book of Cat Jokes* (Chronicle Books), edited by Thomas Nowak.

Knock, Knock.
Who's there?
Annie.
Annie who?
Is Annie-body going to feed me or what?!

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Feline.
Feline who?
Feline fine after my fifth nap of the day!

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Pasture.
Pasture who?
Pasture leg and had to rub against it.

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Tamara.
Tamara who?
Tamara I want tuna for dinner.

STEPHANIE_ZIEBER/GETTY IMAGES

MISSOURI
Homemade
Pop-Tarts

THE BEST BREAKFAST IN EVERY STATE

BY *Emily Goodman and Emily Tyra*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Emiko Franzen*

FOOD STYLING BY *Allison Cebulla, Melissa Franco and Josh Rink*

ALABAMA
Golden Eagle Syrup

Short stacks, buttermilk biscuits and warm waffles all deserve drizzles of this honey-flavored, honey-colored syrup. The slogan on the bottle says it best: This stuff is the "Pride of Alabama." Folks in Fayette feel especially proud, given that the factory has earned the town the nickname Syrup City.

ALASKA
Reindeer sausage

Made with a mix of meat—reindeer (domesticated caribou), beef and pork—these sausages sizzle alongside sourdough pancakes, a staple since the gold rush, when prospectors kept sourdough starter on their person to keep it alive. (Yeast was hard to come by on the frontier.)

ARIZONA
Breakfast burritos

Soft tortillas swaddle seasoned potatoes, scrambled eggs and melty cheese, creating a portable, protein-rich parcel made all the more eye-opening with spicy chorizo, chiles and fresh salsa.

ARKANSAS
Biscuits and chocolate gravy

Some like their sauce thin and silky; others prefer it almost as thick as pudding. But either way, when buttermilk biscuits are anointed with a ladleful of "sopping chocolate," you'll want to soak up every delicious drop.

ARIZONA
Breakfast burritos

CONNECTICUT
French toast

TMB STUDIO

CALIFORNIA
Avocado toast

The Golden State harvests about 90% of American-grown avocados, which make hearty (and heart-healthy) meals when spread on multigrain toast. In a land of such agricultural abundance, you can pair avocado toast with a fruit smoothie and hit your five-a-day nice and early.

COLORADO
Denver omelet

Eggs, ham, peppers, onion and sometimes cheese: You know this diner classic (also called a western omelet), but did you know it was first served between slices of bread? The "Denver sandwich" was popular in the country around 1950. Nowadays, the toast is more likely to come on the side.

CONNECTICUT
French toast

Stars Hollow isn't real (sorry, *Gilmore Girls* fans), but Connecticut has lots of quaint little towns like it—along with diners like Luke's, where French toast was the longtime special. Nutmeggers know their namesake spice is essential to the batter, adding another layer of cozy comfort to the brunch favorite.

DELAWARE
Scrapple

These bricks of pork scraps, cornmeal and spices are big throughout the Mid-Atlantic, but Delaware makes the most of them. Don't dwell on what's inside; just focus on their taste (similar to sausage) and texture: crispy on the outside, tantalizingly tender in the center.

FLORIDA

Guava pastries

While visitors to the Sunshine State might start their days with Mickey waffles, many residents prefer *pastelitos* ("little pastries"), a familiar term even among Florida's non-Spanish speakers. These flaky, glazed Cuban delicacies come with a variety of fillings, some of them savory, but the classic is guava and cream cheese. Of course, what better to wash them down with than a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice?

GEORGIA

Bacon

Before Banana Ball blew up, the Savannah Bananas' main rival was the Macon Bacon, a summer collegiate baseball team—with a mascot called Kevin (get it?). In 2023, the city of Macon added a bacon trail, featuring 19 local eateries with recipes that celebrate the beloved breakfast side. Try all 19 (not exactly a hardship) and earn a season ticket to see the Macon Bacon play.

HAWAII

Spam musubi

The canned meat, pan-fried to perfection with a sweet soy glaze, perches atop sticky rice sprinkled with furikake (a Japanese seasoning mix), all tied together with a strip of toasted seaweed. This grab-and-go bite is the total package, ready to jump-start busy mornings and breezy beach days alike with the sweet-and-umami punch locals love.

IDAHO

Hash browns

Let's call a spud a spud: Idaho produces more potatoes than any other state. Many of them are destined for the shredder, then the fryer, before being served across the country. In fact, the 24/7 breakfast chain Waffle House sources its spuds strictly from family farmers in southeastern Idaho.

ILLINOIS

Apple pancakes

Lines start early at legendary Chicago pancake houses Walker Bros. and Apple Villa, where the sized-to-share baked apple pancakes come with a custardy interior and a bounty of caramelized Granny Smith apples on top.

INDIANA

Cinnamon rolls

Rolled by expert hands and baked to nearly the size of your head, gigantic and generously frosted cinnamon rolls are a must-eat attraction in Indiana's Amish country, including at the region's famous huge flea market.

IOWA

Casey's breakfast pizza

Far from leftovers, these pies at Casey's, the Iowa-based gas station and convenience store chain, are meant for the morning, with cheese sauce or sausage gravy on pizza crust, plus scrambled eggs, cheddar and mozzarella, topped with bacon, sausage or veggies. Grab a slice and a coffee—maybe a scotcheroo too!—and breakfast (to go) is served.

KANSAS

Hash brown casserole

Expect a hearty plate in the heart of America: eggs, bacon, pancakes and—perhaps the (morning) glory of them all—hash brown casserole. The homey delicacy combines hash brown potatoes with cheese, your choice of "cream of ..." soup and a crispy, buttery topping. (Cornflakes are a common choice.)

IOWA
Casey's breakfast pizza

KENTUCKY

Breakfast Hot Brown

The standard version of this open-faced hot turkey sandwich with bacon, tomato and Mornay sauce (a cheesy bechamel) could be considered a brunch item. But many Kentucky cafes move it to breakfast territory by putting it on an English muffin or a biscuit and adding an egg or two to the equation.

LOUISIANA

Beignets

Big Easy mornings come with a shower of powdered sugar over hot, plump squares of fried dough that visitors and locals alike line up for. Between bites, sipping a slightly bitter chicory coffee balances the beignets' sweetness.

MAINE

Ployes

Not quite crepes, ployes (rhymes with *boys*) are similarly thin, griddled goodies that cook on just one side. (No flipping necessary.) With only five ingredients—buckwheat flour, wheat flour, baking powder, salt and water—they let their toppings, including other Maine specialties such as blueberries and maple syrup, be the stars of the show.

MARYLAND

Crab Benedict

Eggs Benedict, meet the Chesapeake Bay. The breakfast classic of poached eggs and Canadian bacon on an English muffin with hollandaise sauce gets a simple swap here: crabmeat for the Canadian bacon.

MINNESOTA
Breakfast hot dish

MASSACHUSETTS
Corn muffins

One of just a handful of states with an official state muffin, Massachusetts picked the corn muffin (perhaps it grew tired of all the cranberries) in 1986. Bay Staters' beloved Dunkin' Donuts also deserves a mention here—although not all Dunkin' locations carry corn muffins, many in Massachusetts do.

MICHIGAN
Cereal

Battle Creek, Michigan, also answers to the name Cereal City. It's where W.K. Kellogg created cornflakes and C.W. Post struck gold with Grape-Nuts, launching a long line of easy meals and enthusiastic mascots including Toucan Sam and Tony the Tiger.

MINNESOTA
Breakfast hot dish

Casseroles are cultural phenomena in the Land of 10,000 Lakes, where you're more likely to hear them called hot dishes. The standard morning model has eggs, cheese and sausage with Tater Tots on top, dontcha know?

MISSISSIPPI
Grits

No single southern state is the ultimate authority on grits. But they are massive in Mississippi, where they combine with notoriously creamy Mississippi Sin dip (featuring cheddar cheese, cream cheese and sour cream) into one sumptuous and scrumptious casserole.

MONTANA
Huckleberry pancakes

MISSOURI
Homemade Pop-Tarts
Ever since it was reported that Taylor Swift had baked homemade Pop-Tarts for Travis Kelce (and other Kansas City Chiefs linemen) to celebrate a win in the 2023-2024 season, similar toaster treats have popped up at pastry shops all over the Show-Me State.

MONTANA
Huckleberry pancakes
Tart-sweet huckleberries find their way into all kinds of treats here, like bear claws and the coffee cake called huckleberry buckle. Families fold freshly foraged huckleberries into pancake batter and griddle it up with pride.

NEBRASKA
Breakfast Runza
Fans of the fast-food brand Runza have been begging for a breakfast version of its eponymous pocket sandwich (which features ground beef and cabbage). The chain occasionally acquiesces—albeit at select stores and on specific days, often to raise money for charity. When a Lincoln location offered ham, egg and cheese Runzas one day in April 2025, the last one was gone by 9 a.m., and the store collected $1,600 in donations.

NEVADA
Steak and eggs
Whether or not you've been up all night (what happens in Vegas ...), juicy steak and eggs ("steggs" for short) with a side of crispy potatoes and toast will get you back on track for the day ahead.

NEW HAMPSHIRE
Corned beef hash

Irish immigrants breathed new life into dinner leftovers of boiled corned beef, cabbage, potatoes and onion by chopping and frying it all up in the morning. Some folks add beets and call it red flannel hash, a nod to the color—and to the attire of New Hampshire's loggers.

NEW JERSEY
Taylor ham/pork roll

The only debate in the Garden State over its favorite egg-and-cheese sandwich is what to call the meat inside it: Taylor ham to those in the north, and pork roll to those in the south.

NEW MEXICO
Huevos rancheros

In the Land of Enchantment, breakfast comes with a question—red or green? That is, which type of Hatch chile sauce to top a plate of sunny-side up eggs nestled on lightly fried tortillas (beans and cheese optional). On the side, a warm sopaipilla dipped in honey helps take the edge off the spice.

NEW YORK
Bagels

It's no secret New Yorkers take pride in their bagels, often citing the softer water in New York City as the reason for their superiority. (In reality, their method of boiling the bagels before baking them makes more of a difference.) A simple schmear of cream cheese will do, but hungrier New Yorkers from Brooklyn to Buffalo might go all in and make it a "BEC" by adding bacon, egg and cheese.

NORTH CAROLINA
Krispy Kreme doughnuts

As long as the Hot Now sign is lit up, indicating that a fresh batch is coming off the conveyor belt, Krispy Kreme can be breakfast, lunch or dinner to Tar Heels. But dunking an Original Glazed into a cup of coffee is a surefire start to a great day.

NORTH DAKOTA
Caramel rolls

Also dubbed the Dakota Roll, this ooey-gooey goodie starts with a pan of pillowy-soft cinnamon rolls baked in a pool of buttery caramel (said with two syllables here: *CAR-mull*). After cooling a smidge, the whole shebang is inverted so the sweet stuff seeps into every swirl.

OHIO
Goetta

GET-uh (an admittedly Americanized pronunciation) goes back to German immigrants adapting their own version of *grützwurst*, a grain-based sausage. The combination of pork, spices and oats (which are right at home in Ohio—Quaker Oats got its start in Akron) has become a Buckeye staple. It's often sliced into patties, pan-fried till crispy and served alongside runny eggs.

OKLAHOMA
Chicken-fried steak

Sooners salivate over chicken-fried steak day and night, so it's up to the rest of the meal to make it feel like breakfast. Handy, then, that Oklahoma officials designated an entire state meal. It stars chicken-fried steak, of course, but also includes sides that work well in the a.m.: grits, biscuits and strawberries.

NORTH DAKOTA
Caramel rolls

OREGON
Toast with marionberry jam

OREGON
Toast with marionberry jam
The deep purple marionberry is an Oregon original: Developed in the state in the 1940s and grown almost exclusively in the Willamette Valley, it is sweeter than a blackberry and makes a juicy jam.

PENNSYLVANIA
Chicken and waffles
Far from the fried fare you find in the South, Pennsylvania Dutch chicken and waffles features a creamy chicken stew spooned over waffles that are often made in a grill pan, not an electric waffle maker. (This is Amish country, after all.)

RHODE ISLAND
Jonnycakes
Our smallest state is deeply divided over these cornmeal pancakes, right down to how to spell them. (Some prefer *johnnycake* or even *journeycake*.) The biggest dispute, however, is over how to make them: In South County, for example, the cornmeal is combined with boiling water, and the cakes come out thick. In Newport County, it's mixed with cold milk for a thinner result.

SOUTH CAROLINA
Shrimp and grits
Also called breakfast shrimp, this dish is a staple of the South, combining creamy grits with creek-caught shrimp from the South Carolina Lowcountry.

SOUTH DAKOTA

Kuchen

Coffee and kuchen (*KOO-ken*, German for "cake") is a combo South Dakotans embrace from daybreak to dessert. This coffee cake is usually filled with custard and fruit (such as apples, peaches, rhubarb or prunes), and it's often so sweet that many who partake in the ritual keep their coffee black.

TENNESSEE

Biscuits and gravy

Sure, lots of southern states lay claim to biscuits and (sausage) gravy. But in Tennessee, Volunteers readily pour the peppery white sauce over buttermilk biscuits. Cracker Barrel, which first opened in Lebanon, Tennessee, before spreading into 43 more states, serves 200 million biscuits each year.

TEXAS

Breakfast tacos

Lone Star mornings have come wrapped in warm tortillas since long before 2017, when breakfast tacos became the official state breakfast. The usual fillings include soft-scrambled eggs, cheese, bacon, and beans or potatoes. Chorizo and cilantro may be optional, but in Texas, hot sauce is not.

UTAH

Utah scone

These scones aren't the traditional tea-time variety: They're fluffy pillows of deep-fried dough (similar to sopaipilla or fry bread), best served warm and slathered with butter, honey or—the best of both worlds—honey butter.

VERMONT

Maple syrup

Whatever the vehicle for it, be it flapjacks or fresh snow (not kidding), pure maple syrup is the only acceptable option in Vermont, which produces the most of it by a mile—more than 3 million gallons last year.

VIRGINIA

Country ham

Nestled next to eggs or tucked into

tender biscuits, country ham is king in the commonwealth. One true southern staple sees it grilled like steak and served with red-eye gravy made from its own drippings and strong coffee. (The bitterness of the coffee brings out the smoky flavor of the ham.)

WASHINGTON

Coffee

Nutritionists may disagree, but in the state that gave us Starbucks, a cup of coffee (when large enough) can be breakfast in and of itself.

WEST VIRGINIA

Buckwheat cakes

In these parts, folks gather for all-you-can-eat "buckwheat feeds," an ode to Appalachian resilience during the Big Frost of June 1859, when early settlers turned to hardy buckwheat after their other crops failed. In pancakes, it lends a toasty, slightly bitter note that's just begging for a good douse of sorghum syrup or apple butter.

WISCONSIN

Bloody Mary

If you're going to drink before noon, you might as well make a meal out of it! Sconnies famously like their Bloody Marys bountiful—with celery, cheese curds, beef sticks, bacon, pickles, dilly beans, olives and maybe even a li'l burger on top. Don't forget the sidecar (a small beer served alongside). It just might be the most Wisconsin way to start the day.

WYOMING

Cowboy breakfast

No fuss. No frills. Just fuel. It starts with coarse coffee grounds simmered in a pot over a fire, with a little eggshell in it to cut the acidity and help the grounds settle before pouring. The rest cooks in cast iron: fried eggs, potatoes and smoky elk sausage, all sizzling together in the skillet.

OUR DATA, OURSELVES?

Wearable trackers—from smart watches to rings—can give you stats on everything from your daily step count to minutes of REM sleep. But does more information lead to better health?

BY *Beth Weinhouse*

YEARS AGO, I read the book *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by Helen Fielding, about a single woman in London looking for love. And I was struck by the fact that, while there was a lot of text devoted to her quest for romance, Bridget often started her diary entries by detailing personal metrics. She listed things like how much she weighed, how many cigarettes she'd smoked that day, how much alcohol she'd had to drink and the number of calories she'd consumed. At the time, that seemed to me like such a stressful and somewhat obsessive way to keep a record of your life.

Fast-forward to today. I wake up and check my wearable tracker to see how many hours I've slept. Then I input what I ate for breakfast so I can monitor my calorie intake. My tracker also counts my steps, and I aim for at least 10,000 each day. And every once in a while, just because the information is available, I monitor my heart rate (during exercise and at rest) and my blood oxygen level. If I wanted, I could also keep an eye on a lot more, such as how much water I'm drinking each day and my stress level at any point in time.

And I'm not alone. It's estimated that more than 1 in 5 American adults now use a wearable biotracker of some kind, including watches, rings, patches, earbuds, clip-on devices and smart clothing. Whether someone's trying to lose weight, get more fit, sleep better or monitor a chronic medical condition like high blood pressure or diabetes, there's a wearable device that can offer relevant information. But there are also questions about whether having access

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Daniel Hertzberg*

to all this information is actually making us fitter and healthier ... and whether there's a danger of too much information being potentially harmful.

Keeping People on Track

As with a lot of new technology (think AI, for example), there are good uses and some not-so-good uses that come with the hardware. When utilized appropriately, these products can indeed help people manage medical conditions or just become more aware of their health and fitness. "Overall, I find the use of health/fitness trackers to be positive," says Seth Creasy, PhD, a metabolism and obesity researcher at the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus. "Trackers help individuals monitor their behavior or health, which can help bring awareness to areas of health that need to be improved. Trackers can also help with motivation and goal setting." For instance, if you're aiming to walk at least 10,000 steps a day and you look at your tracker and see you've walked only 8,000 steps, it may inspire you to go out and walk 2,000 more. Trackers may also nudge people toward their goals by offering reminders or digital incentives in the form of badges, in-app competitions with friends or others, or the quest to "close the rings" on Apple Watches by meeting daily goals.

Many researchers are looking to quantify just how effective trackers are in helping people monitor their health and improve their diet and fitness. While there are few long-term studies

that offer definitive data, a literature review published in the *Lancet Digital Health Journal* found that across short-term studies of almost 164,000 participants, the use of an activity tracker improved physical activity by an average of 1,800 extra steps and about 40 minutes more walking each day, which is a significant change.

In addition to trackers for logging data tied to diet and fitness goals, many people have health wearables, recommended by their doctors, to help manage chronic conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes. For example, continuous blood sugar monitors, in the form of skin patches, mean that people don't have to prick their fingers to monitor glucose levels. The monitors provide nearly constant information, usually delivered to a phone app.

"These devices will never replace the medical expertise of a physician or medical professional," says Creasy, "but they do provide useful information outside of those visits." He adds that even people without chronic conditions can benefit. "For example, an individual may have normal blood pressure at their annual physical, but when they measure it daily at work or at home, they notice it tends to be higher. This may be something to discuss with a physician. And without using the tracker, they would be unaware of it."

The Downsides

But while there are undeniably many benefits to using wellness devices, studies have pointed to a number of potential hazards as well.

The first issue has to do with accuracy and consistency. "The trackers can be accurate for certain metrics like steps, time in bed and heart rate," says Creasy. "However, they aren't able to measure these things accurately all the time." Creasy says he has used the devices in several research studies and has seen numerous occasions where the data says one thing but the person tells another story.

He explains that sometimes, for example, wearables struggle to detect the difference between sleeping time and sedentary behavior. "That's a problem," he says, "since sedentary time is typically thought of as a negative health behavior, and sleep is a positive one." While tracker technology continues to improve, there's always a margin for error in the data.

Another problem is how people understand and use the data that's provided. "Information viewed in isolation doesn't provide the complete picture," says Jessica Matthews, a doctor of behavioral health and a professor of integrative wellness in the College of Health Sciences at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. "What's important is that one piece of information be used as part of a greater whole. That includes objective data like blood pressure readings and glucose monitor readings."

With medical devices, especially, experts recommend that people discuss

Heart Rate
84 BPM
75 BPM, 1m a
Distance
4.04 mi
Elevation Gain
1,264 ft
Moving Time
22:04
Avg Power
319 W
Avg Speed
11.0 mi/h
Calories
393 Cal
12AM
6AM
12PM

their use and information with a health professional.

The Psychological Toll

Perhaps the biggest potential problem with using these products is how they can affect the psychological health of those who are susceptible. Experts explain there's a tendency for some people to fixate on the information their tracker provides and to become overly reliant on it. And for perfectionists, failing to meet their fitness or sleep goals can cause feelings of stress or failure.

Monitoring calories consumed and calories expended can help some people lose weight. But others may become discouraged and give up the effort if the data they're seeing isn't what they were hoping for. And for others, an ongoing stream of information may exacerbate eating disorders by encouraging a constant fixation on diet and calories. Similarly, says Matthews, "for some people, exercise can become compulsive in a very unhappy way. Is it great to track steps? Not for that person."

While trackers can deliver an impressive amount of information, more is not necessarily better for everyone. That's especially true for people who are prone to experiencing a physical symptom and then becoming obsessed with it. "Imagine if you have a technology that allows you to do that throughout the day," says Matthews. "You notice that your heart rate is higher than it was 10 minutes ago. Now it's slower. It can open the door to a kind of neurotic behavior." For these people, more information can be a source of physiological as well as psychological stress.

Phil Lane, MSW, a psychotherapist in private practice in Pennington, New Jersey, recommends that people who have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder or who are prone to feeling anxious, especially over health issues, be aware that using trackers might make matters worse. He recommends checking with a therapist or mental health clinician about possible drawbacks before deciding to use one.

Signs of Over-Tracking

The many kinds of activity monitors, meant to give us more information about our bodies, can conversely get in the way and distance us from ourselves. Experts cite a tendency for people to rely on the information from the device rather than tune in to what they're feeling (for example, looking at a tracker to see how well you slept, rather than noticing how rested you feel).

"I use them myself, and I recommend them in my practice," says Haley Perlus, PhD, a sport and performance psychology expert. "But I think when we become too attached, too reliant, we lose self-reflection. We need to assess how we're feeling instead of relying on a device." Some signs of overreliance, says Perlus, are when people can't leave the house without the device or believe their workout or steps don't "count" because they weren't wearing a tracker. "And if someone asks

you how your workout is, and you say 'I don't know ... I have to go look at my tracker,' that's a sign you may need to put it down."

"It's a red flag if you're looking at these numbers for an unnecessary amount of time," adds Lane. "That's not a helpful behavior, and it can get in the way of living your life. Do you need a wearable to tell you if you're feeling stressed? I would say no. If you're having a panic attack, you don't need a device to tell you you're having a panic attack."

If you're using technology, be very aware of your relationship to it, recommends Lane. "The human brain likes measurements," he says. "There's a psychological draw to information like this. But it's not always healthy."

Adds Matthews: "Trackers provide an opportunity for people to get greater insights about their health and fitness, but they don't tell the whole story. And they shouldn't come at the expense of listening to your body. If we're only worried about the data, we might actually miss the most important data of all."

I plan to take all this advice to heart and be less like Bridget Jones. I'm not going to give up my health monitor, but I'll start using it differently. Instead of consulting the tracker in the morning to see how many hours I've slept, I'll ask myself how rested I feel. And while I want to continue using it to encourage me to get my 10,000 daily steps, I'll take breaks from it so I can tune in to my body. Because we are all so much more than a set of numbers and data. RD

TIPS FOR TRACKING SMART

"Used correctly, health monitors help people not only achieve goals, but also set goals," says Perlus. "You can see what you've been doing, know your baseline and see if you can challenge yourself and increase it. And they give you real information to make sure those goals are appropriate. They're great for accountability, education and giving us information. And I think they're fun, which is a good motivator."

Here's how to get the most out of your device:

TAKE IT ONE GOAL AT A TIME

"Be clear on what your goal is," says Matthews. Today's technology can

monitor so many different things that the possibilities can be overwhelming. Sleep? Stress? Exercise? Diet? Pick one to start.

CHOOSE THE PRODUCT THAT FITS YOUR NEEDS

Online reviews can help you select a reliable device that's within your budget and measures what's most meaningful to you. If improving your sleep is your most important goal, look for a tracker that measures sleep accurately and offers lots of information around that specific topic. "And if your main goal is to increase your step count, then a simple pedometer may be all you need," says Matthews. "You can buy one for a few dollars, and there have been studies showing they're actually quite accurate."

HAVE A PLAN FOR HOW TO USE THE INFORMATION

Just capturing your data won't make you healthier. These devices provide information, but unless you take action and change some habits, there won't be any benefit. Most wearables link to health and fitness apps that can suggest actions based on the data that's gathered. For instance, if you sit at a desk all day, the apps can trigger reminders to get up and move every half hour or so. If the tracker indicates you're not sleeping as long or as soundly as you optimally should be, the apps can offer tips on how to improve that. If the tracker detects that you're stressed, the apps can offer breathing exercises or guided meditation sessions to help. And if you want to start a new exercise routine, the apps can help you choose one that meets your fitness level.

BE AWARE OF YOUR BODY SIGNALS

Don't ignore what your body is telling you. "You don't want to have the information from a tracker overtake or hijack your awareness," says Matthews. "Ask yourself, 'How am I feeling today?' and 'Do I feel rested?' The body knows when it's tired."

KEEP THE INFORMATION IN PERSPECTIVE

Recognize that one piece of information doesn't tell the complete picture. Many of the things that trackers measure go through normal fluctuations throughout the day. Blood pressure increases with activity. Blood sugar varies depending on what we eat. Heart rate, stress level and fatigue also vary. You may need to discuss the data from your device with your health-care provider to understand what it means.

TAKE PERIODIC BREAKS

"I would challenge people who are using a fitness tracker all the time to go out and move their bodies without it for a day or a week," says Perlus. "Sleep for a week without looking at the data. It's good for self-reflection and a good tuneup for yourself."

When I Feel Most American

Readers share the moments when their patriotism surges

BY *Reader's Digest Readers*

Basking in Old Glory

The flag flying in my yard reminds me of those I saw at military posts all over the world while serving in the Army. I think of helping to preserve our freedoms in the United States and other countries seeking support. I'm also proud of my Hungarian wife's becoming an American citizen so she could enjoy the same freedoms and pledge her allegiance to the flag too. It reminds me of those who have served, serve today and will serve.

—BRUCE MIZELL *Seymour, TN*

Where Dreams Come True

Visiting Disney World or Disneyland feels quite American to me. It was all the plan of visionary Walt Disney, who had the tenacity and grit to make it happen even though he had little more than a suitcase and a dream when he ventured to California. Still, he started one of the most recognizable companies in the world. His story feels like a fairy tale most possible in America.

—DIANE SCHROEDER *Norman, OK*

Paying It Forward

Strangely, I feel proud when paying income taxes, and I have never objected to doing so. Someone else's taxes paid for the National Science Foundation fellowship that allowed me to study engineering science. Those degrees helped launch a great career and earn income that goes toward taxes to hopefully fund for others opportunities like the one I received.

—CHARLES GASTON *Lititz, PA*

Building a Legacy

My grandfather was a coal miner of Welsh descent, living and working in Pennsylvania. He built a summer cottage at Elk Lake in the Pocono Mountains with lumber he got to keep as payment for tearing down an old house. To this day, I feel blessed to stay at the cottage every summer. My granddaughter is the sixth generation to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

—CINDY HANSEN *Toms River, NJ*

Home Sweet Home

I came to the U.S. from Vietnam as a refugee when I was 15. After years in the States, visiting Vietnam for the first time was emotional—I recognized my homeland but it was no longer my home. I didn't feel that I belonged as I once did and was reminded of how much the U.S. had changed me. That's when I understood: I'm an American now. When I cleared customs at LAX, an agent said, "Welcome home." Tearing up, I realized, America really is my home.

—THUY VU *Fountain Valley, CA*

EVGENYATAMANENKO/GETTY IMAGES (SOLDIER). CAVAN IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (CHAIRS). ANNA KURZAEVA/GETTY IMAGES (HEART)

Sharing the Heavens

Sidewalk astronomy is a way to share the universe with strangers. It's like playing guitar on the street, minus the open case. I set up my telescope in a city park on a clear night and the show begins. "Have you seen Saturn through a telescope before?" I'll ask passing strangers, inviting them to take a look. "I can see the rings! It looks like the photos!" people exclaim with delight. "If you're not yelling, you're not seeing it," I say. "So, where are you from?" They tell me, in a tapestry of accents and places that take me around the globe as we wander across the sky with my telescope. It makes me feel hospitable, curious, bold. Sharing the universe is when I feel most American. Keep looking up.

—JOSH URBAN *Rustburg, VA*

Moments of Triumph

Over-the-top events like the Academy Awards or the Super Bowl feel very American. We have the gift and ability to turn anything here into a moment of global participation. We're a scrappy group, and we take advantage of opportunities to create, succeed and win.

—JOANNA GLEASON *Kalispell, MT*

States and Unions

My wife and I were vacationing in Colorado when two men walking by said "Isn't it great?" with huge smiles. We had no idea what they were talking about, and they told us the Supreme Court had just legalized same-sex marriage on the federal level. We'd married years earlier when it became legal for us in California, but to cope, we often joked about the 1,138 rights we'd lose when we crossed state lines. But that day, we truly felt welcomed into the fold of America.

—LISA MILLER *Portola, CA*

Standing Tall, Together

A few weeks after 9/11, I returned to work in lower Manhattan. My employer issued flag lapels, which I proudly wore. As I looked around my subway car, I realized almost everyone wore something similar. There's lots of diversity in New York City, but in that moment, we were all just Americans, looking at one another and nodding. I certainly don't miss the cause or its repercussions, but I do sometimes miss the camaraderie.

—JOHN ALBERT *Deposit, NY*

IHOR LUKIANENKO/GETTY IMAGES (TELESCOPE). ANNA KURZAEVA/GETTY IMAGES (STAR)

Swearing In

Flags, military bands, flyovers and "The Star-Spangled Banner" at sporting events all inspire patriotism. But I feel the most American when I see immigrants being sworn in as new citizens on TV news broadcasts. Hearing the Pledge of Allegiance and acknowledging the hard work it took for them to reach that moment takes my breath away.

—ANNE RETTIG *Perrysburg, OH*

Our Great Debates

It sounds counterintuitive, but I feel most American when I disagree with U.S. policies and actions. Let me explain. I'm a Vietnam War veteran fortunate enough to have returned home healthy. But I can't ever forget that 58,000 Americans died, and I don't always support our actions overseas. I take pride and comfort in being able to openly disagree with our government, and I feel most American when I criticize my country from a place of concern and love.

—ED BARRETT *Pratt, KS*

Don't Mail It In

Sending mail as we do in the U.S. is a minor miracle. I can pay less than a dollar, and someone will hand-deliver my letter to my grandmother thousands of miles away. The idea that someone—a fellow American—makes the effort to reach my house nearly every day? An overlooked blessing.

—MADISON CHAN *Watertown, MA*

Gaining Perspective

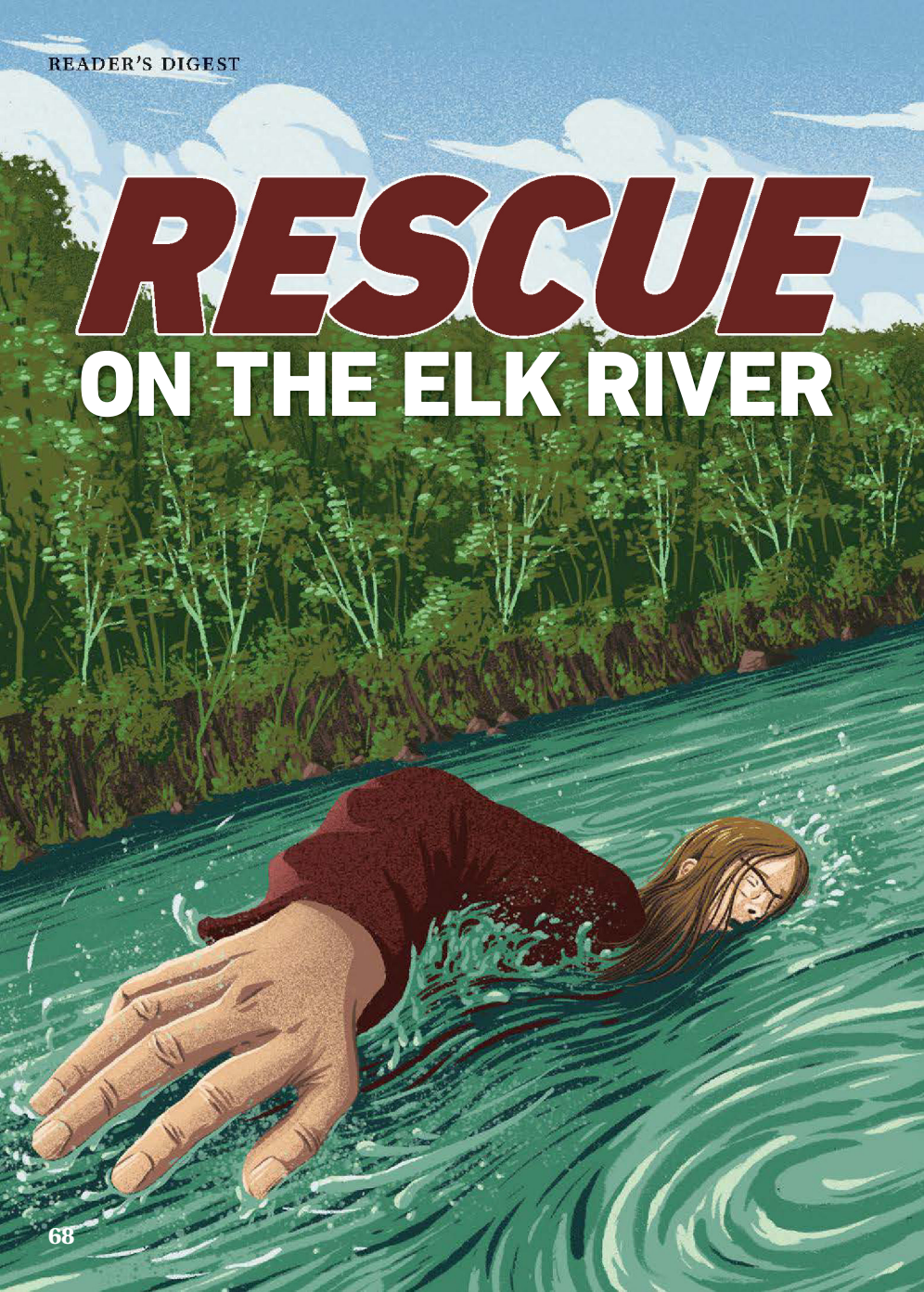
My wife and I fulfilled a lifelong dream of taking a National Geographic trip to Botswana. Many of our guides were young adults and promising students from the area, and they expressed admiration for Barack Obama's then-recent inauguration. They had visualized the world as ruled only by those who took power by force rather than by law and were amazed that leadership change took place without discord or military intervention. The trip was quite memorable, for a variety of reasons.

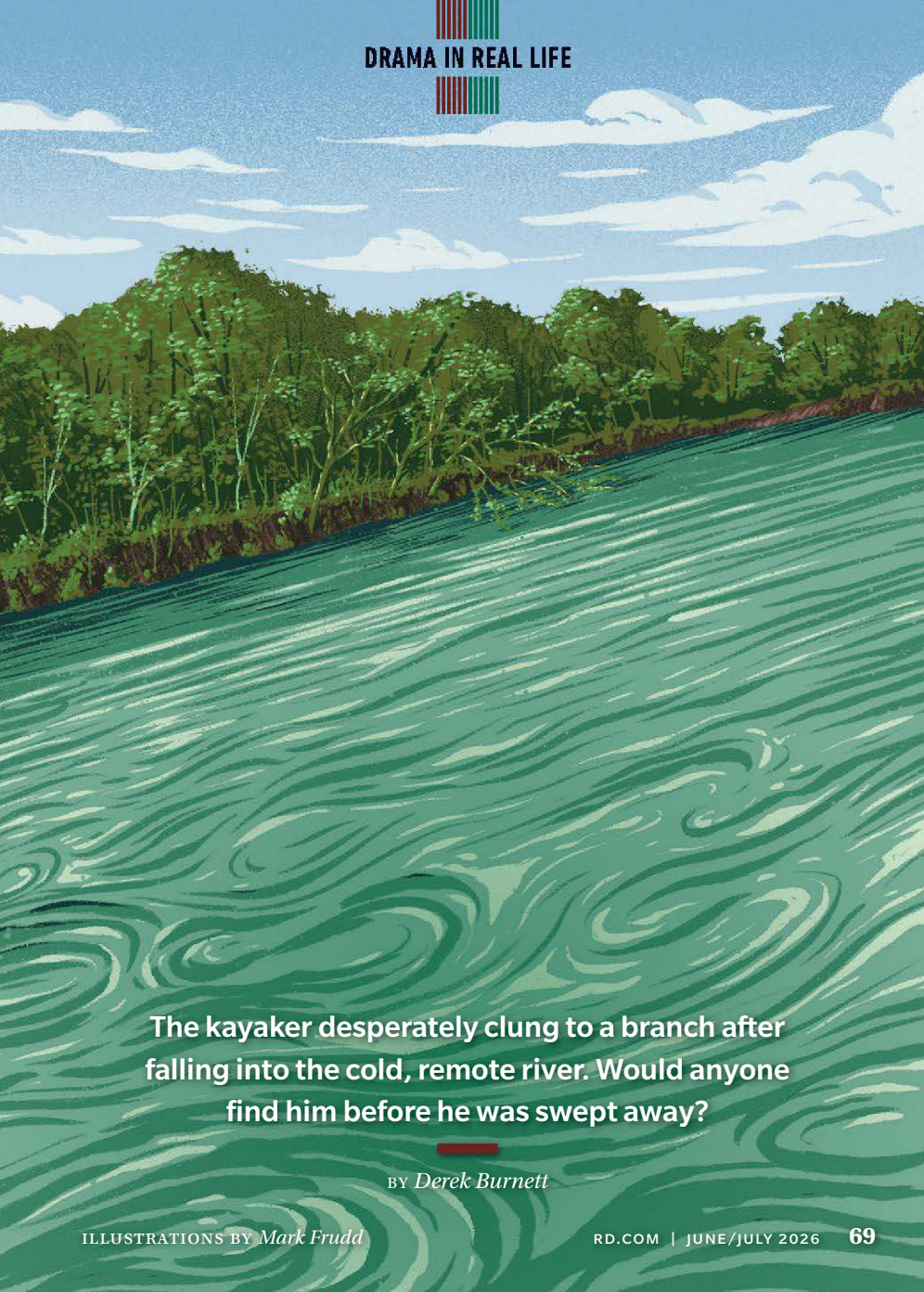
—JOHN MILLER *Bemidji, MN*

CALLING ALL PENNY-PINCHERS, CHEAPSKATES, SKINFLINTS AND SCROOGES

What's the boldest thing you've done to save a buck? There are classics like watering down dish soap and washing sandwich bags for reuse. But a restaurant charging $4 more for the same burger just because one has cheese will just about drive you to bring your own slice from home. See terms and share the clever way you save at **rd.com/moneysaver**. No judgment here—we applaud resourcefulness!

RESCUE ON THE ELK RIVER





The kayaker desperately clung to a branch after falling into the cold, remote river. Would anyone find him before he was swept away?

BY *Derek Burnett*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Mark Frudd*

Even in Alabama, late March is early in the year for fishing, but this was 31-year-old Caleb Bennett's third outing of the season. It was midmorning on Good Friday, March 29, 2024, when he loaded his 10-foot kayak into his pickup and drove, fittingly enough, to where Easter Ferry Road crosses the Elk River, about 25 minutes from his home in Athens, Alabama. His was the only vehicle parked at the out-of-the-way boat launch, a simple clearing surrounded by empty woods. From the concrete boat ramp jutting out of the steep riverbank downstream from the parking area, it was a clear view 100 feet upstream to the bridge over the river.

Bennett had the day off work from his job as a warehouse manager and distribution dispatcher for an industrial supply company. His plan was to cruise upstream past the bridge until he found a creek mouth, fish it for bass, catfish or crappie for a couple of hours, then hurry home to catch his 4-year-old daughter's T-ball game that afternoon.

The water temperature was just over 50 degrees, and the day was sunny, in the mid-60s. That was a nice change after the rainy weather the week before, which had swollen the river and amplified its current, visible against the opposite bank some 160 feet away. On the shore, Bennett loaded the kayak with three rods and reels, bait, a tackle box and a fish finder. At the stern, he attached a small trolling motor.

Something was missing, though—he'd forgotten his outriggers at home. Normally he'd fasten them, pontoon-like, on either side of the little kayak to improve its stability. He looked out at the muddy river. Its surface was smooth, but sticks and leaves rushed past in the current. He'd have to be extra careful.

A burly man standing 6 foot 3 and weighing more than 240 pounds, Bennett eased himself into the boat, started the motor and pushed off, angling upriver toward the far bank, which was less obstructed by overhanging branches and debris. He'd gotten most of the way across when a confusion of currents—probably caused by the supports of the bridge—began spinning him around.

Uh-oh, he thought. *This is probably not a good idea.*

Working the tiller, he pulled the kayak out of its spin and nosed it upriver. But almost immediately, it fell into another spin.

OK, this is definitely not a good idea. Let's head back.

He pointed the kayak back toward the boat launch, but a crosscurrent broadsided him, and the little craft flipped. One second he'd been sitting upright; the next he was submerged in the shockingly cold, steadily moving water.

FOR 40-year-old John Reinhardt to have ended up at that same spot on the Elk

River that morning is what believers might call a miracle and skeptics might call a fluke. He was spending the Easter break camping with his four kids, along with his sister Pattie Smith and her four children, on family land about 11 miles outside Athens. His own kids, who ranged in age from 3 to 13, had surprised him by asking if they could go fishing during their camping week. Reinhardt couldn't remember the last time he'd fished, but he had agreed and bought some gear. There were plenty of good spots closer to their land, but Reinhardt, without being able to articulate why, decided they'd fish near the Elk River's Easter Ferry Road bridge.

While Smith and her kids went to collect some more gear, Reinhardt and his children pulled into the parking area around 11:30 a.m. The kids were chattering excitedly while Reinhardt parked and turned off the engine. As he stepped out of the truck, a loud gunshot rang out, alarmingly close by. He ducked back into the truck and retrieved his pistol from its locked case under the driver's seat.

"I want you kids to stay here," he said. "I'm going to see what's going on."

Even as he spoke, a second shot shattered the peace of the still day.

Gun in hand, Reinhardt stalked toward the far edge of the clearing, scanning it closely as he went. What was this? Someone "plinking" (casual target shooting)? Or was it something more serious, like a shoot-out? Or …

A third ringing shot cemented in his mind the other possibility: These were distress shots.

"Hello?" he called out.

From the river, he heard a faint "hello" in reply.

"Are you good or not good?" he yelled.

"Not good," came the answer.

Reinhardt ran toward the riverbank.

THINGS HAD GONE from bad to worse for Bennett. When he'd fallen into the river, the frigid water had taken his breath away, jangling every nerve. Surfacing, he saw the kayak drifting beside him, belly-up. He tried to swim for it, but his clothing had become instantly waterlogged, and his rubber boots had filled with water. His life jacket, buoyed by the water, jammed up against his throat, choking off his breath.

Swallowing back panic, he kicked off his boots and swam toward the boat. *If I can climb back up in there* … Kicking hard, he threw his arms over the hull and clutched at the submerged decking on the other side. Then he leaned back to flip the kayak—it didn't budge. He tried a few times, but the boat seemed impossible to turn over.

Bennett knew he was wasting his time and energy while the current tugged him inexorably along. He needed to get back to land, but he'd never be able to climb up the steep banks of the near shore. His only hope was the boat ramp, some 145 feet back across the river. When he looked at his target, he realized with a jolt that he didn't have much time—the current had already brought him dangerously far downstream. If it swept him past the ramp, there wasn't another place to come ashore for miles, and he'd be overcome with exhaustion and hypothermia long before he got there.

He bid his kayak and gear farewell and began swimming furiously toward the boat ramp. The ill-fitting life jacket continued to choke him, hindering his breathing and his ability to swim. He unzipped it and tore it off, and the current snatched it from his grasp. Unencumbered but now in more danger than ever, he kept swimming. Eddies from the currents washed over him and filled his mouth with water. Already, the cold was stiffening his limbs.

Bennett looked up. There was no way he was going to make it to the ramp. But there in the water, some 25 feet from shore, was an overhanging branch from a large poplar tree growing right beside the ramp. If he could catch it, maybe he could pull himself to shore.

His hope renewed, he swam with everything he had. *If I don't make it to that branch, I could die here,* he thought. Without a second to spare, he reached up and caught the branch just before the current swept him out of reach.

It was so slender—perhaps an inch in diameter—that he wondered whether it would snap. With his weight pulling on it, the end of the branch now lay in the

water. Bennett pulled his elbows over it and found that he could rest with his legs trailing behind him in the current. But now what? Let go, and swim the remaining 25 feet to shore? The current would carry him downriver away from the ramp. Climb up the branch? That, he realized, had been a wild fantasy, given his weakened state.

Then Bennett remembered: *My phone!* But when he reached into his pocket, he found that the phone was gone. As he checked his other pocket, his hand brushed against the Glock 21 pistol he always wore on his hip when he fished, in case of snakes or coyotes. Maybe he could signal for help.

He drew the pistol from its holster and held it in front of him. He had 13 rounds in the magazine. Shivering, he watched the bridge, waiting for a vehicle to show itself.

At last a car came into sight, and he fired three shots toward the opposite shore. The car didn't stop.

Minutes went by. Then another car, another three shots. No luck.

Bennett's situation was growing desperate. He could scarcely feel his legs, and he could tell that his cognition was slowing. At last another vehicle passed over the bridge. He fired once, twice—and then nothing. He ejected the dud round and fired a third shot. The car kept going.

Three rounds left.

Another car droned by on the bridge. Bennett fired his final three shots and

dropped the now-useless pistol into the river. But a second after his very last bullet hit the opposite shore, he heard a voice. "Hello?"

"HOW ARE YOU FEELING?" Reinhardt called to Bennett.

"Freezing cold," Bennett said. "Man, I'm barely able to hold on."

"I'm going to get you out of there," Reinhardt said. "Hold on."

Bennett could not have picked a better rescuer than John Reinhardt. These days, Reinhardt worked as an information technology project manager and volunteered as a youth pastor, but he had fought in Afghanistan in the U.S. Army infantry, had received training in combat water survival and combat trauma, and had been a certified lifeguard back in high school. As a disaster-recovery volunteer, he'd pulled people out of car wrecks, set bones and rescued puppies. He saw his skills and experiences as a responsibility to help others.

Reinhardt ran back to his truck. "There's somebody in the water who needs help," he told his kids. "I'm going to have to get into the water." He turned to his eldest, 13-year-old Maelie. "I'm going to need you to help me," he told her. He instructed 8-year-old Macie to stay in the vehicle and look after her younger two siblings, ages 4 and 3.

He knew it was only a matter of time before the exhausted Bennett lost his

grip on the branch and was carried away by the current. If only he'd brought a rope along, he could have thrown it out to Bennett and hauled him ashore.

Unfortunately, he didn't have all his usual emergency equipment with him, as he'd recently bought this truck and hadn't yet transferred over all his gear. He and Maelie scrounged for any kind of rope in their vehicle and Bennett's. All they came up with was a 6-foot ratchet strap, an oversized trash bag and a roll of duct tape.

With the bag and the duct tape, Reinhardt knew, they could improvise a flotation device that he could use. And Maelie could hang on to the ratchet strap in case he could use it later. He would have to get into the water and swim Bennett back to shore—a dreadful thought, considering how much Reinhardt despised cold water.

Still standing next to his truck, he called 911 and gave the dispatcher a "nine-line"—a terse, just-the-facts accounting of what was going on and what was needed. He explained that he'd be getting in the water, so the first responders should prepare for the possibility of two victims, not just one. The dispatcher had more questions, but Reinhardt cut in. "Hey, I need to get off the phone. I got to go help this guy."

He hung up and handed the phone to Maelie. "Be ready to call 911 if anything happens to me," he told her.

They ran down to the water, where he swooped the trash bag through the air to inflate it, then taped it shut. With Maelie by his side, he said a quick prayer. "Give me a calm heart, God. Guide my actions. Protect him, and protect me."

The base of the tree that Bennett was clinging to stood just downstream of the boat ramp, leaning at a 45-degree angle over the water. Reinhardt stripped down to his underwear, climbed along the trunk above the current for a few feet, drew a breath and jumped into the water, holding the makeshift flotation device above his head.

REINHARDT'S HEAD WENT UNDERWATER AGAIN AND AGAIN, AND HE HAD TO FIGHT TO RESURFACE.

Within seconds, he reached Bennett. "Here, hold on to this," he gasped, passing Bennett the inflated trash bag. But Bennett couldn't grasp the bag with his numb fingers, and it drifted off down the river. *My fault, not his*, Reinhardt thought. *I made it too big to hold on to.*

"It's OK," he said. "We're going to swim to shore."

"I don't think I can use my legs," Bennett managed to say. He'd been in the water for nearly an hour and was in the throes of Stage 2 hypothermia, with difficulty speaking and thinking, numbness, loss of motor function.

Bennett draped his arms over Reinhardt's shoulders from behind, and they set out. Almost immediately, the

current and Bennett's weight pushed Reinhardt's head underwater. He was a strong swimmer, but his 5-foot-9 frame weighed only about 155 pounds, a good 90 pounds less than Bennett. He'd taken on a herculean task.

He swam with all his strength, angling toward the boat ramp, desperate to hit shore at the clearing, where they'd have a chance of making it up the bank, which was about 8 feet high. But it wasn't working.

Again and again, Reinhardt's head went underwater and he had to fight to resurface, gasping and gagging. Long experience had taught him to tamp down panic, but now he could feel it coming over him. *Oh, crap*, Reinhardt thought, *we're both going down the river*. He had nothing left in the tank—his muscles felt dead with fatigue.

So he said a silent prayer: *God, I need your strength right now to help him.*

With a sudden burst of energy, he finished the upstream swim, coming to rest at the base of the tree, where a mass of its roots jutted out of the muddy bank.

The water was too deep to stand, so Reinhardt laid Bennett's chest over a slick muddy outcropping and guided his arms through loops formed by the tree's roots. The two men lay there for a long moment, spent—vomiting from exertion and from swallowing water. Now, how to get Bennett up onto dry land?

WITHIN A COUPLE of minutes, a deputy from the Limestone County Sheriff's Office arrived and peered down over the bank. "What do you need?" he called.

"Rope," Reinhardt answered. "Do you have any?"

"I don't."

"Maelie," Reinhardt said, "give him the ratchet strap."

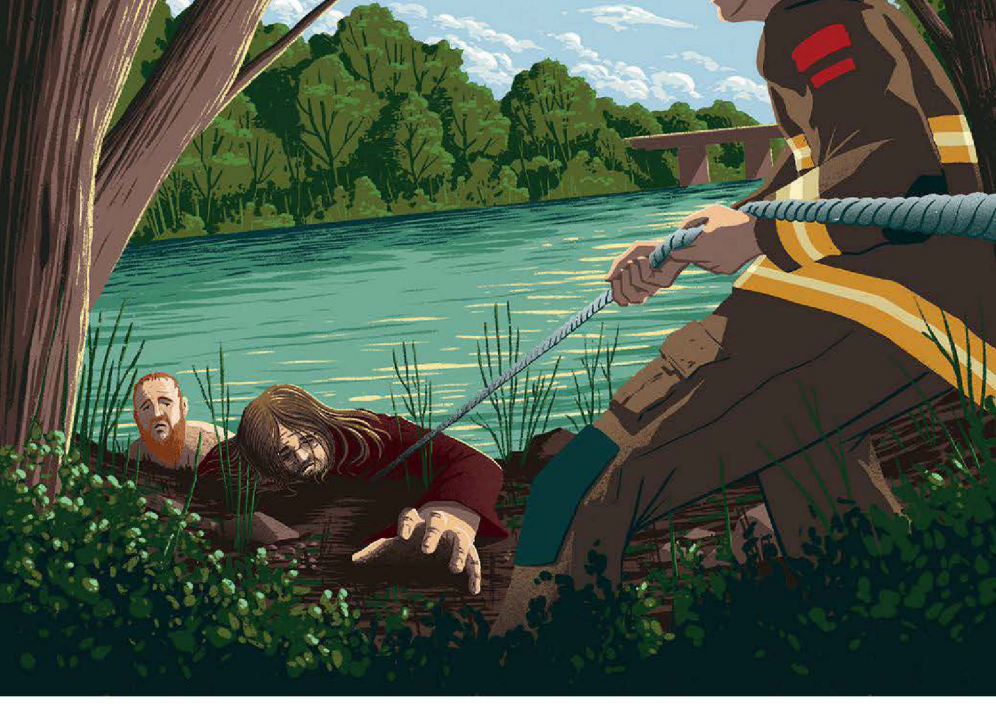
The deputy came partway down the embankment and lowered the strap to Reinhardt, who used it to fashion a makeshift harness, passing it around Bennett's chest and fastening it to his belt loop. By now, Bennett was slipping in and out of consciousness.

For 10 minutes, the deputy pulled from above while Reinhardt pushed from below. But the deputy couldn't get any footing on the steep, muddy embankment, and Reinhardt, barefoot and in his underwear, had nothing to stand on. He'd been in the water for at least 20 minutes and was in the early stages of hypothermia himself—shivering and going numb in his extremities.

At last, a volunteer firefighter showed up with a 20-foot rope. He passed one end down to Reinhardt, who quickly tied it to the ratchet strap and then scrambled up the bank. The three of them, standing on dry ground, pulled, but Bennett kept slipping back down the bank, his limbs and clothing snagging in the roots.

"Hold on," Reinhardt said.

He climbed back down the bank and slid, again, into the frigid water. He set his right shoulder under Bennett's butt, dug his hands and feet into the muddy bank, and called out "One, two, three,



lift!" With all his strength, he pushed up while the firefighter and deputy pulled on the rope. Bennett's nearly lifeless body rose a few inches.

Reinhardt braced himself and called the cadence again. Inch by inch, using every ounce of their energy, the three men hauled Bennett up onto dry ground. He lay there, unable to move, scarcely able to speak.

Smith had arrived with the gear, and when she saw her brother shivering in his boxers, covered in mud and exhausted, her mouth dropped open. "Just another day in the life of John Reinhardt," he quipped.

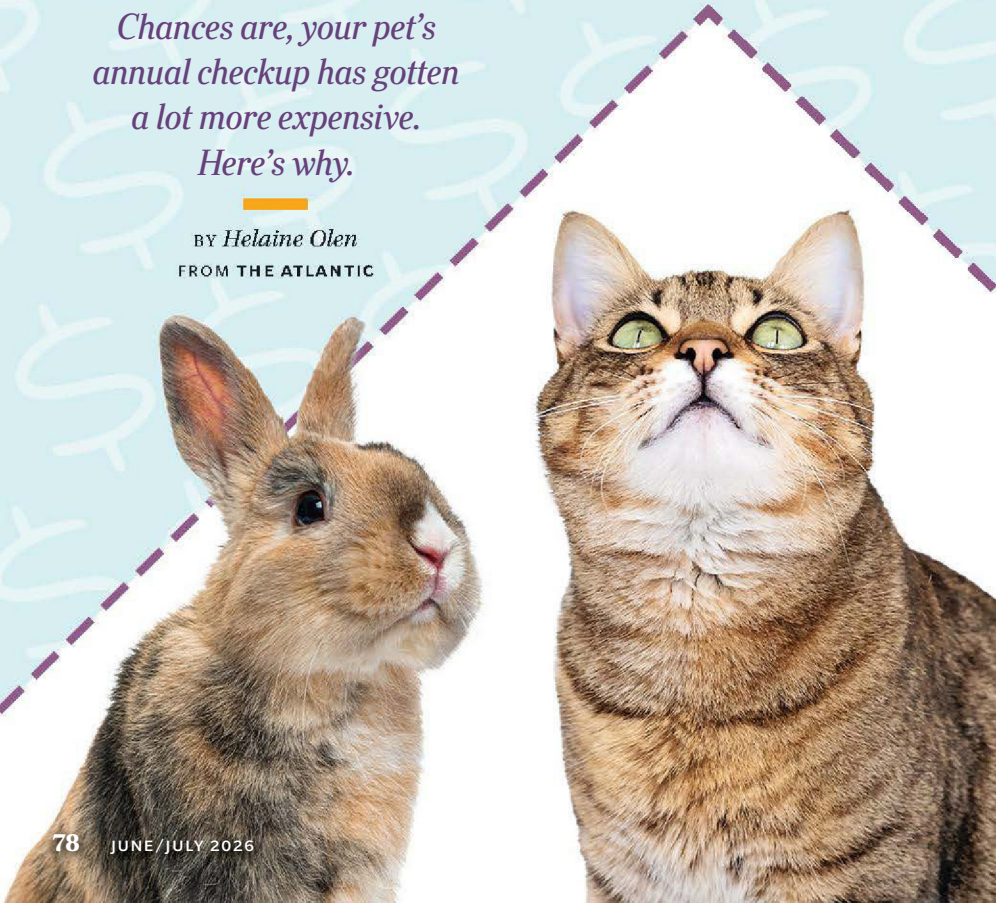
Moments later, the EMS arrived, loaded Bennett onto a stretcher and took him to Athens-Limestone Hospital. His core temperature had dropped into the low 80s, near the threshold of potentially deadly Stage 3 hypothermia. He later estimated he'd been in the water for nearly 90 minutes. He missed his daughter's T-ball game, but by that evening, he was resting in his parents' home with his little girl by his side. He was sore and exhausted, yet blessedly alive.

It wouldn't be until almost bedtime that evening, huddled beside the campfire at his family's campsite, that Reinhardt would really feel warm again. But for the moment, back at the Easter Ferry Boat Launch, he dried himself off, put his clothes back on—and unloaded the kids' rods and reels from the truck. They'd come here to fish, after all. R

The Business of BIG VET

Chances are, your pet's annual checkup has gotten a lot more expensive. Here's why.

BY *Helaine Olen*
FROM THE ATLANTIC



PREVIOUS SPREAD: GLOBALP/GETTY IMAGES (BUNNY). CRIS CANTÓN/GETTY IMAGES (CAT). HAPPY MONKEY/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (DOG). FIREFLYLIGHT/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (MONEY)

IN THE PANDEMIC winter of 2020, Katie, my family's 14-year-old miniature poodle, began coughing uncontrollably. After multiple veterinary visits and more than $1,000 in bills, a veterinary cardiologist diagnosed her with heart failure. Our girl, a dog I loved so much that I had written an essay about how I called her my daughter, would likely die within nine months.

Katie survived for almost two years. My younger son joked that Katie wasn't going to let advanced heart failure get in the way of her life goal of never leaving my side, but the truth was that I was the one who wouldn't let her go. Katie's extended life didn't come cheap. There were repeated scans, echocardiograms and blood work, and several trips to veterinary emergency rooms. One drug alone cost $300 a month, and that was after I had shopped aggressively for discounts online.

People like me have fueled the growth of what you might call Big Vet. As household pets have risen in status—from mere animals to bona fide family members—so, too, has their owners' willingness to spend money to ensure their well-being. Big-money investors have noticed. According to PitchBook, a financial data company, private equity poured $51.6 billion into the veterinary sector from 2017 to

2023, seemingly convinced that it had discovered a foolproof investment. Industry cheerleaders pointed to surveys showing that people would go into debt to keep their four-legged friends healthy. The field was viewed as "low-risk, high-reward," as a 2022 report issued by Capstone Partners put it, singling out the industry for its higher-than-average rate of return on investment.

In the United States, corporations and private equity funds have been rolling up smaller chains and previously independent practices. Mars Inc., of Skittles and Snickers fame, is, oddly, the largest owner of stand-alone veterinary clinics in the United States, operating more than 2,000 practices under the names Banfield, VCA Animal Hospitals and BluePearl. JAB Holding Co., the owner of National Veterinary Associates (NVA) and its 1,000-plus animal hospitals (not to mention Panera and Espresso House), also holds multiple pet-insurance lines in its portfolio. Shore Capital Partners, which owns several human healthcare companies, controls Mission Pet Health, a 2025 merger of Mission Veterinary Partners and Southern Veterinary Partners, with more than 900 locations.

As a result, your local veterinarian may well be directed by a multinational shop that views caring for your fur baby as a healthy component of a diversified revenue stream. Veterinary industry insiders now estimate that 25% to 30% of practices in the United States are under large corporate umbrellas, up from 8% a little more than a decade ago. For specialty clinics, the number is closer to 3 out of 4.

UP TO 30% OF VETERINARY PRACTICES ARE CONTROLLED BY CORPORATIONS.

And as this happened, veterinary prices began to rise—a lot. Americans spent an estimated $41 billion on health care and related services for companion animals last year, up from about $29 billion in 2019. Even as overall inflation got back under control in 2024, the cost of veterinary care did not. In March of that year, the Consumer Price Index for urban consumers was up 3.5% year over year. The veterinary-services category was up 9.6%. If you have ever wondered why keeping your pet healthy has gotten so out-of-control expensive, Big Vet just might be your answer.

To get a sense of what might happen when the profit-seeking dial gets turned up too high in veterinary medicine, we need look no further than human health care. An extensive body of research shows that when private equity takes over a hospital or physician practice, prices and the number

JAGODKA/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (DOG). IMAGEPIXEL/GETTY IMAGES (MONEY).

of expensive procedures tend to go up. A study found that serious medical errors occur more frequently after private equity buys the hospital. Another study found that costs to patients rise, too, sometimes substantially. And that's in a tougher regulatory environment. In veterinary medicine, there is no giant entity like Medicare capable of pushing back on prices. There is no requirement, in fact, to provide care at all, no matter how dire the animal's condition. Payment is due at the time of service, or, usually, there is no service.

WHENEVER I TOLD people I was working on this article, I was inundated with Big Vet complaints. Catherine Liu, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, took her elderly pit bull mix, Buster, to a local VCA animal hospital when he became lethargic and began drooling excessively. More than $8,000 in charges later, there was still no diagnosis. "Sonograms, endoscopy—what about just a hypothesis of what the symptoms could be? Nothing like that at all was forthcoming," Liu told me. Shortly before Buster died, a veterinarian in private practice diagnosed him with cancer. The disease, Liu said, had not once been mentioned by the veterinarians at VCA. (Mars Petcare, VCA's parent company, declined to comment on the episode.)

I don't mean to single out VCA here—in fact, I should note that a VCA veterinarian's medical protocol was almost certainly responsible for my dog's longer-than-expected life. One reason Mars-owned chains attract outsized attention for their high costs and customer service failures is that the company actually brands its acquisitions. That's unusual. A study conducted by Arizona consumer advocate Todd Nemet found that fewer than 15% of corporate-owned practices in the state slap their own brand identity on their veterinary acquisitions; most keep the original practice name, leaving customers with the illusion of local ownership. (When I asked Thrive Pet Healthcare, a chain majority-owned by TSG Consumer Partners, about why the company doesn't brand its clinics, a spokesperson replied, "We realize the value of local hospital brands and are committed to preserving and supporting them.")

Indeed, some pet owners told me they realized that ownership of their veterinarian's practice had changed only after what they thought was a routine visit resulted in recommendations for mounds of tests, which turned out to have shot up in price. Paul Cerro, the CEO of Cedar Grove Capital Management, which invests in the pet industry, said this issue is frequent in online reviews. "People will say, 'I've been coming here for four years, and all of a sudden I'm getting charged for things I've never been charged for,' and they give it one star."

Big Vet denies charging excessive prices. VCA Canada, for instance, recently told the *Globe and Mail* that prices can increase after an acquisition

RON LEVINE/GETTY IMAGES (BACKGROUND). CYNOCLUB/GETTY IMAGES (CAT). SPIFFYJ/GETTY IMAGES (MONEY)

because "the quality of the care, the quality of everything we offer to them, goes up as well." A spokesperson for Mars told me, "We invest heavily in our associates, hospitals, state-of-the-art equipment, technology and other resources." NVA did not directly answer a question about why veterinary prices were rising so rapidly, instead sending me a statement that read, in part: "Our vision is to build a community of hospitals that pet owners trust, are easy to access, and provide the best possible value for care."

Do rising prices really just reflect higher quality care? There may be some truth to this, but there is also evidence to the contrary. A study published in 2023 in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, for example, found that veterinarians working for large corporations reported more pressure to generate revenue, whereas those working for independent practices reported higher levels of satisfaction for such things as the "ability to acquire new large equipment" and the "ability to get new/different drugs." Preliminary research by Emma Harris, the former vice president of Vetster, a veterinary telehealth startup, found significant differences in pricing between corporate and privately owned veterinary clinics in the same geographic region. Usually, she told me, the increases "occurred immediately after the sale to a private equity–owned group."

All of this doesn't sit well with many in the sector. Veterinarians tend to be idealistic, which makes sense given

that many of them rack up six figures in student loan debt to pursue a profession that pays significantly less than human medicine. One veterinarian, who worked for an emergency-services practice that, the vet said, had raised prices by 20% in 2022, told me, "I almost got to the point where I was ashamed to tell people what the estimate was for things because it was so insanely high." (The veterinarian asked for anonymity out of fear of legal repercussions.)

Others described mounting pressure to upsell customers following acquisition by private equity. "You don't always need to take X-rays on an animal that's vomited just one time," said Kathy Lewis, a veterinarian who works at a Tennessee practice purchased in 2021 by Mission Veterinary Partners. "But there was more of that going on." Prices increased rapidly as well, she said, leading to customer complaints. (Mission Veterinary Partners did not respond to requests for comment.)

The combination of wheeling-and-dealing and price increases in the veterinary sector is beginning to attract the government's attention. The Federal Trade Commission required, in a 2022 consent decree, that JAB seek prior approval before purchasing any emergency or specialty clinic within 25 miles of one it already owns in California and Texas for the next decade. In her written comments, then-FTC Chair Lina Khan said she feared these one-by-one purchases could lead to the development of a stealth monopoly. (JAB denied any wrongdoing.) And in the United Kingdom, where corporate ownership is higher than in the United States (even the practice originally owned by the author of the classic veterinary novel *All Creatures Great and Small* has been rolled up), government authorities conducted a two-year investigation into high prices and market concentration after an initial inquiry drew what regulators called an "unprecedented" response from the public.

PETS ARE PUT DOWN BECAUSE THEIR OWNERS CAN'T AFFORD THE VET BILLS.

PET OWNERS USED to have an easier time accepting the short lives of domestic animals. Few people were taking the barnyard cat or junkyard dog in for chemotherapy or ACL surgery, to say nothing of post-op aquatic physical therapy.

"When we started out over 20 years ago, you had to live near a veterinary teaching hospital to have access to something like an MRI," said Karen Leslie, the executive director of the Pet Fund, a charity that aids people with veterinary bills. "Now it's the standard of care. It's available basically everywhere—but that starts at $2,000."

ANNA RESHETNIKOVA/GETTY IMAGES

Is Pet Insurance Worth It?

Pet owners know that those licks and cuddles don't come cheap. The ASPCA puts annual routine wellness visits to veterinarians at $225 for dogs and $160 for cats—that's not including medical emergencies or illnesses, which can run into the thousands. Because many people can't afford such bills, it begs the question: Is pet insurance worth it? For most people, yes, says MarketWatch. "More than 82% of the customers we surveyed say having pet insurance is worth it," reports the financial news website. But insurance can feel like a crapshoot. So, before you insure Muffy, here are things that can affect the cost:

Annual limit: This is the maximum your insurer will reimburse in a policy year. Lower annual limits cost less up front, but if there's an emergency and you go above the limit, you'll pay out of pocket.

Deductible: The amount you pay before coverage kicks in. The higher the deductible, the less you pay monthly. It also means you pay more per claim.

Reimbursement rate: The percentage of covered costs insurance pays after you meet your deductible. A lower rate means you'll have lower monthly premiums but higher costs for care. A higher rate means you'll pay more monthly but less for care.

Pet breeds: Because some breeds, especially purebreds, are predisposed to certain illnesses, their owners tend to pay more for pet insurance.

Pet age: Most insurers raise their monthly fee as the pet ages.

Preexisting conditions: Most insurers do not cover preexisting conditions. If it isn't covered, chances are it'll cost you.

Where you live: Some states are cheaper than others. For instance, pet owners in West Virginia tend to pay less for insurance than their counterparts in Massachusetts.

—Reader's Digest editors

Big Vet, in Leslie's view, helped fuel an increase in expensive services. The same medical progress that has helped humans beat back once-fatal diseases is doing the same for cats and dogs, extending their life spans to record lengths. But only if you have the money to pay for it. Some pets—my Katie, Liu's Buster—receive one expensive test or treatment after another, sometimes helpful, sometimes not. Other equally loved pets may go without basic care altogether, or even fall victim to what the industry calls "economic euthanasia," where pets are put down because their owners can't afford their veterinary bills. (Pet insurance, widely promoted by the industry, is unlikely to help much. Uptake rates are in the low single digits, a result of relatively high costs and often-limited benefits—see the sidebar on the opposite page.)

The American Veterinary Medical Association's tracker shows that veterinary visits and purchases of heartworm and flea-and-tick medications went down last year compared with 2024, even as practice revenues went up, suggesting that some owners are having trouble affording routine preventive care. The market researcher Packaged Facts found that more than a third of pet owners say that they would take their animal to the veterinarian more often if it were less expensive.

The truth is that pets have never received all the care they needed, and that wealthy pet owners have always had access to more care. But the emergence of Big Vet and the injection of cutthroat incentives into a traditionally idealistic, local industry threaten to make these problems far worse. It portends a future in which some pet owners get shaken down, their love for their pets exploited financially, while others must forgo even basic care for their pets.

I don't think Katie, who loved all other animals, would approve. R

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Ne'er the Twain Shall Meet

Shakespeare mentioned the number two nearly 700 times in his plays, but he sometimes called it by another name: *twain*, an Old English word for *two*. The Bard used *twain* 47 times, including in this line from one of his most famous tragedies: "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain." The word largely died out over the next 300 years, though in 19th-century Mississippi, boatmen measuring the river depth would shout a warning if the river was shallower than 2 fathoms, or 12 feet—the cry, "Mark twain!" When Samuel Clemens was looking for a pseudonym, he decided to borrow this boating call.

ROB EASTAWAY, IN THE BOOK MUCH ADO ABOUT NUMBERS

KH_ART/GETTY IMAGES

NATION
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FUNERAL
CRUISE

Been to a Destination Wedding?

What About a Destination Divorce Party?

"Buddymoons," funeral cruises ... these days, vacations aren't exclusively for relaxing. They can also be an event!

BY *Joey Green*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Drew Bardana*

BEFORE HER DESTINATION wedding in Seville, Spain, my cousin Sharon, an American, ordered six *ramos* ("bouquets") for her bridesmaids. The local florist, hearing *remos*, delivered six wooden oars tied with ribbon.

Half the memories of destination weddings are the disasters they spawn. Take the Tuscany destination wedding where the bride-to-be shared on Reddit that she had offered to help a struggling relative with airfare. It was a nice gesture, but unfortunately, word spread, and soon a dozen family members and their plus-ones also expected the couple to pay for their travel. And that's when the lovebirds decided to elope.

These days, destination celebrations aren't limited to nuptials. A recent AAA survey found that 76% of Americans planning trips in 2026 say they'll base them on life milestones like graduations and anniversaries. With that in mind, you might consider these destination celebrations for some of life's equally passport-worthy occasions.

Destination Divorce Party

When Alison of Memphis, Tennessee, finalized her divorce at age 40, her friends didn't send flowers. Instead, they handed her round-trip airline tickets to Miami. "We called it my Singlemoon," she wrote on Reddit.

The six women arrived at their hotel, where the staff greeted Alison with a "Just Divorced!" tiara and sash. They toasted with "Alimony-tinis" and shot glasses printed with the slogan "Take a Shot, I Just Untied the Knot."

"It felt silly at first, but then like a fresh start," Alison says. "Especially when the concierge handed me a cupcake with a ball and chain on it, and we went clubbing until 2 a.m."

Sure enough, Evite data shows that divorce party invitations have soared to a record high. Some hotels advertise "divorce party packages" with spa treatments and breakup playlists including songs like "I Will Survive," "Since U Been Gone" and "Truth Hurts."

"The act of throwing a divorce party may not only serve as a ritual act to acknowledge the end of a chapter," says social psychologist Theresa DiDonato of Loyola University Maryland. "It could also reflect a way to embrace a new identity as a single person, separate from the ex."

Need party favors? Walmart sells "The End of an Error" balloons and "I Do, I Did, I'm Done" banners. Etsy offers a candle labeled "Smells Like Freshly Signed Divorce Papers." And Amazon features stickers printed with "So Long, Mr. Wrong" and temporary tattoos that say "I Never Liked Him."

Destination Funerals

To honor her father's final request, Andrea from Tucson, Arizona, researched ways to scatter his ashes in Hawaii. She discovered that Hawaii Ash Scatterings offers private memorial voyages in the form of sunset cruises. As the small chartered boat drifted off Oahu, a

Hawaiian *kahu* ("minister") began a soft chant while his assistant lifted a conch shell to his lips and blew a long, echoing blast. Family members cast biodegradable leis and flower petals that floated gently on the water, and the kahu released monarch butterflies. A sunset dinner on deck completed the evening.

"They took care of everything, from food and drinks to booking a ukulele player," Andrea recalled on Tripadvisor.

Cruise lines like Royal Caribbean now quietly offer sea burials with private ceremonies on deck—provided you bring the required paperwork (death certificate and cremation certificate), the ship is at least 3 nautical miles from shore (per EPA regulations) and the ashes are contained in a biodegradable urn that is tossed into the sea. No literal scattering of ashes is allowed, as other cruise guests frown on Grandpa's ashes fluttering into their mai tais.

Doreen deVillalvilla from Apopka, Florida, honored her husband this way and found the process smoother than she expected. A ship's officer led her small group to a lower deck, where she tossed the urn into the wake as sunlight shimmered on the water. Two days later, she posted on Cruise Critic that she received a certificate marking the exact longitude and latitude of the burial at sea—a touching memento of a serene farewell.

She is not alone. Nearly 6 in 10 Americans have attended a funeral in an unusual setting, according to the National Funeral Directors Association. Some choose to scatter a loved one's ashes in Yosemite National Park (permit required); others march to the cemetery

in a jazz funeral procession through the streets of New Orleans. Cultural anthropologist Anita Hannig, author of *The Day I Die*, says she sees destination farewells as "part of a larger trend … of families transforming traditional funeral rites into something much more personalized and individually curated to match the spirit of the departed."

Which brings us to this stellar goodbye. Celestis Memorial Spaceflights hosts launches of cremated remains at Vandenberg Space Force Base in California. When the company blasted the ashes of *Star Trek*'s James "Scotty" Doohan into orbit, his widow, Wende Doohan, described the experience as surprisingly joyful: "You just know they are somewhere yelling, 'Yahoo!'"

Destination Buddymoon

A tropical honeymoon turned awkward quickly when one newlywed discovered an unexpected surprise waiting in the resort lobby: her husband's best friend and his wife. As she explained on Reddit, her husband had secretly invited them. The honeymoon quickly morphed into a group trip—shared excursions, group dinners and "zero intimacy." When the angry bride finally confronted her oblivious groom, he shrugged and suggested they could take a private trip "another time."

The "buddymoon"—turning a romantic, once-in-a-lifetime getaway into a traveling circus—has become increasingly common. A survey conducted by Prezola, a U.K.-based wedding gift list service, showed that 14% of engaged couples consider the idea. Some newlyweds are shunning the once-sacred honeymoon because so many couples now live and travel together before marriage. They see their shared honeymoon as a way to extend the wedding celebration into one long, happily ever after-party.

Historically, "the real purpose or goal of a honeymoon is for the couple to connect and spend quality time—alone," says relationship expert Terri Orbuch, PhD, author of *5 Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage from Good to Great*. "The honeymoon is the time to bond and remind each other why they married in the first place." But today's couples, she says, "are oriented toward making the celebratory fun last longer. After putting

so much work, time and money into the wedding, they want the celebration with everyone to keep on going."

Of course, inviting friends or relatives to join a conjugal escape tends to escalate "for better or worse" to decidedly worse. Group honeymoons reportedly often backfire when friends party late (forcing the couple to choose their posse or each other), relatives wrest control, or the newlyweds pretend to have food poisoning just to get some time alone. Yet the appeal persists. And with privacy cut from the guest list, "just married" no longer means "do not disturb."

Destination Birthday (Gone Wrong)

On TikTok, a young woman named Lizzy shared a video of the moment she surprised her mother with airline tickets to Bucharest for her birthday, an idea sparked by hearing her mom say she wanted to go there. Lizzy expected tears of joy. Instead, her mother just looked confused. Turns out her mom had actually said she wanted to "book a rest," not a foreign vacation. But instead of a quiet weekend at home, she was suddenly packing for Romania.

Destination birthday celebrations sound great in theory. You travel somewhere fabulous, toast another trip around the sun and post pictures on social media to make all your other friends jealous. What could possibly go wrong? (Besides everything.)

According to *People*, one anonymous woman's 40th birthday plans backfired after she asked her friends to join her for a weeklong Caribbean vacation costing more than $5,000 per couple. When the group refused to take out second mortgages for the privilege, she gave them the silent treatment. So much for turning 40 gracefully.

If you're invited to a celebration outside your budget, personal finance expert Erin Lowry, author of *Broke Millennial Talks Money*, suggests: "Go with the compliment sandwich. Start with a positive, state that you can't go and include a reason why, then end with an alternative. It could look like this: 'I absolutely want to celebrate with you, but unfortunately taking a trip just isn't in my budget right now. Let's do happy hour or dinner when you get back and you can tell me all about the trip!'"

Of course, not everyone gets the memo. *People* reports that another woman suggested a trip to Asia for her 23rd birthday, but when her friends found that too expensive, they planned a cheaper getaway for the same weekend—without her.

Destination Midlife Crisis Trip

Ah, middle age—a time of self-reflection prompted by the realization that too many birthdays can kill you.

At age 45, retired Navy veteran Nick Kush didn't buy a shiny sports car, the standard midlife crisis splurge. Instead, he bought thermal gloves and Arctic boots. A few months later, he was skydiving over Union Glacier, 690 miles from the South Pole, with a team of

fellow veterans on a mission to free-fall over all seven continents in seven days (and they wound up doing it in six days and six hours, a new world record).

Antarctic Logistics & Expeditions organized the team's first leap (the outfitters also offer a weeklong package that includes tent camping on the polar plateau and, for most thrill-seekers, a heart-pounding $36,000 price tag). The minus-25-degree wind chill put a deep freeze on any regrets about aging.

"Only a handful of people on earth can say they've skydived over Antarctica," says Kush. "My biggest fear isn't dying. It's being stuck to a recliner when I'm 85."

Kush and his teammates' adventure raised money for Folds of Honor, a charity that provides scholarships for families of fallen or disabled service members. "When you retire from the military, everything stops," says Kush. "You've got to find a new mission. I realized I can still live a great story, and that's what I'm trying to do."

"Experiencing early signs of an aging body in middle age may awaken a desire to get started on one's bucket list," says psychologist Margie Lachman, a professor at Brandeis University.

Indeed, the marketing firm Grand View Research reports that travelers in their 50s now make up 26% of the adventure tourism market. And adventure companies are cashing in on the midlife itch, selling high-risk, high-budget escapes to travelers eager to prove they've still got what it takes—plus ibuprofen and a heating pad. An Australian outfit literally called Mid Life Adventures runs long-distance motorcycle treks through Mongolia, India and Nepal, pitching them as unforgettable experiences for 40- to 70-year-olds with the time, money and desire to step beyond their norm.

Destination Tastings

Nowadays, foodies venture far beyond Napa Valley for wine tours, Kentucky for bourbon pilgrimages and Portugal for olive oil tastings.

"Picklesburgh is something you have to attend at least once in your life," says Lori of Hanover, Maryland, who visited the multiday pickle festival in Pittsburgh with three friends. The event features everything from pickle ice cream to pickle beer, pickle-themed Christmas ornaments, a pickle-eating contest and pickle bobbing. Lori and her group sampled pickle margaritas, fried pickles and pickle fudge—a funky blend of tangy, salty and perplexing. Attendees can also ride a bucking mechanical pickle under a gigantic pickle–shaped balloon. One YouTube reviewer called Picklesburgh "an experience I will always relish."

"What we eat and drink can bring us joy," says Cheryl Stanley, a senior lecturer at Cornell University's Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration. "And traveling so we can expand our knowledge about a place, food or beverage, or to meet a cheese maker or sake producer, can

take that joy to the next level by creating lasting memories."

In Waikiki, Hawaii, the Spam Jam Festival celebrates the state's favorite canned meat with Spam tacos, Spam sushi and Spam wontons, drawing tens of thousands of devoted fans. "If you're looking for creativity, this is it," commented Tiffany from Fairfax, Virginia, on Yelp. "I'm a food explorer, so I wanted to try all the unique Spam offerings—and I'll admit, I didn't really like most of them," she confesses, although she concedes that the Spam Wellington "was pretty good."

Some tastings veer toward outright daring. In Wiscasset, Maine, the annual Sustainable Supper with Edible Insects at the Maine Tasting Center begins with a cocktail hour featuring drinks like an Oaxacan margarita rimmed with crushed toasted agave worms. Rather than formal hors d'oeuvres, guests nibble on toasted grasshoppers and roasted crickets. A four-course dinner features dishes like mealworm dumplings with beetle chili crisp, and the event ends with party favors of insect-based sweets, including scorpion suckers.

One guest, Sam Chatto of South Portland, Maine, says the ants speckling the cornbread "looked like poppy seeds." Then came the real test. "A taco with beetles and mealworms was visually intimidating," he says. "There was no mistake that you were eating bugs." So, how were they? "Great," says Chatto. "They may have added a crunch, but in reality, that faded into the background."

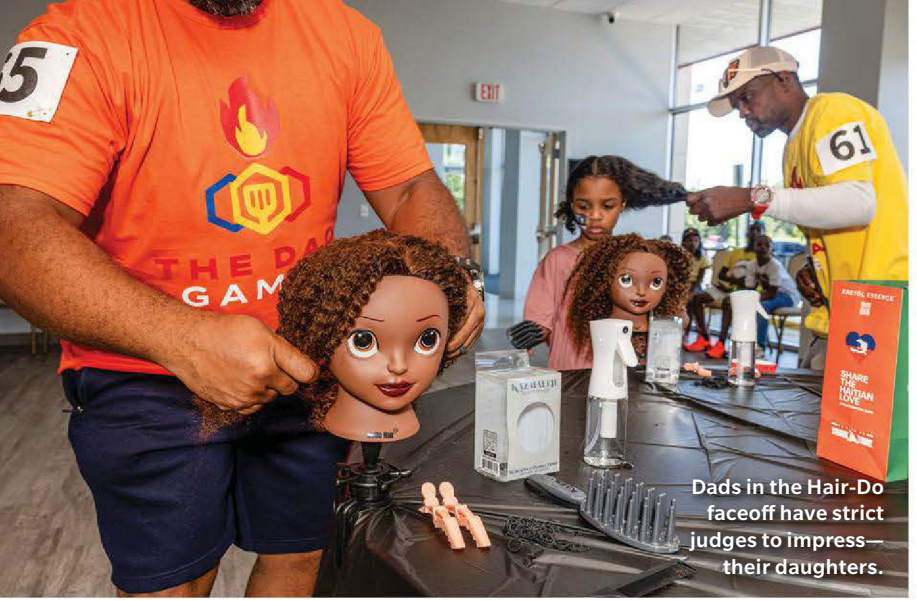
When all is said and done, it's not just a matter of taste. It's a matter of place—and how far you're willing to go. RD

365

WELCOME TO THE INAUGURAL DAD GAMES!

From grocery bag dashes to diaper change races, competitive games at the first-time event had 250 fathers showing off their skills—and bonding over their experiences

BY *Sophia Solano*
FROM **THE WASHINGTON POST**



Dads in the Hair-Do faceoff have strict judges to impress—their daughters.

ALEX KENT/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST (2). CHRIS/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (PREVIOUS BACKGROUND)

DON ALLEY TRAINED decades for this moment. It finally came, 21 years later, in a Maryland parking lot.

The event: One-Trip Grocery Bag Challenge.

The goal: carry 15 shopping bags and a case of water inside from the trunk of an SUV in a single journey.

His competition: two representatives from other teams made up of dozens of fellow fathers.

Alley, whose children ranged in age from 3 to 21, is the kind of dad who goes to all of his kids' sports practices and who loves competition. The tedious act of transporting groceries from the car to the kitchen is a matter of personal pride. So when the rest of his team had finished shoving cereal boxes, cans of beans and bottles of juice into canvas totes and throwing them in the back of the car, he gathered all the items he could and took off toward the doors.

Because of a technical error, the teams had to redo their attempts. Alley's teammates doubted whether he could replicate his first performance, which had ended in a sliding finish and a bloody knee.

"I got four kids, and you think I got no energy?" he told them. "I got nothing but energy!"

This was the inaugural Dad Games, a competition series developed to celebrate the contributions of fathers and male role models in the home. Alley was one of 250 participants who came to an Upper Marlboro, Maryland, church last August to fight for the title of Dad of Dads—a designation attained by winning events like the Diaper Change Challenge and the Wiffle Ball

Home Run Derby. They were supported by their partners and kids (who, with tiny black-and-white striped shirts and stopwatches around their necks, refereed many of the events).

The event also came with prizes, including a $250 D.C. Improv gift card for the winner of the Dad Joke Battle, and a signed Stephen Curry jersey for the winner of Trash Can Basketball. But organizers hoped the games would also signify an ongoing fight for community, recognition and connection among fathers in an era of isolation and loneliness.

"Take the competition seriously," Dad Games founder Joshua DuBois said during his opening remarks. "Yourself? Not so much. We don't need anyone yelling at a 7-year-old referee today."

And with that, the games began.

The idea to create an Olympic-style test of fatherhood came at the end of the NFL season. DuBois's group of friends looked away from the television at the barbershop in Washington, D.C., where they'd watched Sunday night games, and realized that no more football meant no more weekly hangouts.

They started discussing ways to stay connected. Meanwhile, DuBois began noticing that his wife was part of more intentional parenting communities than he was—WhatsApp groups for moms at their kids' schools, and Instagram communities of parents sharing tips. Why didn't the fathers around him have a place to gather and talk about parenting?

"It was a bit of a push from her being like, 'Well, if that doesn't exist, create it,'" DuBois says.

The idea for the Dad Games emerged through discussions with DuBois's fraternity brothers and prayer groups. The venture is now a registered nonprofit in Maryland. But it wasn't DuBois's first spin in the fatherhood programming space. During President Barack Obama's administrations, DuBois led the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the White House, where he helped the president launch fatherhood initiatives like

IT'S PART OF AN EFFORT TO COMBAT ISOLATION WITH THE HELP OF HOMEMADE SLIME.

national educational tours, mentoring programming and the nonprofit My Brother's Keeper. DuBois said he has found a passion for working in the men's mental health space.

"Men tend to self-select into loneliness, into isolation, and assume that no one wants to hear about their problems," he says. "They feel like they've got to navigate this thing called life alone."

DuBois intends to take these games on the road: He and the organization's

ALAN/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

volunteers have already brought the Dad Games to Atlanta, and they hope to host it in Nashville, Los Angeles and other cities across the U.S., as well as hold a national Dad Games championship competition. To DuBois, it's all part of an effort to combat that isolation, with the help of homemade slime and lots of crumpled paper aimed at trash bins.

"When you get something wrong, you're wondering if you're the only person who got that wrong," he says of fathering. "When you feel the joy of getting something right, you want somebody to celebrate that with. Or, you know, 'My kid just struck out three times in a row at T-ball,' and it's hard to strike out at T-ball, so they're really bummed. Those are the kinds of conversations you want to have with other dads."

After the conclusion of many raucous rounds of Trash Can Basketball, a game involving crumpled paper, wastebaskets and a ticking clock, the men moved on to the Dad Joke Battle. They climbed the stairs to a stage, grabbed the mic with the swagger of any stand-up comic, and delivered a spitfire stream:

"What was the one-legged man doing at the ATM? Checking his balance."

"Did you hear about the restaurant they opened on the moon? The food was great, but it had no atmosphere."

"How does a man satisfy his wife in bed?"

At that line, DuBois leaped in with all the gusto of a dad catching a teetering cup, covered the microphone with one hand and asked the competitor where this joke was going (this was, after all, a family-friendly event). They consulted. Finally, the audience got the punch line: "By sleeping on the couch."

Nana Fredua Agyeman, a New Jersey father of two visiting family in the area, wasn't planning to join this competition. But his 12-year-old son begged him to.

"I do it for my kids," he said from the stage before a one-liner about nacho cheese. "I push them out of their comfort zone and they push me out of mine."

All of the participants' kids seemed to yell in unison when the Diaper Change Challenge got underway. With a dozen dads, stacks of diapers and piles of infant onesies, the objective was to be the first to change and dress a plastic baby doll. Amid the (human) kids' shouts, many of the dads cheered for one another.

"Sometimes you can lose yourself or not feel appreciated," says Terry Mundell, a father of two from Lanham, Maryland. But to him, this event felt like "pouring in each other's cups right now and showing appreciation for one another."

Meanwhile, at the Slime Chef Battle, DuBois's 7-year-old daughter, Adelaide, stuck her fingers into dozens of jars filled with thick, sparkly goop.

"It's not sticky, but it's not perfect," she declared from the judges' table. "Not stretchy, but great creativity."

The Dad Games helps fund free therapy and counseling for fathers who seek it.

ALEX KENT/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST (2). SHOWCAKE/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (FLAGS)

"This kid is brutal," called out one competitor.

On the other side of the room, fathers competed in a Daughter's Hair-Do faceoff, tasked with prepping mannequins' hair for "a day at school." As the judges came around, one dad finished wrangling his doll's strands into twists—and plucking loose tufts out of the brush he had used before they could see.

Toward the end of the five-hour event, organizers realized that the point system they'd devised to determine a champion didn't account for the competitors who had to leave midway for sports practices and birthday parties. No Dad of Dads was crowned that day.

But the dads didn't seem to mind. Back on the battlefield—between rounds of the One-Trip Grocery Challenge—men chatted, laughed and discussed their kids, sports teams and hobbies. One took off his baseball cap and placed it on his waddling son's head, shielding his big, round eyes from the sun. Another lifted his daughter high in his arms and spun in a wide circle. She giggled as the yellow tulle on her dress floated around her.

"It's great to see fathers out here interacting, and then having our kids out here, watching us do things together," says Rodney Anderson Jr.

A few minutes earlier, he had been showered with pats on the back and handshakes when he won the challenge, along with the prize of grocery store gift cards, for his team.

As Anderson spoke, his toddler hung off his calf. "All positivity, right? It's really about being that role model." R

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My Wish for AMERICA

A special collaboration with the New York Historical

On our country's 250th birthday, imagine a big cake with millions of candles, each representing a wish. Now imagine that one of those candles is yours. What's your wish for America? The New York Historical asked that all-important question, and more than 10,000 people, in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., shared their best thoughts for our nation's future. To read more and to share your own, visit *onour250th.org*.

CURATED BY *Jody L. Rohlena*

DAVORR/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (TITLE CARD); MATRUF AHMED/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (RULED PAPER)

INSPIRATION

My wish is for America the Beautiful to forever stand as that shining light on a hill. Honesty plus opportunity plus hard work equals success. Our nation still provides us with everything we need when we try.

—Tina from Idaho

GRATITUDE

America, thank you for the freedom to live and love in the beautiful land we call home!

—Alexis from South Carolina

Thank you, America, for all the glorious songs and sights and sounds. Keep making your music—teach the children, stay strong.

—Rocky from New York

PATRIOTISM

For Americans to learn to love this beautiful nation even if you don't like the guy or gal in charge. For all, whether Democrats or Republicans, to come together as one and be Americans first before we are anything else.

—Val from California

Happy 250th birthday, America! I wish for patriotism to increase among young people. I wish for an end to poverty and homelessness.

—Stephanie from Tennessee

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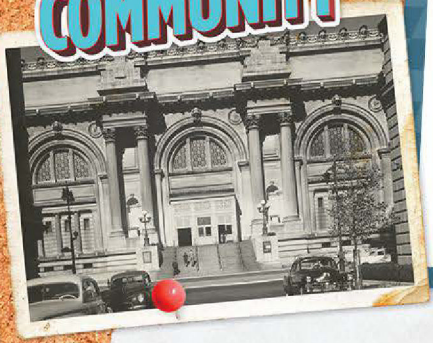
COMMUNITY



I wish that we could return to celebrating learning and knowledge by supporting our libraries and museums. I wish that we could return to making communities and the acceptance of others, even if they are different.

—Morgan from Alaska

On this, America's quarter-millennium anniversary, I wish the American people more social interaction with your neighbors and countrymen, while cutting down dramatically on social media.

—Wesley from Illinois

DEMOCRACY

A thriving democracy, healthy public debate, strong and independent press, and the relentless pursuit of the enduring ideals of liberty, justice and equality for all. May we keep working together to make the dream real and honor our shared humanity.

—Kristin from Michigan

I pray that we return to the desires of our forefathers and their intention to create "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

—Bonnie from Arkansas

I wish for democracy to shine bright in my country. I plan to be part of the solution!

—Gary from Connecticut

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SERVICE

I hope that we will restore the faith in what used to be known as public service; that is, elected representatives serving all the people. Not self-service, not for personal financial gain or power. For the benefit of the people.

—Jennifer from Washington, D.C.

The problems we currently face can only be resolved if we work together. The people of America have always joined together to resolve conflict. Let's do it now.

—Sherry from Florida

HOPE

That we are actively pursuing big, bold aspirational futures that are worthy of our children and their children and the generations to come.

—Kara from Maryland

EQUALITY

For women to be paid equally.

—Evie from Ohio

My hope is for an America where everyone is respected for their talents, gifts and intelligence. Where we proudly support the Constitution of the United States as the best example of democracy. A diverse, equitable and inclusive country.

—Barbara from Virginia

I wish for world peace, kindness and serenity for all.

—Ellen from Texas

ICEMANJ/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (VOTE STICKER); VERNON LEWIS GALLERY/STOCKTREK IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (ROSIE THE RIVETER); FOTOGRAZIA/GETTY IMAGES (TORN PAPER); TRISTAN3D/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (CORKBOARD)

TOGETHERNESS

I love the idea of a huge neighborhood potluck—representing all culinary traditions and backgrounds that represent the great American melting pot!

—Meli from Utah

My wish for America is for everyone to respect and appreciate our differences to unite us and not divide us. We are stronger together! Let us work together for the common good of all!

—Tom from Pennsylvania

I hope that we can become more accepting of everyone's differences and make room for everyone to be safe and accepted.

—Chris from New Hampshire

ONWARD

The past merely informs our future, which is destined to be great if we can look courageously forward, acknowledging the power that comes from our diversity and differences.

—Melanie from Maine

Happy 250th birthday, America, land that I love. The best is yet to come!!

—Michelle from New Jersey

FOTOGRAZIA/GETTY IMAGES (TORN PAPER); MARTIN PIECHOTTA/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (STICKY NOTE); DAN ROBERTS/TMB STUDIO (POTLUCK); WETZKAZ/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (STATUE OF LIBERTY); HANAHAL/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (PINS); TRISTAN3D/STOCK.ADOBE.COM (CORKBOARD)

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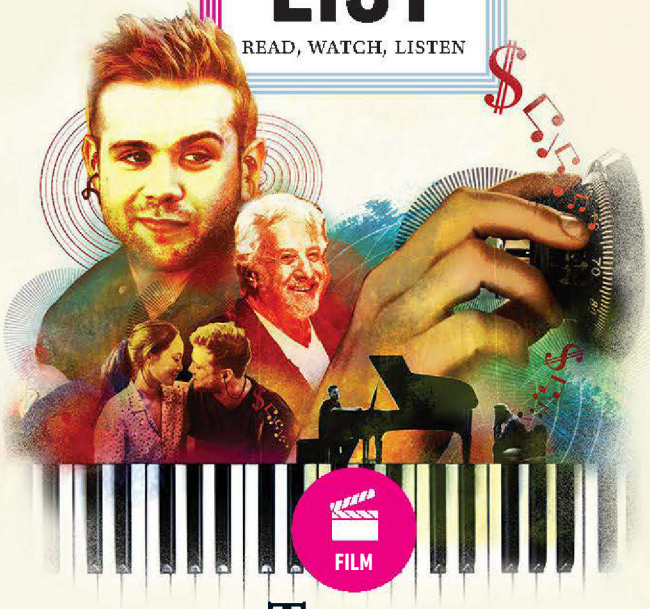


Tuner

Starring Leo Woodall and Dustin Hoffman

A PRETTY PITCH-PERFECT THRILLER. Niki White (Leo Woodall) is a soft-spoken former keyboard virtuoso who can no longer play because of his hypersensitivity to loud noises. Now, he wears special earphones and works all over New York City as a loyal assistant to charming piano tuner Harry Horowitz (Dustin Hoffman). But after his mentor falls ill and runs up hefty medical bills, White reluctantly agrees to put his highly developed audio superpowers to use in a dangerous new business: cracking safes. Though White eventually wants out—"I'm just a tuner, man!" he tells the gang of crooks dependent on every twist of his wrist—his desperation constantly gets the best of him. Not only does the tension build to a satisfying and surprisingly emotional crescendo, it's underscored by the jazziest musical composition you'll hear all year. *(In theaters May 22)* —*Mara Reinstein*

COURTESY OF BLACK BEAR (2); ALAN MARKFIELD; COURTESY OF BLACK BEAR (1); THE NOUN PROJECT (FILM ICON)

ILLUSTRATION BY *Tim Marrs*

FILM

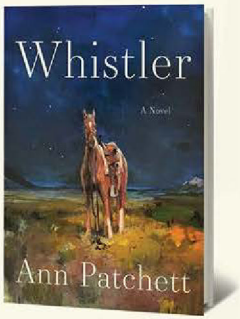
Remarkably Bright Creatures

Starring Sally Field and Alfred Molina

Behold the warm yet unlikely bond between a cranky widow and ... a giant Pacific octopus. Tova Sullivan (Sally Field) spends her off-hours cleaning at a local aquarium, where she keeps a special lookout for an aging mollusk named Marcellus. She's soon joined on the night shift by Cameron Cassmore (Lewis Pullman), a loner decades her junior, who is in search of his long-lost father. Little do the two realize that the wise and weary octopus is listening in on all their conversations. And Marcellus concludes, via narration voiced by Alfred Molina, that they all need to break free of their respective confines to embark on new journeys. Based on the novel by Shelby Van Pelt, this heartfelt tale shows how establishing connection restores the soul. *(Streaming on Netflix May 8) —MR*

COURTESY OF NETFLIX. THE NOUN PROJECT (TV ICON)

BOOKS



Whistler

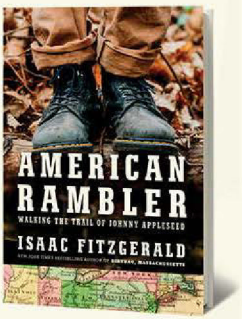
By Ann Patchett

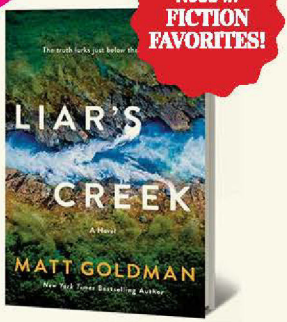
Who is your favorite person? If you're lucky, you see them often. It's been almost 45 years since Daphne Fuller's beloved stepfather, Eddie Triplett, uncharacteristically left without a word. Suddenly, there he is, in the same gallery as her at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The unfolding of their new relationship as they get reacquainted as adults and discover still-kindred spirits is juxtaposed with flashbacks of 1980, when a snowy car wreck changed it all. Author Ann Patchett's love of books breathes through Daphne and Eddie, both aspiring novelists, as they rewrite the story of their fractured family. *—Jody L. Rohlena*

American Rambler

By Isaac Fitzgerald

In this memoir-meets-local adventure tale, Isaac Fitzgerald follows the steps of folk hero Johnny Appleseed (real name: John Chapman), who wandered the Ohio River Valley region at the turn of the 19th century, sowing seeds and a kind of frontier gospel. Along the way, Fitzgerald chances on an Amish "racing buggy", a phantom dog and a giant Appleseed statue inside an Indiana H&M. But the story is deeper than just a lighthearted tribute—it's a raw but honest exploration of community, faith and the patchwork of ideals and contradictions that make up modern America. *—Leigh Belz Ray*





Liar's Creek

By Matt Goldman

Clay Hawkins left his rural Minnesota town to pursue a professional soccer career abroad—and to escape his strained relationship with his sheriff father, Judd Hawkins. Years later, Clay returns with his preteen son and new skills (thanks to a dangerous, clandestine side gig) that come in handy when his beloved Uncle Teddy disappears. Clay must work with his now-retired father to find out what happened to Teddy, all while repairing old familial wounds. It's a twisty mystery, set against the gorgeous woods and streams of Minnesota, from an Emmy-winning TV writer turned novelist. *—Amy Reilly*

HARPER (WHISTLER). COURTESY OF A.A. KNOPF (AMERICAN RAMBLER). COURTESY MINOTAUR BOOKS (LIAR'S CREEK). THE NOUN PROJECT (BOOK ICON)

QUOTABLE QUOTES

Go to couples therapy before you need it.

—Manny Jacinto, ACTOR, IN *COSMOPOLITAN*

Obstacles are just the world's way of asking "How much do you want this?" The greatest limits you'll ever face are the ones you quietly agree to.

—**Fidji Simo,** TECH ENTREPRENEUR, TO GRADUATES OF THE HEC PARIS BUSINESS SCHOOL

I always pitch to my strengths, right? I never pitch to your weakness. ... If a guy is good on cutters, then we're going to see who's better today.

—CC Sabathia, BASEBALL LEGEND, IN *GQ*

People used to say, "If I was a millionaire ..." Now they say, "If I was a billionaire ..." I always say to these people: "Do you know how much a billion is?" And they really don't. A couple of years ago I heard the word *trillion*. No one should ever use that word unless they are an astronomer.

—Fran Lebowitz, WRITER, IN THE *GUARDIAN*

Sometimes you have to wear the costume before it becomes the clothes.

—**Lucy Dacus,** MUSICIAN, ON THE PODCAST *LAS CULTURISTAS*

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The ORBISCULATE Challenge

EASY How many words can you find within the 11-letter word below? Words must be at least three letters long and appear in the dictionary (we use Merriam-Webster) to count toward your score.

S O V E R E I G N T Y

YOUR SCORE:

_____

BONUS The longest word we found within SOVEREIGNTY is 10 letters long. Can you find it? (See answer below.)

What's With This Game's Crazy Name?

We first published "Warning: This Fruit May Orbisculate," about a family's made-up word, in our December 2021/January 2022 issue. *Orbisculate* means "when you dig your spoon into a grapefruit (or another fruit or vegetable), and it squirts juice directly in your eye." Soon after, reader Sue Mollineaux of Torrington, Connecticut, wrote us to say that residents of her senior community had put their heads together and found 223 words using the letters in *orbisculate* (like *orb*, *brace* or—good one—*aerobics*). After we shared her letter, hundreds of readers took up the challenge and wrote us with their scores. We were so delighted, we decided to feature the ORBISCULATE Challenge, with a new (legit, not made-up!) word in every issue of *Reader's Digest*.

Answer: Generosity

KOLONKO/GETTY IMAGES

On Vacation

EASY Shara, David, Scarlett and Jackson are all going abroad this summer, each to one of these places: Australia, Italy, Mexico and Spain. Based on the clues, can you figure out who's going where?

- Shara is traveling to Europe; David isn't.
- Scarlett has been studying Spanish in anticipation of her trip.
- Jackson has already been to Australia, and Shara has previously been to Italy. Both are going someplace new this summer.

A Numbers Game

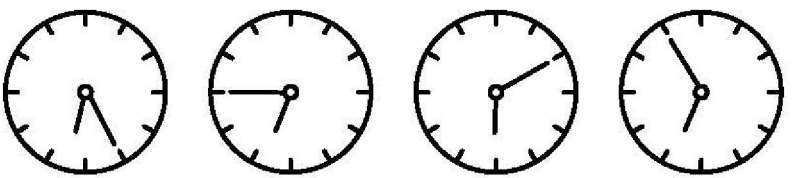
MEDIUM Looking at the sequence below, what should the next two numbers be?

30 >> 10 >> 12 >> 4 >> 6 >> ? >> ?

Reflect on It

MEDIUM You signed up for a fitness class to work on your beach bod. But mere minutes into it, you regret having signed up. So for the rest of the hourlong class, you keep stealing glances at the clock—but you're seeing it in a mirror.

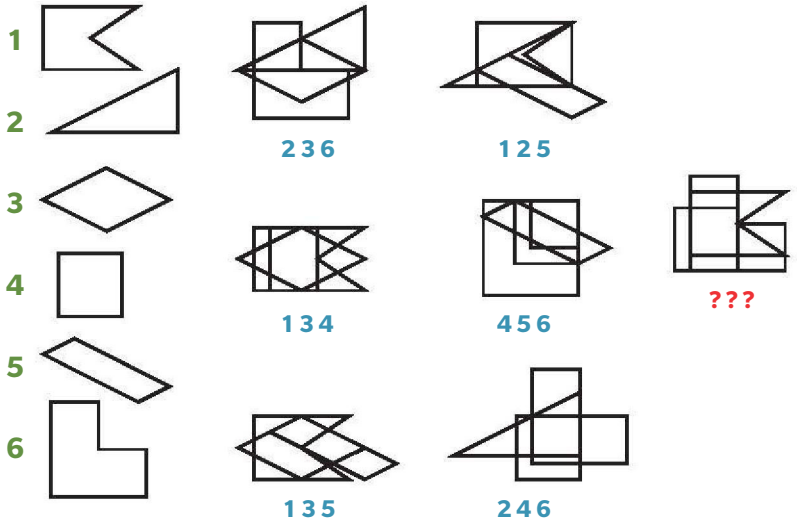
A, B, C and D show four views of the clock throughout that hour. Determine in which order you saw them and which hour the class ran. (It started and ended on the hour.)



EMILY GOODMAN (ON VACATION, A NUMBERS GAME, REFLECT ON IT). NOUN PROJECT (CLOCK). VLADST/GETTY IMAGES (STAMPS)

Shape Up

EASY Six different shapes (labeled 1 through 6) have been arranged into various designs below—three to each design, with indications of which shapes make them up. Which three numbered shapes were used to make the last design?



Twisty Path

DIFFICULT A string of 36 consecutive numbers—connected to one another horizontally or vertically, but never diagonally—will complete this grid. Some numbers are given to get you started. Can you fill in the rest?

48			57		
			56		
		78			
			64		

For more Brain Games, go to **RD.COM/BRAINGAMES.**

For answers, turn to **PAGE 119.**

DARREN RIGBY (SHAPE UP); FRASER SIMPSON (TWISTY PATH)

WORD POWER

Soon you'll be chanting "U-S-A! U-S-A!" That's because this issue's words have those three letters in that order (as in *reusable* or *sausage*) in honor of America's 250th birthday this summer. Get the party started by choosing the correct definitions, then head cross-country to p. 118 to see how you did.

BY *Sarah Chassé*

1. perusal *n.*
(puh-'roo-zuhl)
A rejection
B inspection
C selection

2. crusade *v.*
(kroo-'sayd)
A fight
B wander
C imprison

3. espousal *adj.*
(ih-'spow-zuhl)
A legal duty
B secret mission
C adoption of a cause

4. accusatory *adj.*
(uh-'kyoo-zuh-tor-ee)
A commonly used
B assigning blame
C backed by evidence

5. medusa *n.*
(muh-'doo-suh)
A paramedic's kit
B adult jellyfish
C bossy woman

6. causative *adj.*
('kaw-zuh-tiv)
A containing acid
B bringing about
C single-minded

7. sousaphone *n.*
('soo-zuh-fohn)
A jolly drunk
B tropical bird
C circular tuba

8. thousandfold *adj.*
('thow-zuhnd-fohld)
A multiplied by 1,000
B exactly 1,000
C divided by 1,000

9. docusate *n.*
('dahk-yoo-sayt)
A recycled paper
B digestive medicine
C short film

10. pupusa *n.*
(puh-'poo-suh)
A stuffed corn cake
B cocooned caterpillar
C evil spirit

11. lazy Susan *n.*
('lay-zee 'soo-zn)
A couch potato
B yellow flower
C revolving tray

12. recusant *adj.*
('reh-kyuh-zuhnt)
A disqualifying
B disobedient
C disciplined

13. crusado *n.*
(kroo-'say-doh)
A Spanish bullfighter
B French appetizer
C old Portuguese coin

14. babirusa *n.*
(ba-buh-'roo-suh)
A wild pig
B headscarf
C vegetable stew

15. spousal *adj.*
('spow-zuhl)
A related to marriage
B related to whales
C related to hemp

Yankee Doodle Diss?

Written by a British army surgeon in 1755 and set to an existing tune, "Yankee Doodle" was meant to mock American colonists, with *doodle* meaning "fool" and *dandy* referring to a vain man. The British sang the song as they marched toward Lexington and Concord, battles they were stunned to lose. According to legend, the colonial militia sang "Yankee Doodle" back to the retreating British, and it became an unofficial American anthem.

STOCK MONTAGE/GETTY IMAGES

Word Power ANSWERS

1. perusal (B) *inspection*
After a quick perusal of the spa's menu, I decided on a hot stone massage.

2. crusade (A) *fight*
Mr. Wu has long crusaded for an espresso machine in the teachers lounge.

3. espousal
(C) *adoption of a cause*
The governor's espousal of a new sales tax has hurt her popularity.

4. accusatory
(B) *assigning blame*
If you're not angry, then why are you shooting me that accusatory glare?

5. medusa
(B) *adult jellyfish*
Over its lifetime, a jellyfish grows from an egg to a polyp to a medusa.

6. causative
(B) *bringing about*
Alcohol was a causative factor in the car crash.

7. sousaphone
(C) *circular tuba*
The sousaphone's shape allows a player to "wear" it while marching.

8. thousandfold
(A) *multiplied by 1,000*
My viral TikTok resulted in a thousandfold increase in followers.

9. docusate
(B) *digestive medicine*
Post-surgery, Matt had to take an antibiotic, a painkiller and a docusate.

10. pupusa
(A) *stuffed corn cake*
Pupusas can be filled with cheese, beans, meat and/or vegetables.

11. lazy Susan
(C) *revolving tray*
Javier keeps his spices on a lazy Susan by the stove.

12. recusant
(B) *disobedient*
As a teenager, Amber was recusant, rebellious and reckless.

13. crusado
(C) *old Portuguese coin*
Crusadoes were gold or silver coins with a cross on the back.

14. babirusa (A) *wild pig*
Native to Indonesia, the babirusa is known for its large tusks.

15. spousal
(A) *related to marriage*
"The way my husband loads the dishwasher often causes spousal tension," Amelia joked.

Vocabulary Ratings

9 & BELOW: excusable
10-12: good usage
13-15: batting a thousand

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ANSWERS

WHERE, OH WHERE?

(page 120)

D. King Ranch, Texas

BRAIN GAMES

(pages 115-116)

On Vacation

Shara is going to Spain, David to Australia, Scarlett to Mexico, and Jackson to Italy.

A Numbers Game

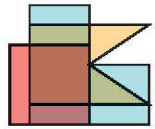
2, 4. The pattern is to divide by 3, then add 2, and repeat.

Reflect on It

D reads 5:05, B reads 5:15, A reads 5:35 and C reads 5:50. So you saw them in that order, and your fitness class ran from 5 to 6 o'clock.

Shape Up

1, 4 and 6



Twisty Path

48	47	46	57	58	59
49	54	55	56	81	60
50	53	78	79	80	61
51	52	77	64	63	62
74	75	76	65	66	67
73	72	71	70	69	68

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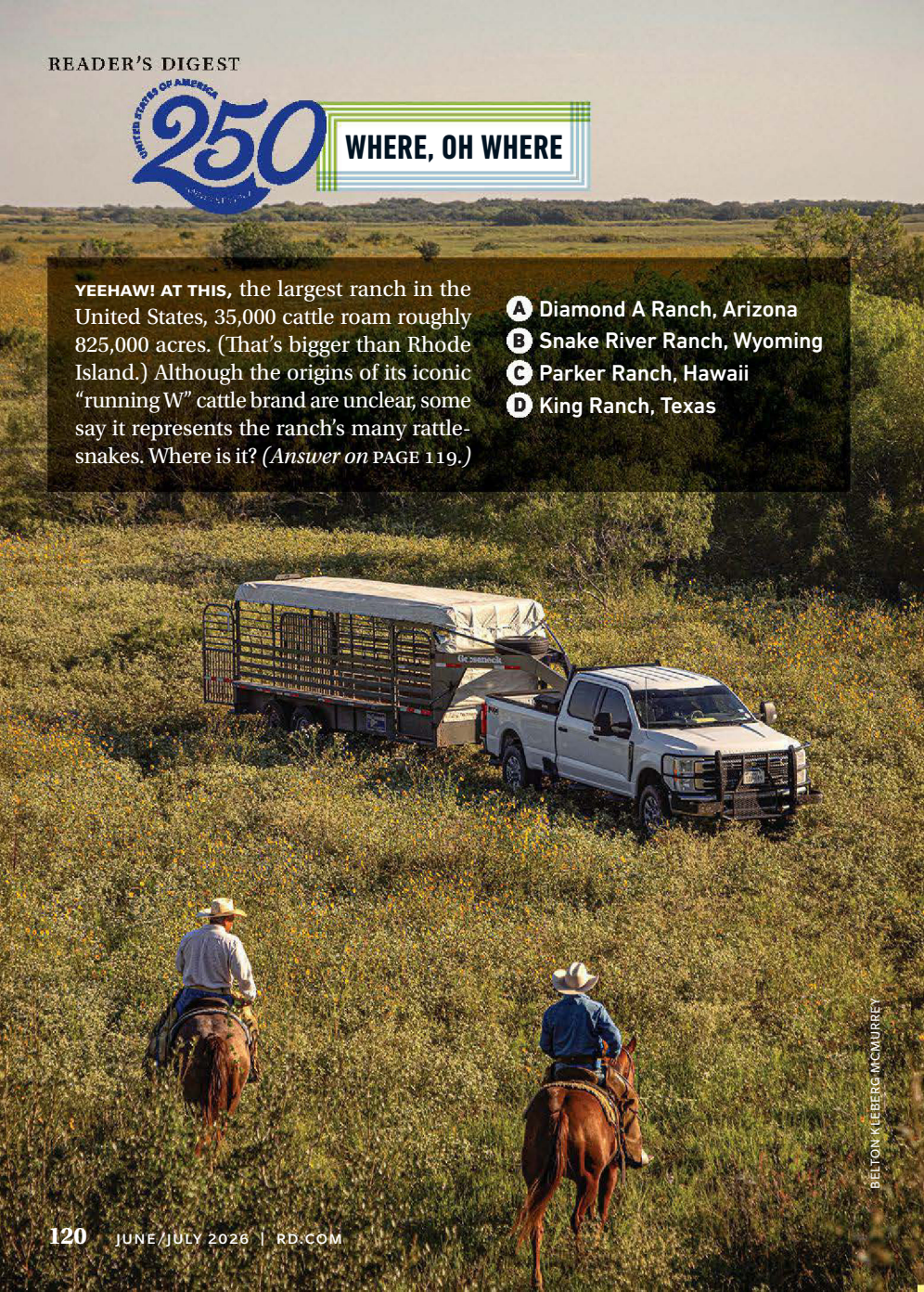
250 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

WHERE, OH WHERE

YEEHAW! AT THIS, the largest ranch in the United States, 35,000 cattle roam roughly 825,000 acres. (That's bigger than Rhode Island.) Although the origins of its iconic "running W" cattle brand are unclear, some say it represents the ranch's many rattlesnakes. Where is it? *(Answer on* PAGE 119.*)*

- **A** Diamond A Ranch, Arizona
- **B** Snake River Ranch, Wyoming
- **C** Parker Ranch, Hawaii
- **D** King Ranch, Texas



BELTON KLEBERG MCMURREY

Enjoy Your Independence with a Portable and Safer Mobility Scooter

The So Lite® Scooter is easy to transport and almost impossible to tip over.

Like millions of Americans, I struggle with mobility. For years, I watched my quality of life slip away, as I was forced to stay home while friends and family took part in activities I'd once enjoyed. I thought I'd made some progress when I got a mobility scooter, but then I realized how hard it was to transport. Taking it apart and putting it back together was like doing a jigsaw puzzle.

Travel scooters were easier to transport, but they were uncomfortable and scary to drive. I always felt like I was ready to tip over. Then I found the **So Lite® Scooter**. Now there's nothing that can hold me back.

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What's more, it easily folds up for storage in a car seat, trunk, or even on an airplane. **It folds in seconds without tools**. Best of all, it's designed with your safety in mind. Why spend another day letting your lack of mobility ruin your quality of life? Call now and find out how you can get a **So Lite® Scooter** of your very own.

**Do not attempt

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