

Reader's Digest

AUGUST 2024

₹125



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Heartfelt Tales of Grit and Glory

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EVERYDAY HEROES

He Took on a Coal Giant—
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A Trusted Friend in a Complicated World

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Leave the Wild Things Be

As an animal lover, for years I have been sensitizing street kids and motorists to be kind to strays, who frequently fall victims to pranks and reckless driving. Using animals for religious purposes, may stem from their association with gods as their companions and carriers, but just as we avoid the personification of gods and place them in a higher realm, their animal cohorts should also be given the same respect and left in their natural habitats. The best way to observe and honour them is as free-moving spirits in wildlife parks and sanctuaries.

ARVIND ARYA, *Mumbai*

Arvind Arya wins this month's 'Write & Win' prize of ₹1,000. —EDs

Reading about Raju, the bear and how young bear cubs are groomed for entertainment brought tears to my eyes. Using animals such as elephants and camels for functions, religious or otherwise, is an exploitative practice and needs to be curbed. And to those who cage birds in their homes, isn't it a greater joy to watch birds flying free?

LAXMAN GORLAKATTE, *Mysore*

Hot and (Un)bothered

In this humourous take, the author Samit Basu has rightly pointed out an important and serious issue: Those with the power to undertake climate action are simply organizing meetings and not doing much else. There is need to examine the unbridled

construction that takes place in the guise of development. Forest and agricultural land should not be further encroached upon. Limits should be imposed on the number of vehicles owned per household. The government must reach out to all stakeholders to arrive at measures for tackling the climate crisis.

VIKRAMJIT SINGH,
Amritsar

Doing Dad's Bucket List

Sydney Page's story deeply resonated with me, as I too have a list of activities that I wish to accomplish before kicking the bucket. Recently, after striking off one of the things on my list—a cruise to Bermuda Island from Port Liberty—the wife and I were crossing a road in Boston, USA, at night, when a two-wheeler sped past, narrowly missing us. This happened despite the traffic sign

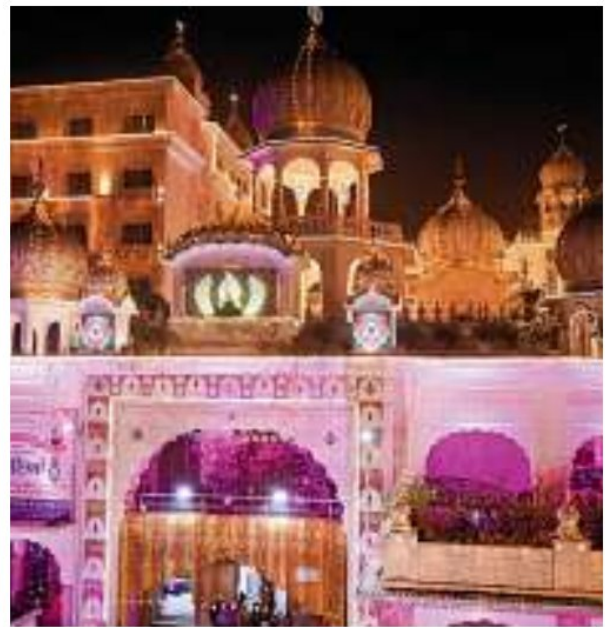


Experience the Spiritual Grandeur of Prakash Parv in Bihar

Prakash Parv is celebrated with immense devotion and grandeur which marks the birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh Ji Maharaj, the tenth Sikh Guru. Bihar, particularly Patna Sahib, holds a special significance during this festival as it is the birthplace of Guru Gobind Singh Ji Maharaj. For tourists, Prakash Parv offers a profound cultural and spiritual experience. The next Prakash Parv is scheduled for January 6, 2025.

Visitors to Bihar during Prakash Parv are welcomed by a vibrant and festive atmosphere. The city of Patna is adorned with lights and decorations, transforming into a beacon of celebration and devotion. Gurudwaras, especially Takht Sri Harimandir Ji Patna Sahib, become the epicentre of activities. This revered Gurudwara is beautifully illuminated, and the air is filled with the soulful sounds of bhajan-kirtan, invoking a sense of peace and spirituality.

One of the highlights for tourists is witnessing the Langar, a community kitchen that serves free meals to thousands of devotees. The Nagar Prabhat Pheri, a morning procession, is another captivating event.



Sikhs march through the streets with hymns and chants, carrying the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs.

During Prakash Parv, tourists can also partake in Ardas and prayers at the Gurudwaras, immersing themselves in the spiritual ambience. The festival offers a unique blend of devotion, culture, and history, making it an enriching experience for anyone visiting Bihar. Whether you're a spiritual seeker or a cultural enthusiast, Prakash Parv in Bihar promises a memorable and enlightening journey.



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indicating that the road was clear for pedestrian crossing. Such traffic violations are fairly common in Delhi NCR where we live, leaving us reeling in shock often. And since we have three daughters and would like to prevent the chance of leaving them with the responsibility of realizing our unfulfilled dreams, we have decided to restrict our on-foot excursions.

DEV DUTTA ROY,
Greater Noida

Buried Beneath a Mountain

I salute all the people associated with the rescue operation, and Arnold Dix and Munna Qureshi in particular for their bravery and determination. However, questions around the several defects in the planning and design of the project that were pointed out in the investigation report—including the lack of an escape route, an alarm system in case of emergency, insufficient

exploration of geological and hydrological conditions to determine the feasibility of construction and lack of real-time monitoring for stress formation—must be answered too.

PRADEEP KUMAR, *Surat*

Meticulous planning and execution ensured success in an otherwise impossible operation. It is also heartening to note that the victims were calm and cool throughout the operation. This is a fine example of how collective responsibility can achieve success.

K. S. RAMABHATTA,
Bengaluru

The Journey of the Kon-Tiki

The story of determination and perseverance of natural scientist Thor Heyerdahl and his companions made for a thrilling read. I got goosebumps knowing that they undertook the perilous journey through an untrammelled sea route on a wooden raft to prove

what they believed was right, knowing well that they may not survive the endeavour. How they turned every adversity to their advantage is mind boggling. The balsa wood trunks and 300 sisal ropes remained their dependable allies throughout, and how!

AYYASSERI RAVEENDRA-NATH, *Aranmula, Kerala*

Betting on Humanity

Friendships thrive when one does the kind thing, but minus expectations. True friendship provides moral support, the promise of being there for one another, come what may. Friends are emotional pillars on whom we build our confidence to take on and accept life and its vagaries.

CHOODAMANI VASUDEVAN, *Mylapore*

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Brick by Tiny Brick

IT'S A WHIMSICAL sight: Two children gleefully soaring atop giant flying turtles. Look closer and you'll notice that the 2.8-metre-long sculpture—*The Great Turtle Race*—was created using over 2,00,000 black Lego pieces. Ghanaian-Canadian artist Ekow Nimako combines African art style and history with fantasy and mythology to create masks, animals and human figures. He works in Legos, the toy of his youth, preferring black Legos partly so that his subjects will never be mistaken for anything other than Black, as with the children on the flying turtles—one of which is seen here. The result, he told CNN, is art that captures “the essence of childhood.” **R**

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PHOTO COURTESY OF EKOW NIMAKO STUDIOS



Taking on Goliath

How one man led a successful campaign that saved 4,45,000 acres of forests from 21 planned coal mines in India

BY Anu Prabhakar

WINNER OF THE 2024 Goldman Environmental prize, 44-year-old Alok Shukla is no stranger to extraordinary challenges. As a founding member of the Hasdeo Aranya Bachao Sangharsh Samiti, a grassroots movement of adivasis from about 30 villages in one of India's largest contiguous forest tracks—the Hasdeo Aranya forest in Chattisgarh—Shukla has been locked in a real-life David vs. Goliath fight, battling India's richest coal conglomerates.

Spanning over 1,70,000 hectares, the bio-diverse Hasdeo Aranya forest bears the burden of being resource-rich. It sits atop some 5.6 billion tons of coal, making it one of India's largest reserves—and the focus of intense interest from coal corporations. These dense woodlands also serve as the watershed for the Hasdeo Bango reservoir, which irrigates 7,41,000 acres of farmland, and forms

the life-force for nearly 15,000 Adivasis, such as the Gonds, who draw their both their sustenance and their identity from it. Shukla's successful community campaign has saved 4,45,000 acres of these biodiversity-rich forests from 21 planned coal mines in Chhattisgarh.

Born in undivided Madhya Pradesh into a family of farmers, Shukla grew up in the lap of nature. Since gaining statehood in 2000, Chhattisgarh—44 per cent of which is forestland—fell prey to rapid development, changing the young state beyond recognition. With its natural resources under duress, several movements protesting this plunder took root.

Shukla too, found himself gravitating towards environmental activism. While attending a protest against the privatization of the Sheonath River, he recalls not being able to stop thinking of the verdant farms and jungles of his childhood. "So I

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took the opportunity to become a part of that protest." In 2004 Shukla joined the Nadi Ghati Morcha where he met Dr Brahma Dutt Sharma, who left the IAS and dedicated his life to improving the lives of tribal people. He also met [activist] Medha Patkar, and on visits to various parts of Chhattisgarh, saw first hand how polluted its rivers were and how quickly industries were springing up.

Meanwhile, multiple movements and organizations, such as the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha and Chhattisgarh Kisan Sabha, were fighting similar battles so Shukla played a pivotal role in an effort to bring them together and form the Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan in 2010. The idea was to create one strong platform that could amplify their struggles at the state level. As the convenor of the alliance, one of Shukla's biggest successes was to organize farmers protesting a limestone mining project that endangered the Pandit Lakhanlal Mishra Reservoir. As a result, the 'no objection' issued for the mine's lease was cancelled.

In 2011, Gond activist and tribal leader Hira Singh Markam suggested that Shukla visit Hasdeo Aranya forest, which was becoming a hot-bed of coal mining operations. Two coal blocks, both operated by the Adani group, had sprung up. "Corporations, as well as the state and central governments, wanted to open up new mines and were pressurizing local communities," he says.

On his first visit to the forest, Shukla was stunned by its beauty. It harboured an important tiger corridor and was a

sanctuary to several vulnerable bird and animal species. "That was the day, I vowed to protect Hasdeo," says Shukla.

But doing so was no easy task. The people of the area lacked any legal know-how and were easily taken in by widespread misinformation, "that Gram Sabhas have no power, and that their land would be taken, minus any compensation", says Shukla. There were also internal tensions to iron out. "The villages are spread out and though we assume that tribal communities have strong ties, in reality, those community ties are no longer that effective," he explains.

B. D. Sharma suggested that Shukla start with empowering the Gram Sabhas by educating them about their rights. "This was an important strategy for the movement," explains Shukla. "Gram Sabhas play a critical role in ensuring 'free prior informed consent' of local communities before any new mining project." But villagers had stopped finding value in Gram Sabha meetings, so Shukla began rectifying this. He spoke about how they were "disenfranchising" themselves by not attending the sessions and gradually, they even began holding their own. "It was all about generating awareness about the law, their rights, and then finding the safeguards to protect them" says Shukla.

There were other challenges, too. "Multiple vested interests existed even within the community," he says. "Some tried to negotiate on behalf of the community and create their own power centres. Our job was to ensure these disrupt-

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tive forces didn't dominate." He did so by painstakingly talking to every household about the Forest Rights Act and success stories elsewhere. "It gave them the confidence that by law, nobody, not even the Prime Minister, could take their land if the Gram Sabha refuses."

Shukla also learnt just how much the forest meant to the people. More than sustenance, this was their home for generations and a focal point of their identity. "Without the forest, what will I be known as?" was a common refrain.

Both victories and setbacks abound during Shukla's 12-year-long fight. For instance, the central government had proposed 21 coal blocks in 2020, which the community thwarted two years later through marches and protests that garnered public support. The next year 1,995 sq kms of the forest was designated as a Lemru Elephant Reserve, and 1,700 sq km declared as a 'mining-free zone' by the Chhattisgarh Assembly.

But the fight is far from over. "There are still a few parts of Hasdeo Aranya, where the threat of two mining projects—the ongoing Parsa East Kete Basen and the adjoining Parsa coal mine—still exists," Shukla says. Then, there is the danger to his own safety. In December 2023, when 15,000 trees were cut, Shukla says he was illegally detained by individuals he believes, were "plainclothes police" to stop him from reaching the area. He also alleges an attempted attack by unknown persons in 2021 just as he was to embark on a 300-km march from Surguja district to Raipur with adivasis,



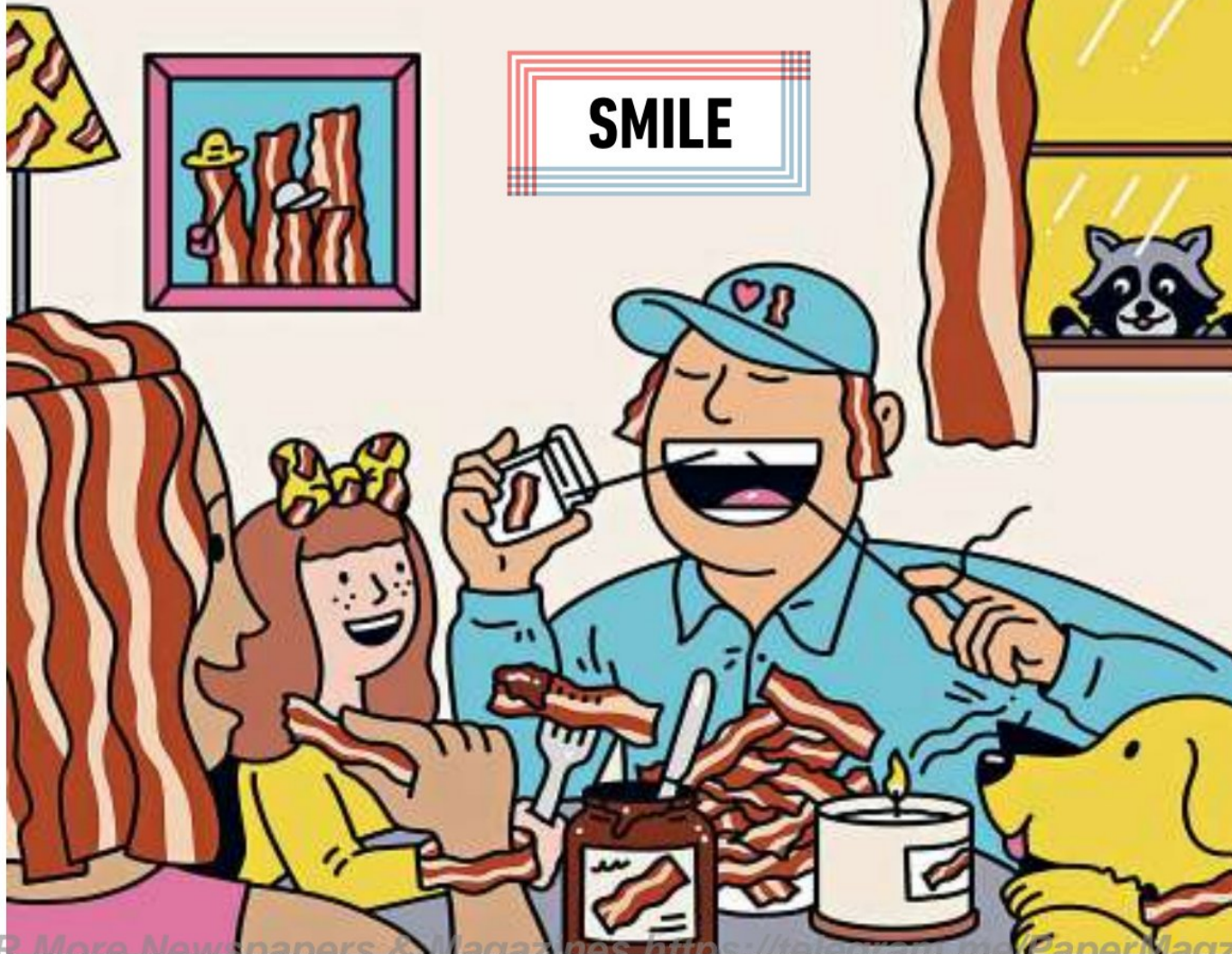
Shukla at the 2024 Goldman Prize ceremony

demanding the cancellation of all coal mining projects in Hasdeo forest. The same year, he learnt that his phone was likely compromised by Pegasus spyware.

As fossil-fuel-hungry nation, India's environmental future stands on shaky ground. "We continue to claim leadership on climate change and but then allocate more coal mines than ever before," Shukla points out. With most mineral resources beneath dense forests and tribal-occupied land, Shukla worries about the potential for conflict and exploitative encroachment.

However, hope remains, thanks to a generation of young environmentalists emerging from these communities. "The dream is that not a single tree in Hasdeo should be cut for mining against the wishes of the community. And if society becomes more environmentally conscious, governments will be forced to act" Shukla concludes. **R**

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THIS BACON FAKERY MUST STOP



BY *David Zimmer* FROM *COTTAGE LIFE*

I WAS RECENTLY given bacon-flavoured dental floss for my birthday. My first question was: Who the hell gives dental floss as a gift? My second question was: Has bacon gone too far?

By my estimation, only someone who doesn't understand oral hygiene would give bacon dental floss as a gift. It's very simple: When we clean our teeth, the goal is to remove all the bits of mushed-up food and God-knows-what and replace them with a clean mouth landscape, preferably minty fresh.

Bacon-flavoured floss is a terrible idea because after eliminating the vestigial gunk of our daily chewing, no one wants to be left with the taste of food they didn't actually eat. That's why Stilton mouthwash and Miracle Whip whitening strips have yet to be invented.

Now to the meaty question at hand: Has bacon gone too far? Absolutely not. You see, bacon is the victim here. It's

an old-fashioned product that is honest and delicious.

It might get the cold shoulder from *Canada's Food Guide*, but bacon doesn't mind. Bacon knows it is loved and respected and has incalculable mojo.

The first attempts to siphon off some of bacon's juice came from the fake-food movement, which was unable to muster up original names. By definition, bacon is made from pork. And while it is perfectly acceptable to observe a diet that is restricted by personal, moral or religious beliefs, calling salty strips of beef or turkey "bacon" is just wrong.

It's a form of identity theft that diminishes the victim's good name and misleads the public. Case in point: Bacon is delicious, while "beefacon" is not, something I learned at a breakfast buffet in Malaysia.

Vegetarians, meanwhile, have given us bacon-themed "facon" and "vacon," which are salty strips of vegetable stuff. I have nothing against salty strips of vegetable stuff because those terms exactly define a potato chip. But why not give vegetable strips a new name? Leave bacon out of it.

Think of the outrage that would ensue if someone decided to sell "peaches" made from ground veal. Even if they were clearly labelled "VealPeaches," people would be upset, especially if they missed the fine print that said, "Must be refrigerated. Cook to an internal temperature of 75 C."

As if fake bacon weren't bad enough, there is now a disturbing industry

based on appropriating bacon's taste, smell and likeness. I think it started in the 1990s, when bacon held a bad-boy appeal for diet-conscious consumers. The fast-food industry cottoned on to this and spruced up its tired offerings with mountains of rashers.

Today, bacon saturation is upon us. Some creations, like bacon-flavoured ice cream, jam, vodka, lip balm and "bacon-naise," you can consume. Other stuff, including bacon-themed condoms and bandage strips, as well as bacon-scented candles and pillows, are just meant to be purchased and regretted forever.

Where will this madness end? One solution could be trademark protection—legal rules for content, likeness and a Bacon™ logo that could be used to stop makers of stuff like Magic Vegan Bacon Grease. Think about it; if Interpol and the FBI can get their shorts in a knot over illegal downloads of *Transformers: Rise of the Beasts*, surely we can muster up some legal firepower to protect one of the world's best foods.

I think the lawyers should start by tearing a strip off the turkey-bacon people because turkey bacon is scary bad. Baconnaise should be next because it ruins two things at the same time. And you have to admit it would be fun to send a letter to the manufacturers of bacon-flavoured envelopes in one of their own products. "Attention, stealer of Bacon™. You have been served. Wipe your mouth, then cease and desist." **R**

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13 THINGS

About Shipwrecks

BY Lisa Fields



1 IF YOU don't want your ship to sink, you'd better break a bottle of champagne on it before launching. (It's considered bad luck if the bottle doesn't break.) The tradition, called 'christening,' dates back at least to the third millennium B.C. While champagne is the most popular these days, other liquids, such as red wine, whiskey and water, have also been used. Sure, it's just superstition, but one vessel that skipped this step was the *Titanic*.

2 PERHAPS THE best known shipwreck, the *Titanic* sank in 1912 and wasn't located until 1985. The discovery was a collaboration between French and American researchers, including Dr Robert Ballard, who had previously looked for the *Titanic* unsuccessfully in 1977. The research teams used the latest sonar and video equipment at the time to explore the sea floor.

3 THE *TITANIC* inspired the 1997 film that won 11 Academy Awards. It also inspired the adoption of a new international law that set minimum safety standards for ships at sea, including strict lifeboat and life jacket requirements. More than 1,500 people died, in part, because the *Titanic's* 20 lifeboats could only hold about half of the passengers on board—and many of the 18 lifeboats that launched weren't filled to capacity. Had they been, nearly 500 more people may have survived the disaster.

4 IN 2010, 168 intact champagne bottles were recovered from an old shipwreck with an unknown name in the Baltic Sea between Sweden and Finland. They were estimated to be 170 years old. Researchers studied and then sampled it, which was believed to have been the world's oldest drinkable

champagne. It had aged remarkably well in the cool, deep water.

5 PERHAPS THE shortest life of a ship was that of the massive Swedish warship *Vasa*. The poorly designed vessel sank mere minutes after it was launched in 1628, in full view of the port and the crowd gathered to watch. Most people aboard swam to safety, but 30 perished. The *Vasa* remained submerged for more than 300 years. In 1961, it was raised from the water and turned into a museum that opened the following year.

6 WHILE shipwrecks can be fatal disasters for humans, they do encourage sea life to flourish. The bigger the shipwreck, the greater the number of creatures that can live in and on the wreckage. Over time, shipwrecks attract large and small fish, eels and sharks, as well as plankton, algae and coral. In 2005, a

retired Australian Navy warship called the *Brisbane* was scuttled (sunk on purpose) off the coast of Queensland to become an artificial reef.

7 IN 1906, more than 100 people died when the *Valencia* sank off Vancouver, on the west coast of Canada. The treacherous water where the ship went down has come to be known as the Graveyard of the Pacific: Nearly 2,000 ships have sunk there since 1792.

8 IN 1975, a carrier called the *Edmund Fitzgerald* sank in Lake Superior, killing all 29 crew members aboard. It remains the largest ship to sink in the North American Great Lakes. Canadian folk singer Gordon Lightfoot penned a song, 'The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*' immortalizing the event; the song reached No. 1 on Canada's singles chart.

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9 ACCORDING TO Greek mythology, sirens—creatures that are part bird, part woman—sang beautiful songs to lure sailors toward rocky shores, causing shipwrecks. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus was eager to hear the sirens but didn't want to veer into danger. He ordered his men to tie him to the ship's mast, then put wax in their ears, protecting them from the music. Odysseus listened to the tempting sirens, but his sailors didn't, and everyone survived the encounter.

10 ODYSSEUS IS also the name of the oldest shipwreck that was discovered intact: a 2,400-year-old Greek ship that was located by the Black Sea Maritime Archaeology Project (MAP) research team. The ship was

found in the Black Sea near Bulgaria, still in one piece. It sank so deep that the water surrounding it was anoxic (oxygen-free), preserving it well, since the organisms that degrade wood couldn't survive that far down. The *Odysseus* was one of 65 shipwrecks found in the Black Sea by MAP researchers between 2015 and 2017.

11 SHIPWRECKS have figured into the plots of several classic plays and novels, including *The Tempest*, *Candide*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Swiss Family Robinson* and—perhaps the most 'giant' of them all—*Gulliver's Travels*.

12 THE FAMOUS English pirate Blackbeard took over a French ship called *La Concorde*

(which he renamed *Queen Anne's Revenge*) in 1717 off the coast of Martinique in the Caribbean, stealing the powdered gold on board and adding it to his treasure. Blackbeard abandoned the ship in 1718 after it hit a sandbar near North Carolina. The shipwreck wasn't discovered until 1996, nearly 300 years later.

13 SEARCHING the sea floor is no easy feat, but finding treasure aboard a shipwreck could be better than winning the lottery. One of the most valuable shipwrecks that still hasn't been found is the *Flor de la Mar*. The Portuguese ship sank near Sumatra, Indonesia, in 1511, and was laden with treasure. The estimated value in today's currency: \$2 billion. **R**

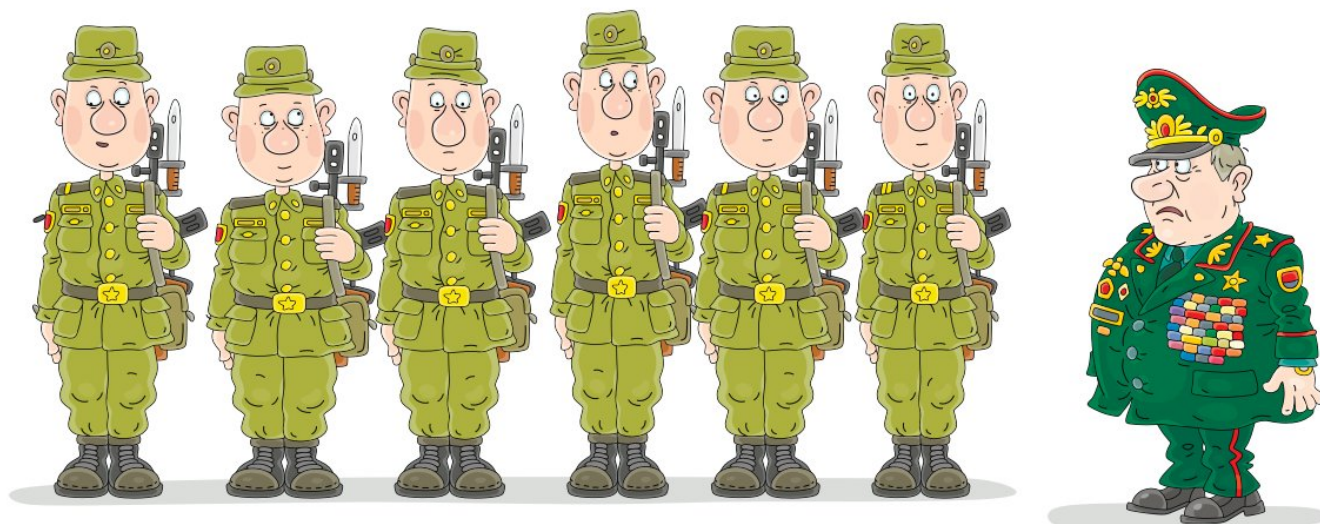


Come as You Are

There's nothing wrong with being afraid of somebody. Just never be intimidated.

MIKE TYSON, BOXER, IN GQ

HUMOUR in UNIFORM



"Why do I get the feeling none of you read the manual on how to look intimidating?"

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A man is flying in a hot-air balloon and realizes he is lost. So he reduces height and spots a man down below. He lowers the balloon further and shouts: "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?" The man below says: "Yes, you're in a hot-air balloon, hovering 30 feet above this field."

"You must be a non-commissioned officer (NCO)," says the balloonist.

"I am," says the man. "How did you know?"

"Well," says the balloonist, "Everything you've told me is technically correct, but it's no use to anyone."

The man below says "You must be an officer".

"I am" replies the balloonist, "But how did you know?"

"Well," says the NCO, "You don't know where you are or where you're going, but you expect me to be able to help. You're in the same position you were before, but now it's my fault!"

—REDDIT.COM

"Halt!" shouted our drill instructor. He had noticed that, for the umpteenth time, a recruit kept going to his right on a left command. Our instructor approached the Marine and stomped on his left foot. "Now," he said, "when I say 'left,' it's the one that hurts."

—WAYNE SCHROEDER

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BETTER LIVING

WELLNESS FOR BODY & MIND

Spill the Beans

Everyone
has secrets.
Here's why
you should
share yours

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BY *Leah Rumack*

ILLUSTRATION BY
Tallulah Fontaine

THIRTY YEARS AGO, Allison McColeman hid a big secret from her family: a husband. McColeman, now a 55-year-old mom, feared the marriage would cause too much friction with her parents. She knew her stepfather didn't like her partner, and the lovebirds had also only been dating for less than a year, which she knew would worry her mother. Plus, deep down she knew the marriage was a bad idea.

"I was embarrassed to tell them what I'd done," she says. So McColeman pretended the man who swept her off her feet was simply her boyfriend. Only her

closest friends knew the truth: McColeman had married the charming Irishman in a small wedding at City Hall, in part to sponsor his bid for Canadian citizenship. She expected they'd have a 'real' wedding if the relationship worked out.

Instead, the couple split after a year. It took another five years for McColeman to come clean to her mom (her stepfather had since died). Though her ex rarely came up in their conversation, McColeman couldn't stop thinking about her secret. It was like there was an elephant in the room that only she saw. "I felt like I'd been lying to her all that time," she says. "Afterward, I just felt lighter."

We all have personal secrets—even if they're not always as juicy as a hidden marriage. While not everybody needs to know everything about you, the benefits of sharing secrets can often be greater than whatever damage you're imagining you will incur from doing so. Here's how to start spilling the beans.

ASK: IS IT HARMFUL?

The idea that secrets can be a psychic weight is what first intrigued psychologist Michael Slepian, an associate professor at Columbia University and author of *The Secret Life of Secrets*. His research shows that 97 per cent of people have a secret, and the average person is keeping 13 at any given time. Keeping secrets has been linked with less-satisfying relationships,

higher rates of anxiety and depression and a generally diminished sense of well-being. Slepian's research revealed 38 categories of common secrets spanning everything from big ones (infidelity, addiction) to relatively minor ones (embarrassing habits, hidden possessions).

All types of secrets have the potential to harm your mental health, but that harm doesn't actually come from the stress of concealment. Slepian says the biggest clue to how damaging a secret is to you is how often you involuntarily think about it—like you're picking at a scab. It's more likely, says Slepian, that your mind will get stuck thinking about a secret that speaks to your intrinsic sense of self (a hidden marriage) than a more workaday secret (like the fact that I have a stash of chocolate that I hide from my family). "The hard part about having a secret is not that we have to hide it," he says, "but that we have to live with it alone in our thoughts."

SHAME VS GUILT

Chances are good that the secrets that will weigh on you the most are the ones that make you feel bad about yourself. Part of the reason McColeman didn't tell her family about her ill-fated nuptials is that some part of her felt that her boyfriend was using her, and she was ashamed she got sucked in. Many of us can relate to shame keeping us mum. (My husband still

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likes to remind me about when I ‘forgot’ to tell him that I was visiting a psychic because I knew he would think it was silly and a waste of money.)

Slepian says that what’s more harmful about shame—and what distinguishes it from guilt—is that when you feel ashamed you think *I’m a bad person*, but when you feel guilt you think *I’ve done a bad thing*. The latter is actually much healthier, he says, and telling your secret can help get you past the shame and to a place where you might reflect on your behaviour. And if you decide you acted wrongly, he adds, you can then figure out how to act differently next time. “You can learn from your mistakes.”

CONFIDE ...

The most obvious thing you can do to lessen the weight of keeping a secret, says Slepian, is to share it with someone. Telling it to another person—be it a friend, a therapist or even an online acquaintance—can reduce the number of times your mind will obsessively go back to it, sort of like opening an emotional pressure valve. But Slepian points out it’s not simply the act of confessing that helps get your mind out of the record groove—it’s the conversation that follows.

“Confessing something on the internet anonymously can feel really great for about 10 seconds,” he says. “But having a conversation with someone you trust works because people can bring a

unique perspective, emotional support or advice.” Even being heard by one person can help you think about your secret differently and move forward.

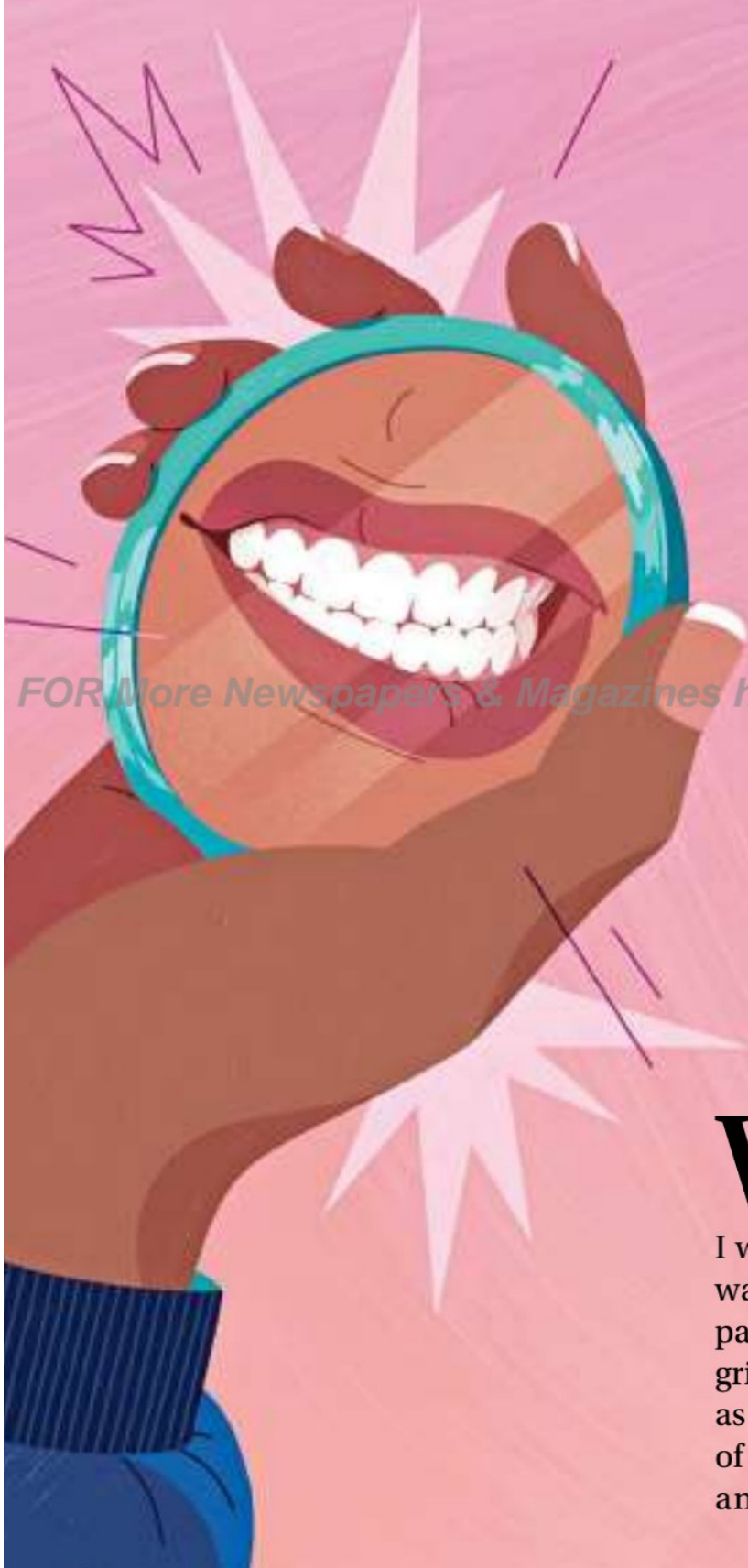
BUT CONFIDE IN THE RIGHT PERSON

Slepian says that people share 26 per cent of the secrets they’re told, which seems like a pretty big gamble to take if you have a secret you really want kept (mostly) under wraps. The key, he says, is to choose someone who has a similar set of morals and values as you. “People are more likely to pass on a secret if they’re morally outraged by the behaviour,” he says. “So don’t confide in someone who’s going to be scandalized by your admission.”

You may not want to share, for example, that you’ve developed a crush on a colleague (even though you’re already in a relationship) with the friend who thinks that even looking at another person is tantamount to cheating. It’s probably better to save that particular tidbit for the pal who knows a bit of innocent daydreaming when she sees it and can reassure you that you’re not a monster who’s destined to break up your family.

Deep down, past all the worry and shame, McColeman knew that her mom could handle the secret. “She was surprised, but she wasn’t angry,” she says. Mostly, she was happy McColeman was okay, divorced and had a clean slate. “And I felt much better because I got it off my chest.” **R**

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HEALTH

Stressed and Worn Down

*More and more people
are clenching and
grinding their teeth.*

*Here's what to do
about it*

BY *Melissa Greer*

ILLUSTRATION BY *Kate Traynor*

WHEN MY DENTIST suggested I get fitted for a night guard (a plastic dental appliance), I wasn't exactly surprised. I had been waking up with headaches and jaw pain, symptoms of teeth clenching and grinding—a condition officially known as bruxism. I knew I was holding a lot of tension in my jaw, but I just popped an ibuprofen in the morning and

moved on. But when my dentist noted that I had some gum recession—due to inflammation caused by grinding and clenching—I realized how much damage the habit was causing.

Bruxism is common, especially sleep bruxism, which affects an estimated 16.5 per cent of adults. Experts have seen a surge in patients with tooth and gum damage from clenching and grinding in recent years, particularly during the stressful days of Covid-19 lockdowns.

“When you’re really stressed, you might be putting a lot of tension in your masseter muscles, which are the muscles in the cheek responsible for chewing,” explains Dr Pujaa Patel, a UK-based dentist, facial aesthetics expert and chief medical officer of UNNDOO, a platform for booking at-home facial aesthetic treatments. “Because everything in the head and neck is linked, patients come in with tension headaches, jaw pain, earache and shoulder pain.” Related factors such as smoking or chewing tobacco, excessive caffeine consumption, workplace stress, and improper brushing and flossing practices exacerbate the damage.

Whether bruxism occurs while awake or during sleep, most people don’t realize they’re clenching and grinding until they start experiencing symptoms. Either way, it’s important to see an expert to identify the cause.

While the most common factor is stress, especially if the patient is doing

it while awake, bruxism could also be a symptom of an underlying medical condition or a sleep disorder, says Dr Mirissa Price, a paediatric dentist and spokesperson for the American Dental Association. In these cases, bruxism can often be resolved by treating the underlying cause.

The movement the jaw makes while clenching and grinding is similar to chewing, but the force is up to 10 times greater. That amounts to about 17 kilograms of pressure per square centimetre. Over time, it leads to cracked teeth or worn-down molars. Consistent grinding also weakens the ligament that holds the tooth in place, which can lead to tooth loss, says Price.

For stress-related bruxism, Patel recommends relaxation techniques, such as meditation or yoga. “Some patients have success with cognitive behavioural therapies to manage their stress and change the behaviour,” says Price. For daytime bruxism, Price suggests chewing gum during stressful situations, which can offset the desire to grind, or snapping a rubber band bracelet as a reminder to relax the jaw.

If you grind while asleep, your dentist can fit you for a night guard. “The guard takes the pressure instead of your teeth,” explains Patel. Because it prevents your jaw from fully clamping down, it reduces the activity of the masseter muscle, helping it relax.

Guards can be expensive, especially if not covered by health insurance,

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but Price cautions against opting for a cheaper, over-the-counter product. “If you get a mouth guard that doesn’t fit properly, you can actually worsen the problem,” she says.

Another treatment involves injecting botulinum toxin (Botox is one brand) into the masseter muscle on each side of the jaw, temporarily blocking nerve signals and essentially paralyzing the muscle. Patients might bruise at the site of the injection, but it’s safe and simple, and the results can be felt in two to six weeks. The treatment also relieves tension headaches and shoulder and neck pain.

Patients generally have injections

every four to six months, and over time, as the muscles begin to relax, the gap between treatments can be extended. It’s a great option for people who experience bruxism almost exclusively while awake, says Price, since a night guard isn’t designed to be worn while talking and eating.

Meanwhile, researchers at UK’s Nottingham Trent University are working on a smart headband that trains the wearer to control the grinding impulse. Worn at night, the device deploys a gentle vibration to relax clenched jaw muscles, while also creating a subconscious awareness of the habit. A prototype is in development. **R**

AS KIDS SEE IT

Granddaughter:

Grandma, why do you have scratches all over your face?

Me: They're called wrinkles. Grandma's getting old.

Granddaughter: Are they wrinkles like the ones on my shirt?

Me: Yeah, kind of.

Granddaughter: You can borrow mommy's iron and just iron them out.

—MICHELE VIVEIROS

When I was little, I accompanied my mom to the grocery store. While passing through the cereal aisle, I spotted a box with a picture of a leaping tiger. I grabbed it and yelled, "Mom, we have to buy this. It comes with a free pet tiger!"

—DENISE RAICH

My smarty-pants husband told our four-year-old son that ageing slows down in space. My son replied, "Of course it does."



"When you can count the number of storeys, you'll be ready to graduate from first grade."

There are no birthday parties in space."

—NEHA VIG

My granddaughter was playing a board game with her cousins and was clearly not following the rules. Her dad told her off and said she was cheating. "I'm not cheating, Dad," she replied indignantly. "I'm just helping myself win."

—JANE HARDEN

My eight-year-old daughter assured me that she will still like me when she becomes a teenager; she says she will just be good at hiding it.

—RITA HICKEY

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NEWS FROM THE

WORLD OF MEDICINE

By Samantha Rideout

VEGAN DIET BOOSTS HEART HEALTH, FAST

A Stanford University study of 22 pairs of twins found that eating a vegan diet can improve cardiovascular health in just eight weeks. Using identical twins allowed the researchers to control for genetics and limit other factors since the twins grew up in the same households and reported similar lifestyles. Each twin was assigned to either a vegan or omnivore diet, with plenty of fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains. The vegan diet

was completely plant based, while the omnivore diet included chicken, fish, eggs, dairy and other animal-sourced foods.

At the end of eight weeks, those on the vegan diet had significantly lower low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels than those on the omnivore diet.

Vegan participants also had a 20 per cent drop in fasting insulin, which lowered their risk for diabetes.

While a vegan diet might not be for everyone, the study's senior author, Christopher Gardner, says simply eating more plant-based foods can improve health by increasing gut bacteria and dietary fibre intake.

Can AI Spot Skin Cancer?

Artificial intelligence (AI) is on its way to becoming a helpful tool

for assessing possible skin cancer. Trained on data from malignant and benign lesions, new AI software assesses a scan or photo for precancerous or cancerous spots.

Software presented last October at the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology in Berlin had a 100 per cent detection rate for melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer, and was 99.5 per cent accurate in detecting all types of skin cancer. Of 190 confirmed cases of skin cancer, the software missed one—a basal cell carcinoma that was caught by a dermatologist.

And in January, the United States Food and Drug Administration authorized use of DermaSensor, an AI-powered device that can evaluate a suspicious lesion. It scans the spot and uses an algorithm to determine its cellular and below-the-skin characteristics. While the device is not meant



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to be a screening tool or to replace a physical exam, it can complement a physician's evaluation by giving recommendation to either investigate further with a specialist or simply monitor, meaning no action is required.

A Stimulating Alzheimer's Treatment

Brain stimulation is showing promise as a treatment to improve neuroplasticity in Alzheimer's patients. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to adapt by strengthening existing neural pathways and forming new ones. In Alzheimer's patients these pathways are disrupted. The treatment, called transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS), sends a low-intensity electrical current to the brain, via electrodes placed on the scalp, which stimulates the formation of neural pathways.

In a study published

in the journal *General Psychiatry*, researchers in China recruited 140 patients over the age of 65 with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease.

The treatment group received tDCS—two daily 20-minute sessions for five days a week, over a six-week period—had significantly improved cognitive function compared to their baseline, measured at the start of the trial. Meanwhile, the control group received a placebo treatment and had no noticeable improvements. More research is needed, but results are encouraging.

Slowing Cellular Ageing

A new study published in *Science of The Total*



Environment found that the cells of people who live in neighbourhoods with ample access to parks, gardens or lawns age slower than the cells of their urban counterparts with little to no green space. Specifically, the residents were found to have longer telomeres—structures that protect the ends of chromosomes.

"A longer telomere is usually a younger telomere, or a more protective, helpful telomere," said Aaron Hipp, professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at North Carolina State University and co-author of the study. "It is protecting that cell from the ageing process."

For every five per cent increase in green space, the authors noted a one per cent reduction in cellular ageing. However, certain factors, such as high pollution, negated any benefit the green space had on cellular ageing. ■



Tasty Tacos

Those shells hold a lot of history

BY Renée S. Suen

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Mark Derse

ONE OF THE world's favourite hand-held foods is so popular it gets its own day: Taco Tuesday. The practice has even crossed the Atlantic to Scandinavia—except it happens there on Fridays. On *Taco Friday*, Swedish families top theirs with pineapple, cucumber, nuts and a yogurt sauce. And that's just one way the world gets its fill.

But before they became an international hit, tacos took their first folds in Mexico. Authentic Mexican tacos use fresh tortillas made from ground corn or wheat, depending on the region. (Though corn plays an integral role in Mexican tradition and culture, the invading Spanish favoured wheat, since it was linked with the Holy Eucharist.)

The word *taco* may come from the Aztec *tlahco*, which means 'half' or 'in the middle'. In the 1500s, the Aztec ruler Montezuma II Xocoyotzin used tortillas prepared on hot stones as spoons to hold food. But, according to Jeffrey Pilcher, author of *Planet*

Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food, the moniker more likely traces back to Mexican silver miners in the 18th century, for whom *taco* was the word for the thin sheets of paper wrapped around the gunpowder used to excavate ore.

Tacos arrived in America with the Mexican immigrants who came to mine our industrializing nation's metals and build its railroads. At the time of its first written mention, in a newspaper in 1905, the taco was still largely a working-class food, an affordable item sold by street vendors in the Southwest.

The first taco restaurant, El Cholo, opened in Los Angeles in 1923. The now-ubiquitous Taco Bell came along in 1962. At that time, most Americans still didn't know what tacos were. But Taco Bell's offerings, created for the Anglo palate, were accessible and affordable and became wildly popular among Americans of non-Mexican heritage. The fast-food chain has since expanded to more than 7,000 locations worldwide, inclu-

TMB STUDIO

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ding in Japan, Saudi Arabia and India. (Feeling left out, Norwegians have a Facebook campaign called 'Get Taco Bell to Norway'.)

Tacos can be filled to suit any palate. Regional favourites range from *barbacoa* (barbecued meat) to *carne asada* (steak) to *nopal* (cactus) to *pescado* (fish). After the Spanish introduced pigs to the Yucatán in the 16th century, *cochinita pibil* (slow-cooked pork) tacos emerged. Then when Lebanese immigrants came to Mexico in the early 20th century, they brought their shawarma tradition and vertical rotisseries. The lamb they had used for gyros and kebabs was substituted with more widely available pork

PERHAPS THE BEST THING ABOUT TACOS IS THAT THEY CAN BE WHATEVER YOU WANT THEM TO BE.

and pineapple, and the classic taqueria menu item *tacos al pastor* (shepherd's tacos) was born.

Perhaps the best thing about tacos is that they can be whatever you want them to be. Whichever delicious way they're filled, they are well worth the mess you'll likely make as you bite into them. **R**

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ALL in a Day's WORK

Please stop asking me to send a calendar invite. I do not know what that means. The calendar invite was me asking you to do the thing. You manage your own little calendar.

—X@IFOLLOWERNODAD

Early one morning, while on the way to work, I stopped at a coffee shop and gave the barista my order: "Medium skim decaf latte." The barista read back my order: "One medium Why Bother."

—THELMA WELLS

A good résumé helps one land jobs. A bad résumé lands here:

"Working at XX airline, I gained experience managing cabin crew in a pressurized environment."

"My hobbies include regular attendance at



my local gym and swimming poo."

"Previously at Starbucks Coffee Co. the position I occupied allowed me to serve customers and exceed their expectations, by providing them with the right product."

—RESUMEHELL.BLOGSPOT.COM

Before GPS, my boss at our courier company was lost on a rural road. So he asked a local for directions. "Go as far as you can see, twice, and there's your turn," said

the local. Confused, but with no better options, my boss fixed his eyes on a spot as far as he could see. He drove to that spot and made a mental note of the next farthest spot he could see. Upon arriving at the second spot, dead on was the little unmarked turn he was looking for.

—BOREDPANDA.COM

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COVER STORY

HEARTS *of* STEEL

**FOUR STORIES THAT PAINT A VIVID
PICTURE OF BRAVERY, SACRIFICE,
AND THE PROFOUND IMPACT OF
WAR ON THE HUMAN SPIRIT**

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BROTHERS- IN-ARMS

Maha Vir Chakra awardee Captain Neikezhakuo Kengurüse, aka 'Nimbu Saab' played a crucial role in defending Point 4590 in Kargil war. Here, his brother Neingutoulie describes Neibu's life in the army before embarking on the operation in which he lost his life leading his men into combat

BY *Neha Dwivedi and Diksha Dwivedi*
with *Neingutoulie Kengurüse*
FROM THE BOOK *NIMBU SAAB:*
THE BAREFOOT NAGA KARGIL HERO

Several days after the conflict, acclaimed journalists made their way into the tents of the soldiers who had just returned from the Tololing battlefield. This was the war that gave birth to real-time reporting in India as journalists took to keeping the nation informed about the ongoings at our borders.

I would not have been able to believe then if someone told me that Neibu was witnessing his soldier-brothers breathing their last, crying for their families as they lay there in pain. When you're at war, there's no time to mourn; there's only little time to get your men together, more united than ever before, pick up martyred bodies, collect your enemy's weapons and ammunition, clear out the scattered bodies after a victory, and most importantly, gather courage and resilience for the next attack.

The Indian Army soldiers would often find letters of Pakistani Army soldiers while clearing out the points captured, and with every letter, more secrets about the planning of this disruptive war would be revealed. At the same time, they would empathize with the soldiers writing letters to their loved ones, as they themselves had done the same during troubling times, desperate as they often were to make their families feel at ease, since the news of the war had spread like wildfire by then and it told a different story than what most soldiers were reporting to their families in their initial days. However, as the attacks got intense, soldiers started speaking the truth, as did Neibu, since there was no guarantee that they would live to tell these tales to their loved ones.

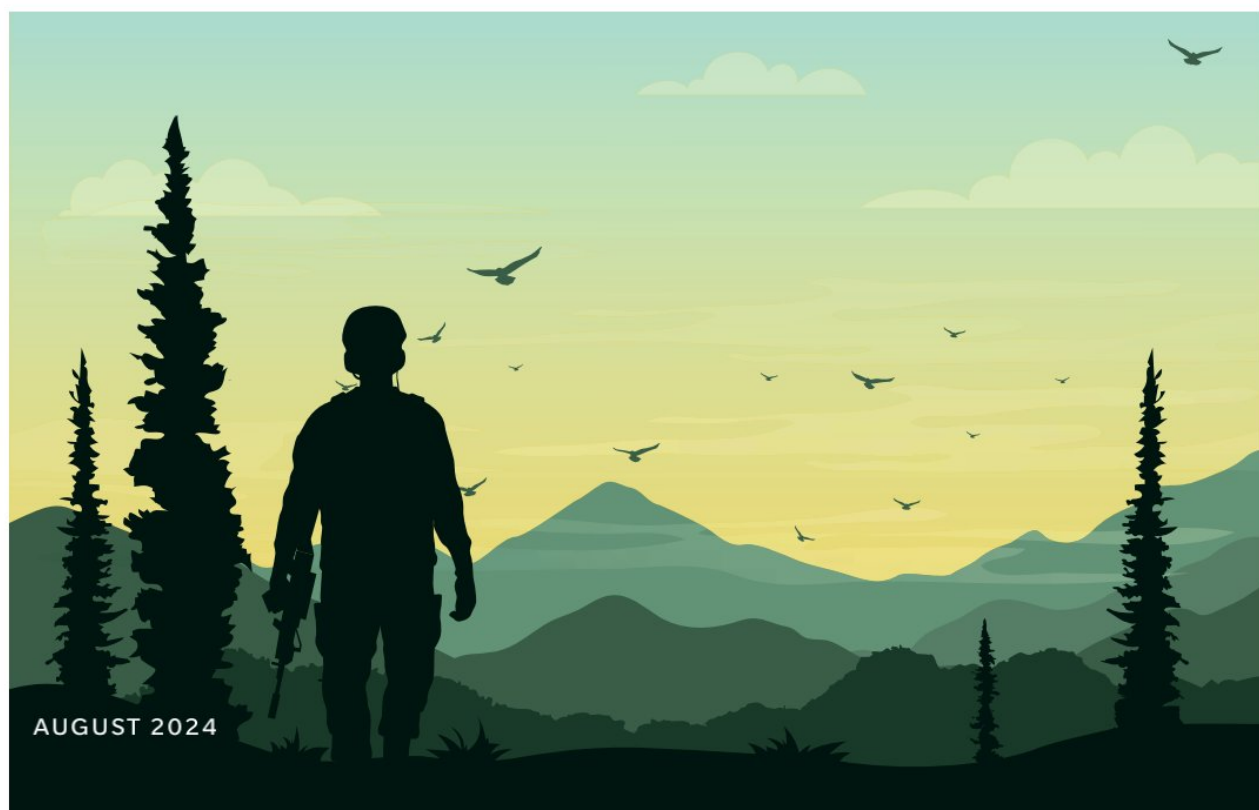


After Tololing, Neibu also called home and spoke to Apuo honestly. He said, 'We have won the battle and snatched many arms and ammunition of the enemy, but many of my loved ones have fallen in front of my eyes and I am not feeling good about it.' Despite the grim news, our ever-optimistic Apuo assumed that this meant that after the impossible Tololing win, they would now be given some relief and someone else would take charge in future attacks.

Nobody in my family knew then that the infantry and artillery worked hand in hand during this war, and many regiments were acting together to change the course of the future in favour of the Indian Army—which seemed like a distant dream on day one, owing to the unfair advantage that the Pakistani Army had. Therefore, our father felt a little relaxed instead of worried after the call, completely unaware as he was of the gruelling challenges and relentless

battles that lay ahead for Neibu and his comrades. He really had no clue that his son, as the second-in-command after Maj. Mohit Saxena, was now gearing up for the next attack.

The battalion received fresh orders within two weeks of the first attack, on 24 June. 2 Raj Rif was to attack the Three Pimples, Knoll and Lone Hill areas—all prized possessions for Pakistan and India. Without the collaborative strategy of the sub-units and units within a battalion, and a carefully designed dance between artillery firing and the infantry's on-foot soldiers, any attack during Operation Vijay was incomplete and impracticable. Therefore, strategically, the tasks were divided between Companies. D Coy, with Maj. Mohit Saxena in command and Neibu as the second-in-command, was given the responsibility of capturing Lone Hill, and A Coy, led by Acharya and Thapar (as the second-in-command),



was given the responsibility of Knoll.

On the night of 27 June, the battalion started their climb and reached the fire base by 6 the following morning. Just then, heavy enemy shelling killed one of their men, Satpal. The firing continued sporadically and so did the briefing on how to mindfully proceed with the attack going on.

Amidst the chaos, Maj. Saxena, Acharya, Thapar and Neibu shared a light moment and had a conversation about home and family. The officers sat down at the firm base known as Kajal, and my brother told his crew about the large family he had waiting for him at home. I learnt about all of this much later, of course, through Saxena. Some of the officers were hearing about Neibu's large family back home for the first time and felt a surge of compassion and pride in him for his sense of duty towards his family and his determination to change the trajectory of his life. The origin of his sense of duty, which they had only been observing in the tasks assigned to him so far, became clear to them now. Here was a man hardwired to uphold his responsibilities to the best of his ability and then some.

They also caught up on some sleep. Finally, around 8 p.m., the men of the D Coy started their climb towards their objective. Before these young, angry men could digest the fact that the enemy had already killed one of their dear soldiers, they lost many more soldiers in the unexpected shelling that ensued. One soldier, Havaladar Jagdeep, was hit by a

splinter, which pierced through his helmet. Many of their weapons were also damaged, the fire base was disrupted, and so, before the determined, audacious men of 2 Raj Rif could begin their task, they saw it all break down in front of their own eyes. From where they were standing, they could see the Three Pimples complex clearly, but from where the enemy was standing, they (the enemy) could point a gun exactly at anyone they chose. At this point, even a rock rolling down from the top could be a powerful weapon for the enemy.

In such unthinkable times, there are only two things that work for a soldier—faith and astounding courage. Especially in this second attack for 2 Raj Rif, the only choice the men had was to pick up the pieces of their broken hearts and morale and make the enemy pay for the loss of their brothers, their buddies, their squad, their leaders. What helped them were the words of the 2 Raj Rif commanding officer, Lt Col Ravindranath, who in their sainik sammelan earlier had shaken them out of their sense of loss and pain, and said sternly to them, “You are the undefeatable Rajputs and Jats, and you have to take the Three Pimples complex from the Pakistanis. This day is what we join the army for, and today the country needs us to show up and we have to prove our mettle.” These words were enough to wake up the sleeping tiger in each soldier's heart.

FROM NIMBU SAAB: THE BAREFOOT NAGA KARGIL HERO BY NEHA DWIVEDI AND DIKSHA DWIVEDI WITH NEINGUTOULIE KENGURÜSE (HARPER COLLINS).
EDITED EXCERPT REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSIONS.

LOVE'S LABOUR LOST

A journalist covering the Kargil war, catches a rare glimpse into the hopes and dreams of soldiers in combat

BY Gaurav C. Sawant

FROM THE BOOK *DATELINE KARGIL*

While war raged with full fury on the peaks, the personal lives of soldiers were undergoing a sea change. The soldiers climbing the peaks preferred not to think about their families, which they at times thought could weaken their resolve to “do or die” in the mission. But they were human beings fighting a war.

Living with them and wading through the ocean of camouflage fatigues,

I realized they were not just figures — six soldiers in a patrol missing... 36 soldiers of a Platoon dead or injured... 820 soldiers of a Battalion inducted....

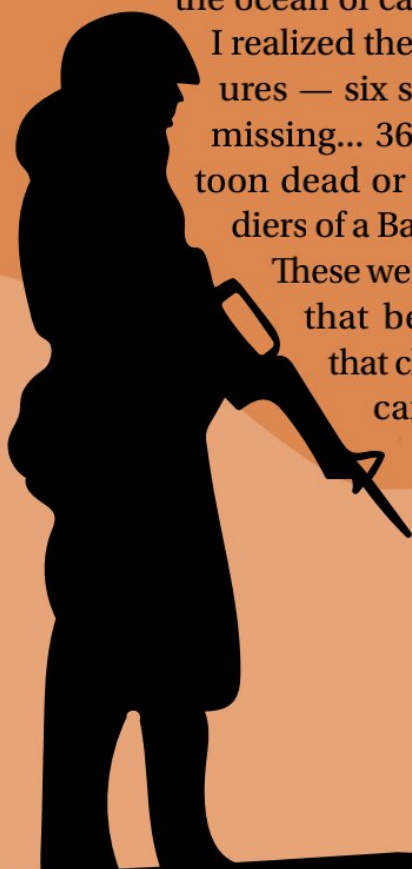
These were men, with hearts that beat and emotions that churned inside their camouflage jackets.

But stern faces and the steely look of determination in their eyes never let those feelings show.

The nation did not know that while Major Joy Dasgupta of the 18 Grenadiers led the assault on Drass heights, his heart was fluttering with happiness. He was to get engaged soon. In fact, his Commanding Officer, Colonel Khushal Thakur, an officer who always led from the front himself, had promised young Dasgupta special leave to go home and get engaged if he recaptured the Hump beyond Tololing in Drass. It was an operation that seemed next to impossible, given the strong defences of the Pakistani troops on the treacherous mountains. In fact, even before Dasgupta went for the assault, he lost half his troops to enemy artillery attack. His orders were to abort the mission and return. But to obey would have meant fresh preparations and further delay.

Dasgupta pressed on and led the assault. He hid behind boulders, climbed when the enemy attention was diverted by his troops giving covering fire from behind another feature. Dasgupta reached the Hump and took the enemy by surprise. He lobbed grenades inside their bunker and shot them dead as they scrambled out. His troops took over and destroyed other bunkers and the Hump was captured.

Colonel Thakur was honour-bound to speak





to the 8 Mountain Division Commander, Major General Mahinder Puri. The Major General too was impressed by the youngster's bravery and sanctioned special leave. Dasgupta reached home. But what happened back home in Hyderabad shocked him.

"In Hyderabad, the girl I was supposed to get engaged to, said that she did not want to get married to a coffin. She had heard that 18 Grenadiers were in active battle in Tololing and Tiger Hill and turned down the marriage proposal," said the dejected Major. His comrades-in-arms tried to console him saying that if a girl could not accept him it was her loss. She lost out on a war hero. Dasgupta would smile, but just about. He had not stopped carrying her photograph even though his friends tried to hide it from him.

Sitting in their camp at the Huliyaal village on the way to Mushkoh Valley, officers of the 18 Grenadiers would tell Dasgupta to find a beautiful hill girl and get married. In the cold nights, as everybody sat tucked inside sleeping bags

with a hide kerosene lamp burning, brother officers would draft newspaper advertisements for the 'Wanted Bride' column. Wanted a bride for a war hero (could end up in a coffin). "Tall and dark (not really) but handsome (certainly) and very daring. Contact Major Dasgupta, 18 Grenadiers, C/O 56 APO."

Laughing till their sides hurt, the officers would dodge Dasgupta's kicks. "Hey Sawant, you are a newspaper man. Have this advertisement published free, okay," officers would tease and Dasgupta sheepishly murmured his no-nos. "All is fair in love and war," is all he would say.

The army too was trying its best to accommodate the lovers. Calls coming for soldiers on dominating heights were actually put through to them. One of the lucky receivers was Captain Vishal Thapa of 16 Grenadiers. The Shola, as he is called, met his girlfriend through All India Radio's (AIR) Forces Request programme. "At 16,000 feet, there is not much to do at times. So we tune into the radio. Here this girl was sending mes-

sages for us, fighting in Kargil. So when I spoke home, I asked my cousin to send in a request to befriend her on my behalf, giving my name and address. And she responded. Then I would send in a letter and gradually we even got talking," the officer said. He gave her his Drass phone number and she began calling. And then he succeeded in receiving calls from his "girlfriend" in Pune at his post above 16,000 feet, courtesy the army, of course. "She would call the military exchange in Drass and ask for him. The call would then be transferred to the internal line which links the headquarters to the top by a landline," he said. What Thapa did not tell but his friends "ratted on him" was the fact that each time she called, he would request the intelligence unit officer on duty to either shut his ears or keep the headphones away and not listen to their conversation.

The scene was different for a friend and senior, Major Ajit Singh. The intense 31-year-old was not so lucky in love. A favourite with his troops and popular with senior officers, Singh, however, was too involved with the army or so the lady supposed to be waiting back home, thought. Same was the case with

Captain Arun Singh in the war zone. Though engaged, his wedding date was put off indefinitely. "The girl in question was candid. She said that though she loved me, she did not want to marry a body bag or a cripple. So here I am," he said, smiling cynically. This, of course, has had one positive effect. "All the anger and frustration is coming out on the Pakistani soldiers who flee seeing

young, angry army men advancing," joked the commanding officer of one of the units. The boys laughed but the pain was evident in their eyes.

And it poured out after a drink or two when the biting cold and the gushing winds would no longer hit us when we stepped out of the wind-proof tents. And then the sessions would begin. Even the HEER round, the entire flight trajectory of which was visible like a rocket flying in through the air, looked romantic to the love-sick Romeos. "Go HEER go. Kill the enemy so I can return home to my love," a young Captain whispered at night as the Bofors shell plastered some Pakistani gun position miles away.

**"SHE SAID THAT
THOUGH SHE LOVED
ME, SHE DID NOT
WANT TO MARRY A
BODY BAG. SO HERE
I AM", HE SAID,
SMILING CYNICALLY.**



FROM DATELINE KARGIL: A CORRESPONDENT'S NINE-WEEK ACCOUNT FROM THE BATTLEFRONT BY GAURAV C. SAWANT (NATRAJ PUBLISHERS, WWW.NATRAJBOOKS.IN). EDITED EXCERPT REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSIONS.

WOUNDS WORTH WEARING

A captain's wife witnesses how soldiers must come to terms with life-changing injuries sustained in combat

BY Shikha Akhilesh Saxena

FROM THE BOOK *NATION FIRST*

I witnessed a daily sight as I walked from the guest room to the officers' ward in the mornings. Near a crossroad, the hospital staff would be carrying coffins towards the mortuary. These were the bodies of our brave soldiers who had made the ultimate sacrifice in the Kargil War. I would join my hands together in prayer for the departed and their family, who would receive their coffins with broken hearts. I prayed to God to give them the courage to face the bitter truth of an ugly war, as ultimately, they were the sufferers. For them, time had stood still, and they would never see their loved ones again. The country was losing its most sincere, loyal and brave sons. People would always remember them with honour, but this could never make up for the void felt by their loved ones.

The coffins were not the only observations I made on a daily basis. In the evenings, I would visit the small food joint on campus and I would see many soldiers. They were all wounded. Some would never walk again, some would never see again, and some had lost their limbs. Some of them had their bones

crushed into such tiny pieces that doctors had to piece them together with steel rods and screws. The wounds on their bodies were covered in bandages, while their sombre faces and vacant eyes bore testimony to the torment they had endured. They would struggle with the smallest tasks for the rest of their lives. Their disabled status would get them downgraded in the army on medical grounds. The army would not ask them to leave, but their self-respect would not let them stay.

Each and every victory on the peaks of Kargil was achieved by paying a heavy price. Often, Akhilesh would wake up from convulsions in his dreams in the middle of the night. He was haunted by the harrowing images of war: blood on the ground, snow turned black, smoke everywhere, the bloody wounds of his comrades and him directing artillery fire. He would scream and say he wanted to go back and fight the enemy.

Once Akhilesh was able to move around in a wheelchair, he asked me to take him to the soldiers' ward. He wanted to meet his men. It was a huge dormitory with beds lined up on both sides, leaving space to walk in between. On seeing Capt. Akhilesh and me, the soldiers in the ward became emotional.

"Sir, what will I do now?" Rifleman Madhav Singh was sobbing. His legs had been amputated. "I have young kids, a wife and old parents. Who will provide for them now?" Capt. Akhilesh extended his hand to console him. "Sir, I want to die. I can't live life as a disabled person."

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"You are a soldier, and you are crying? You have lost your legs while fighting for your country. The army will take care of you and your family," Capt. Akhilesh assured him.

"Sir, we know the army will take care of us, but we are the ones who will go through life with our disabilities. Without my hands, I will now be dependent on my family. It would have been better if I had died" It was the voice of Sepoy Vishnu Sharma from the next bed.

"Sir, the bitter truth of life will not change for me. There is only darkness in front of my eyes," said Rifleman Jaswant Singh from the next bed.

There were so many questions, so much uncertainty and so much sorrow. Everyone was looking at us as though we could explain the conditions life had imposed on them. Then Akhilesh asked them this question, "Do you all regret fighting the war against the enemy to protect our country?" "No, sir, we will go again if given a chance. We are willing to sacrifice our lives for our country," Havaldar Gurudev Singh said, and the others nodded in agreement.

"Martyrdom is an honour achieved only by the luckiest. The rest will have to find glory in their disabilities. You are all soldiers who fought for your country. No one can ever take away this from you. You have done the greatest service to the nation," Capt. Akhilesh reminded them.

The news about the wretched environment in the hospital wards must have reached the commander of the Base Hospital. He opened the hospital

gates, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., for people who wished to meet the Kargil War heroes, to thank and honour them for their bravery and sacrifices. One morning while feeding Akhilesh his breakfast, through the window, I saw many school children lined up in the corridor outside. The nurse came inside and informed us that the kids wished to meet their war heroes. They were carrying cards, chocolates and letters for the wounded officers. A sense of pride overwhelmed Akhilesh and his eyes welled up.

It was the morning that established glory in the history of modern India. All the newspapers were flooded with the headlines: India declared 26 July 1999 as 'Kargil Vijay Diwas' (Kargil Victory Day). The Indian Army had declared a successful culmination of Operation Vijay, declaring victory after an almost three-month-long battle on the frosty peaks of Kargil. Drass had been cleared of all intruders. We all shed tears of joy. It was a day for rejoicing and the officers decided to celebrate it with their soldiers. They all chipped in and ordered exotic dishes from restaurants and, with the help of the hospital staff, had the soldiers' ward decorated with flowers, lights and balloons. They danced with their crutches, glucose bottles held up in the air, on one leg, without any hands. The victory of Kargil is not a story of just winning. It's a story of pain with pride; a story where death is not the end.

FROM NATION FIRST BY SHIKHA AKHILESH SAXENA (HACHETTE). EDITED EXCERPT REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSIONS.

THE GENERAL AND I

They called him Lt. General Zorawar Bakshi, India's most decorated war hero. I called him father

BY Raveev Bakshi

AS TOLD TO ISHANI NANDI

As a child, when I saw at my father in uniform, it was something I always took for granted. After all, growing up on army cantonments, I lived in an insulated world where my peers were other children within the unit, and their fathers wore uniforms too. Soon, other things also became a normal part of our life: The sense that what my father and everybody like him did for work was something *very* important; that anyone who met him or talked about him did so with great admiration and respect; that his long, long absences meant he was at the border, fighting a war; that one day he would be back, or, as it happened with some of my friends, he might not.

From fighting with the UN troops in Congo in 1962, to stints on the Jammu and Kashmir border in 1965 and '71, my father was deployed in nearly every conflict this nation has seen. As a serving officer, through conflict after conflict, he lived along far-flung borders, but once in a while I did manage to spend short bits of time with him, and more so after he retired. We were always a little bit of in awe of him and his presence loomed

large even when he wasn't there. He was strict, but also had a great sense of humour. Perhaps one of the most cherished principles I always saw him live by was that there must be honour and integrity in whatever one does, or what job one holds. It doesn't matter what anybody says, as long as you know you are doing the right thing. He was an outspoken man, who called a spade a spade and didn't mince words. Whatever stand he took, he stood by it. He always had a certain wit and could look at the lighter side of things, especially when life grew dark.

People would often ask him, "Don't you feel scared? You probably don't fear death at all." He replied, "If there's anybody who tells you that he doesn't fear death, he's either a liar or he's mad. Everybody is afraid of dying. The thing is to get over it, or around it, to do what you have to."

There's a story one of his officers once told me. In 1947 he was retreating from Titwal during heavy Pakistani shelling. They were walking on this mountain track with bombs falling all around. "We were so scared," the officer said. "Then suddenly we hear your father whistling a tune. I said, 'Why are you whistling?' He said, 'Well, if we have to die, we'll die. But we may as well be a little easy about it while we are alive!' And that's what I think he imparted to us also. That things can be as bad as possible, but don't lose the lighter side of living. It's something I've always lived by, and I guess I owe it to him. **R**

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TOO MUCH?

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New studies show that even moderate drinking is a health hazard. Here's a frank look at the toll alcohol takes on the body

BY *Brad Badelt*

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The risks of heavy drinking

have been widely understood for decades. Modest alcohol consumption, however—a glass of wine or beer a day, or a shot of liquor—has long been thought of as harmless. Or in the case of red wine, even beneficial. Red wine has been cited as a potential health booster because of an ingredient called resveratrol, which is thought to have powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties that can help protect against cancer, arthritis and other diseases. But growing evidence suggests that having a drink a day might not be so benign after all.

A 2018 study published in *The Lancet* looked at drinking patterns and health in millions of people (both men and women) from 195 countries. The researchers reported having a drink a day can be modestly beneficial for preventing heart attacks, but that was outweighed by heightened risks of stroke, aortic aneurysm and heart failure.

Overall, the study found that health risks rose with the amount of alcohol consumed. People who had one alcoholic drink a day had a 0.5 per cent higher risk of developing one of 23 alcohol-related health problems than non-drinkers. With two drinks a day, the risk rose by seven per cent. “The safest level of drinking is none,” the study’s authors concluded.

“The health halo around moderate drinking has definitely slipped off,”

says Tim Naimi, director of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. For starters, Naimi points out, alcohol is a known carcinogen. There is strong evidence that drinking booze—even just a drink a day—increases the risk of a variety of cancers, including in the liver, breast, mouth, throat and colon. Recent studies have found other negative health impacts, as well.

So how does alcohol harm the body? Here’s what happens when you drink.

IT DISRUPTS YOUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

As you tip back your glass, sending the alcohol down your throat, the first place it goes is to your gut. Once it reaches your digestive system, alcohol begins seeping through your stomach and intestinal wall lining and into your bloodstream. How quickly that happens partly depends on how much food is in your belly. It can take up to 90 minutes for a drink to get fully into your blood if you’ve just eaten a big meal, which slows alcohol from reaching the intestines, where most absorption occurs. But on an empty stomach, a shot of booze can pass into your blood in less than 30 minutes.

When alcohol reaches your stomach, it triggers the release of digestive enzymes. The enzymes that break down alcohol tend to be highly acidic—almost as much as battery acid. Like

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(WINE STAINS) ISTOCK.COM/LILIGRAPHIE

salt water on a ship's hull, these enzymes—along with alcohol itself—can gradually wear away your stomach lining and make it inflamed and painful (a condition known as gastritis) and cause acid reflux.

Over months and years, this can lead to ulcers—blister-like sores that can be excruciating—in your stomach and intestinal lining. These effects, however, tend to be associated with more excessive consumption, typically

THE ENZYMES BREAKING DOWN ALCOHOL WEAR AWAY AND INFLAME YOUR STOMACH LINING.

defined as more than eight drinks a week for a woman and 15 for a man.

For the drink-a-day person, a more likely risk is disruption to the gut's biome. Your stomach contains a complex community of microscopic organisms—billions of them—that break down the food and drinks you consume, providing the nutrients and calories your body needs. The acidic response triggered by alcohol can cause an imbalance: too much of some bugs and not enough of others. Studies have shown that this can eventually lead to difficulty absorbing nutrients, a weakened immune system and even depression. If the one drink

you have today is red wine, the polyphenols it contains can help maintain a healthy gut—but you can get the same amount from a cup of black tea or a handful of blueberries.

Long-term alcohol consumption—even just a moderate amount—also heightens the risk of cancer. Acetaldehyde—a by-product created when alcohol is metabolized—can damage colon cells' DNA and allow a cancerous growth to take hold. The result can be gruesome, if not fatal: bloody stools, severe constipation and, in many cases, invasive surgery is required to remove a portion of the colon.

IT HARMS THE LIVER

The liver is like a treatment plant for blood. It breaks down and filters out harmful substances and makes the proteins, enzymes and hormones the body uses to ward off infections. It also converts vitamins, nutrients and medicines into substances that our bodies need.

When it comes to booze, the liver processes and removes more than 90 per cent of the alcohol we consume. It does this using specific enzymes that convert alcohol into acetate—essentially vinegar—which is non-toxic. The rest exits the body directly via urine, sweat and breathing.

Typically, the liver can process about one drink per hour; it's likely unable to keep up with more than that.

The excess alcohol will then accumulate in your blood and you'll begin feeling drunk (intoxication is usually measured by blood-alcohol content). Interestingly, women typically have less dehydrogenase—a liver enzyme that breaks down alcohol—than men. So a woman's body, by virtue of genetics, will break down alcohol more slowly than that of a man.

Over the longer term, excessive drinking can cause a host of liver ailments, including a buildup of gelatinous fatty deposits, reddish swelling of

A STUDY FOUND THAT ONE DAILY DRINK POSES MORE RISK THAN OCCASIONAL BINGE DRINKING.

the tissue and a breakdown of functional cells. Eventually, hard scar tissue permanently replaces healthy tissue—a condition known as cirrhosis—which can lead to liver failure and cancer.

Moderate drinking poses a much lower risk to your liver but can still have potential impacts. Simply put, every time you consume alcohol, you are making your liver work, which can eventually take its toll.

Booze can also inhibit the liver from performing its other vital functions, such as producing proteins and nutrients. A UK study found that a drink-a-

day habit poses an even higher risk to one's liver than occasional binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks in one event).

IT WEAKENS THE HEART

When alcohol reaches the bloodstream, blood vessels relax and dilate. This, in turn, lowers blood pressure, causing the heart to beat faster in order to maintain enough blood flow to other organs. You might suddenly feel warmer, and your cheeks might flush as blood rushes into the capillaries in your skin. But what about the longer-term effects drinking has on the heart?

Let's start with what's known for certain: heavy drinking is harmful to our cardiovascular system. Consuming more than 15 drinks a week for men, or eight for women, can lead to high blood pressure, an irregular heartbeat, heart failure or stroke. The toxicity of alcohol can also, over time, weaken the muscles of the heart, leading to a condition known as cardiomyopathy, in which the organ stretches and droops—picture a partly deflated balloon—and struggles to pump blood. This can eventually lead to heart failure.

The effects of moderate drinking are where things get murkier. For many years, researchers linked moderate drinking with better heart health.

One example of this is known as the "French Paradox." Since the 1980s, low rates of heart disease have been

observed in French people, despite a typical diet that includes many rich, fatty foods. The phenomenon was initially explained by consumption of red wine in France—particularly resveratrol, which is found in grapes and, as noted earlier, is thought to be a powerful antioxidant.

The amount of resveratrol in wine, however, is relatively small—likely not enough to make a difference. Studies on animals suggest that as much as 500 milligrams of resveratrol might be needed to provide any measurable health benefits. To get that amount, you'd need to drink a whopping 40 litres of wine daily. Instead, most researchers now believe that the low rates of heart

possible reason for this is that alcohol consumption can increase the level of high-density lipoproteins, often referred to as “good cholesterol,” which may protect against heart disease. Still, organizations like the World Cancer Research Fund strongly caution against the idea that a drink a day can be good for the heart. The risks, their research shows, outweigh the benefits.

IT SHRINKS THE BRAIN

For most moderate drinkers, the perceived effect of alcohol on the brain is positive: they feel happier, less stressed, more social. There's a reason for that: brain-scan images have shown that alcohol triggers the release of endorphins—“feel good” hormones—in our brain. These same endorphins are released when having sex or eating chocolate; they help reduce anxiety and make us feel, well, better.

But that euphoric feeling is only part of the story. Alcohol has another effect on your brain: It slows it down. This is why alcohol is considered a depressant. It interferes with the brain's millions of communications pathways, known as neurons, and bogs down or misdirects signals. Think of your frontal lobe as a switchboard operator suddenly struggling to keep up. With too many drinks, it leads to slurred speech, stumbling and clumsiness.

Over time, heavy drinking can cause permanent damage to brain cells and

**YOU'D NEED TO DRINK
40 LITRES OF WINE
A DAY TO SEE ANY
BENEFITS FROM
ANTIOXIDANTS.**

disease in France—and among wine drinkers in general—are due to other lifestyle factors, such as greater physical activity or higher socioeconomic status, and not a love of *vin*.

There are certain groups of people who seem to benefit from moderate drinking—those recovering from a heart attack, for example, have been shown in some studies to live longer if they have an occasional drink. A

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the neural pathways that connect them. The result is poor concentration, judgment, mood and memory. It can eventually lead to stroke and dementia (a 2018 study found that heavy drinking roughly tripled the risk of dementia). The effect that even a cocktail or two a day can have might surprise you. A recent study showed that modest amounts of alcohol can, over time, reduce brain volume: Simply put, drinking can shrink your brain.

A study published in 2022 in the journal *Nature* compared the reduction of brain volume caused by drinking to early aging, in terms of cognitive decline. The study, which was based on participants' drinking habits over the previous year, found that the reduction in brain volume was roughly proportional to the amount of alcohol regularly consumed. For example, people aged 50 who drank a pint of beer a day had brains that appeared two years older than those who abstained.

IT IMPACTS THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

Our immune system is made up of white blood cells, antibodies, the lymphatic system, the spleen, thymus and bone marrow—all of which can be disrupted by alcohol. Normally our white blood cells move quickly to the site of an infection or injury to fight off viruses and bacteria. But with alcohol in the bloodstream, those cells are slower to mobi-

lize—like an army of inebriated, bumbling soldiers. The result is a weaker immune response and greater susceptibility to inflammation and infections.

Another way that alcohol affects our immune system is through our gut. As we've learned, alcohol disrupts the complex community of micro-organisms in the stomach known as the microbiome. Those bugs are critical to our immune functions. For example, your gastrointestinal tract produces epithelial cells, which are sometimes referred to as our body's "safety shields." These cells cover our skin and the lining of our throat, intestines,

**DRINKING AFFECTS
YOUR JUDGMENT,
MOOD AND MEMORY,
AND CAN LEAD TO
DEMENTIA.**

blood vessels and all of our organs. They're our first line of defence against viruses and bacteria.

But alcohol can damage production of these important cells and leave us more susceptible to getting sick. For example, people who abuse alcohol are 10 times more likely to develop pneumonia, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Most research linking immune response with alcohol has focused on

excessive drinking. The effects of moderate consumption are less clear. Nevertheless, at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the U.S. surgeon general warned at-risk adults to stop drinking altogether. Soon after, the World Health Organization recommended cutting back on drinking, explaining that the diseases and mental health disorders caused by alcohol make a person more vulnerable to Covid-19.

IT CAN LEAVE YOU IMPOTENT

Shakespeare once wrote that alcohol “provokes the desire but takes away the performance.” Modern science backs the Bard up. Booze might seem like an aphrodisiac, but it can actually have the opposite effect on your body—especially if you drink too much.

It’s been shown that a bit of alcohol can lower inhibition, raise confidence and increase arousal for both men and

women. But beyond a drink or two, those benefits are outweighed by the negative effects. Alcohol reduces blood flow, slows the central nervous system, takes away libido and for men can cause erectile problems.

Over the longer term, excessive alcohol consumption can wreak havoc on sexual health. Booze can reduce men’s production of an enzyme called NAD⁺, which is a building block for testosterone, an important sex-drive hormone. Most alcoholic drinks also contain a chemical called phytoestrogen, which might increase the level of the female sex hormone estrogen in heavy drinkers. For men, higher estrogen means lower sex drive and performance, as well as a reduced sperm count.

Alcohol can have detrimental effects on women’s sexual health, too, limiting fertility and reducing overall desire for sex. A 2021 study of 133 women found that moderate drinkers were 44 per cent less likely than non-drinkers to get pregnant. **R**



By Reputation

I’ve never been cool, and I don’t care.

CELINE DION, SINGER

**First we only want to be seen, but once we’re seen that’s not enough anymore.
After that, we want to be remembered.**

EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL, WRITER, IN HER NOVEL *STATION ELEVEN*

I wouldn’t bother to describe me. I’m Eartha Kitt.

EARTHA KITT, SINGER

LIFE'S

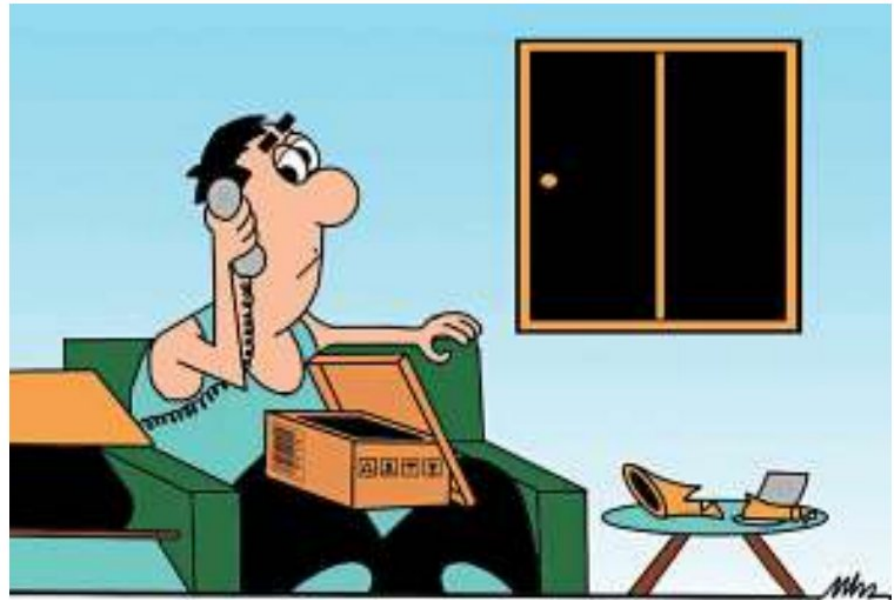
Like That

I had sat down with my family after finishing my worship-leading responsibilities at church. My eight-year-old son, who was just learning to sit in “big church” was whispering to mommy. A few minutes later, he had written something on a piece of paper and wadded it up to hand to me. I unwadded the paper and read the words, “Hi Dad! Bye.” I looked at him and quietly asked him: “What is this?”

“It’s a text message, Dad. Mom wouldn’t let me use her phone.”

—GCFL.NET

A child asked his father, “How were people born?” His father said, “Adam and Eve made babies, then their babies became adults and made babies, and so on.” The child then



“Welcome to Help Desk. Our address is virtual, emails automated, web chat via chatbot and this is a tele-robot answering your call. How can I help you?”

went to his mother, asked her the same question and she told him, “We were monkeys then we evolved to become like we are now.”

The child ran back to his father and said, “You lied to me!”

His father replied, “No, your mom was talking about her side of the family.”

—LAUGHFACTORY.COM

When I started working 20 years ago, there were still people at my workplace who did not understand how computers worked. The evidence? I spotted

a colleague selecting a paragraph from a document, right-click with a mouse to copy it, then detach the mouse from the computer. He then proceeded to attach it to another computer and attempt to paste the copied section to a blank document!

—MOUMITA BAGCHI, *Delhi*

During my undergraduate medical training, one of our forensic science classes dealt with different types of injuries and trauma. One batch mate seemed deeply interested in the

SHUTTERSTOCK

Scientists announced that they have located the gene for alcoholism. Scientists say they found it at a party, talking way too loudly.

— CONAN O'BRIEN, *comic*

topic. He frequently interrupted the professor to ask details of different types of murder weapons. Exasperated, the professor finally asked, "Are you planning to murder someone soon?" The student replied, "Even if I do sir, it will be after you retire from service." Without missing a beat, the professor replied, "Don't be too cocky, I

may remain as advisor to the police even after retirement! And I will remember what I taught in class today!"

— DR RUDRAJIT PAUL, *Kolkata*

My boyfriend is trying to teach me how to play the video game *Dark Souls* right now and it feels like when your dad is trying to do your math

homework with you while you cry at the kitchen table.

— FUNNYTWEETER.COM

I once called out to my daughter in her room saying I had an antique to show her. She called out, "If I open the door, am I just going to see you?"

— FUNNYTWEETER.COM

Reader's Digest will pay for your funny anecdote or photo in any of our humour sections. Post it to the editorial address, or email: editor.india@rd.com

IT'S POURING CATS AND DOGS!

Famous people on why these creatures reign supreme

♦ I would like to see anyone—prophet, king or God—convince a thousand cats to do the same thing at the same time.

— NEIL GAIMAN

♦ Dogs are the leaders of the planet. If you see two life forms, one of them's making a poop, the other one's carrying it for him, who would you assume is in charge?

— JERRY SEINFELD

♦ In ancient times cats were worshipped as gods; they have not forgotten this.

— TERRY PRATCHETT

♦ If you are a dog and your owner suggests that you wear a sweater, suggest that he wear a tail.

— FRAN LEBOWITZ

♦ Cats are the lap-dancers of the animal world. Soon as you stop shelling out, they move on, find another lap.

— ANDREW VACHSS

♦ Dogs are better than human beings because they know but do not tell.

— EMILY DICKINSON





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Small Business, Big Heart

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Caring for people is part of the deal at family-run shops



BY *Scott Grills*
FROM *THE GLOBE AND MAIL*

I GREW UP in and around Sharp's department store on Front Street in Campbellford, Ontario. It was run by my maternal grandmother, Mrs Sharp, and when I was growing up in the 1960s and '70s, I was one of various family members who worked there occasionally.

I learnt the difference between nylon and metal zippers, which fabrics should be cut and which needed to be torn, and how to sort patterns and match colours of embroidery floss. I also learned something much more important: the place of a family business in the community.

FACING A TIGHT BUDGET, WE WERE THE BENEFICIARIES OF THE KINDNESS OF LOCAL BUSINESSES.



Mrs Sharp knew her customers. She heard the rumours of domestic violence; of women who had little money to buy essentials; of families struggling to care for sons who had returned from war suffering with what was then called 'shell shock'; of unplanned pregnancies and the need for the discreet purchase of certain sewing patterns to help prevent gossip.

End-of-the-bolt fabrics and discarded patterns made their way into the hands of mothers whose children needed clothes for the start of the school year. Widows without cash for undergarments bought them on credit, sometimes in tears: "I hate to ask. It has been so hard since Charlie died. You know I am good for it. Thank you. God bless you."

When my partner and I were still in university, we became parents.

Our budget was tight—at the time, inflation was more than 11 per cent and interest rates were above 18 per cent. Still, we saved so we could afford the occasional splurge.

We benefited from the kindness of local merchants who understood that treating every customer equally did not mean they were treated the same way.

The local fishmonger, who supplied lobster and crab to steak houses and immaculate scallops to a French restaurant, showed incredible thoughtfulness. We were regulars because our two-year-old had developed a passion for mussels normally reserved for ice cream and chocolate cake. Without fail, after the mussels were weighed and priced, the scoop went back into the tank—"Just a few extra to make up for the ones that don't open."

On one visit, a staff member asked if we had seen the Scottish salmon that had come in that morning. "Looks beautiful," I said. "Just the mussels, thanks."

He wondered if I could make use of some tails: "The restaurant only wants the best steaks, and I really don't have much of a market for these." Two tails went into the bag, no charge. "Mussels for the little guy and a treat for you and your wife. On the house."

When my wife was expecting our second child, she developed a deep craving for a local Chinese restaurant's version of Tai Dop Voy, a mixture of meats, shrimp and vegetables. Even though they rarely saw us, the owners

always remembered us. One evening, well into my wife's eighth month, I ordered Tai Dop Voy to go. Since he was up, I took our young son with me. It was a chillingly damp December night.

The next thing I knew, we were seated at the bar and my son had a soft drink in his hand. Our order came and I settled up. The bag was heavier than normal.

"We are closing soon," the server said. "There is some fried rice in there that would be thrown out. Enjoy. Have a healthy baby."

When I got home, there was not only fried rice but also an order of chow mein and two orders of Tai Dop Voy.

THAT WAS MANY years ago. But those small kindnesses from people who ran local businesses made a difference. It wasn't just the savings—though they were appreciated. Customers were seen as more than a source of revenue; we were members of the community that the business served.

These days, I'm not sure many people associate airlines, cellphone companies or grocery stores with 'service' to the community. Their customers are mostly anonymous, and their life circumstances are relevant only to the extent that the apps they use help the companies determine which products to display prominently.

Once again, many of us have been forced to tighten our belts. Fresh fruit? Maybe we'll buy some next week. Bacon or eggs, not both. But the generosity I experienced all

those years ago hasn't disappeared.

I witnessed it recently at my local farmers' market. A young family—it could have been my crew years ago—was debating whether to add another zucchini to the order (eavesdropping is an occupational hazard of mine). The farmer serving them said, "Sorry I for-

COMMUNITY, CARING AND KINDNESS ARE ALL PART OF THE MERCHANT-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP.



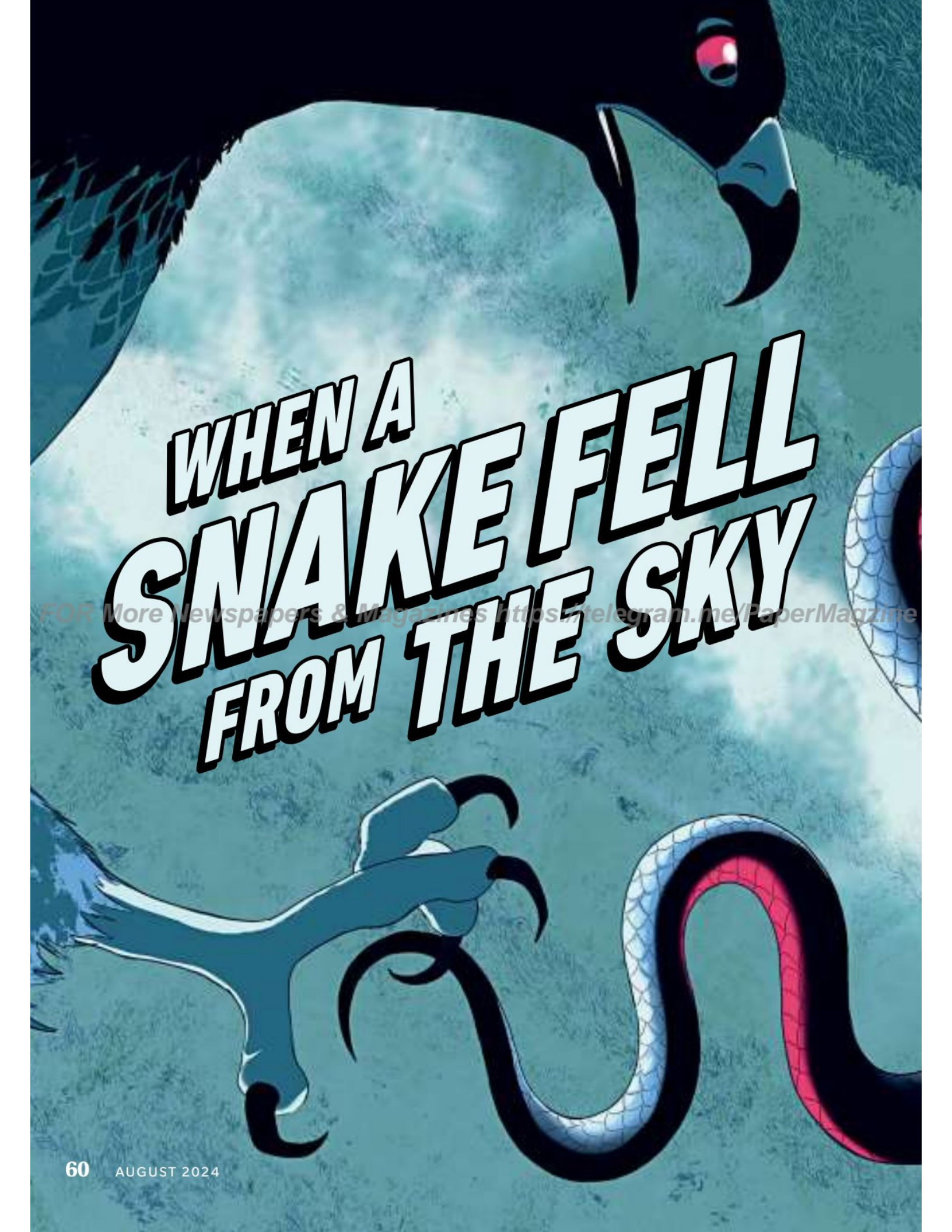
got, I have so many zucchinis this year. If you buy two, you get another for free. Pick out any one you like."

I like to think the farmer was being ethically flexible: no prices on the produce, but everything is fairly priced. Fair in the sense that community, caring and kindness are all part of the merchant-client relationship.

The kindness of merchants during leaner times is a sign of something deeper: We are all making our shared way together. For my part, I will continue to support farmers' markets and family-run restaurants. I am happy to pay a 'fair' price, knowing that there may be an extra cob of corn for the widow buying her eggs a half-dozen at a time.

My grandmother would have expected it of me. ■

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A dramatic illustration featuring a hawk with a glowing red eye and a blue and red snake. The hawk is positioned at the top, looking down, while the snake is coiled at the bottom. The background is a cloudy sky. The title "WHEN A SNAKE FELL FROM THE SKY" is written in large, bold, white letters with black outlines, slanted diagonally across the center. A watermark "FOR More Newspapers & Magazines https://telegram.me/PaperMagazine" is visible in the middle of the image.

WHEN A SNAKE FELL FROM THE SKY



DRAMA IN REAL LIFE

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**THE WOMAN ON THE LAWN MOWER
THOUGHT THAT WAS BAD—
ESPECIALLY WHEN IT HIT HER.
THEN THE HAWK SWOOPED IN**

BY *Derek Burnett*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Ryan Garcia*

EIGHT BILLION PEOPLE INHABIT PLANET EARTH.

Thirty million live in Texas. Residents of the town of Silsbee, just west of the Louisiana state line, number roughly 7,000. Let's estimate, for the sake of argument, that on any given Tuesday evening, 20 of those Silsbee residents are out cutting their grass. Out of all those 20 mowers and 7,000 Silsbee—residents and 30 million Texans and 8 billion humans, only one that we know of, 65-year-old Peggy Jones, was unlucky enough to have a living, writhing snake fall out of the sky and onto her.

The story only gets weirder.

Peggy and her husband, Wendell Jones, were tending a property they own just outside the Silsbee city limits, on 25 July 2023. Wendell was out front, weed-eating, while Peggy drove a tractor (Kubota, 26 horsepower) pulling a mowing machine around the big piece of open land out back. They'd waited till evening to do the work, avoiding the nearly 100-degree temperatures of the afternoon.

Out of sight and earshot of Wendell, Peggy was lost in thought, hands on the wheel, when suddenly a 3½-to-4-foot snake dropped out of the clear blue sky onto her right forearm.

This is not something one expects to happen. "At that particular moment, I

don't know if I realized it was a snake," Peggy says. "You're out here, there's grasshoppers and little flying bugs, so you automatically just kind of sling it off. Just an automatic reaction. And that's exactly what I did." But this creature did not sling. It clung, having immediately coiled itself tightly around her arm. A millisecond later, when she realized that the creature on her arm was a snake—and a big one—she shrieked, and flailed more wildly.

She had no idea what kind of snake the heavens had favoured her with, nor did she much care to know. "To me," she says, "a snake is a snake."

THE STORY IS JUST GETTING GOING, but let's pause here to settle a couple of questions. First, why would a snake fall out of the sky? Two main reasons, according to Vincent Cobb, a snake expert from Middle Tennessee State University: Sometimes snakes lose their footing (as it were) and tumble from trees onto unfortunate passersby, and sometimes they're dropped by a hawk that had been meaning to eat them. In this case, there was no tree, which implicates the hawk.

But, second question: If a snake falls from the sky onto an outstretched forearm, would it really wrap itself around

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the arm, just that fast, or wouldn't it kind of slide off and slither away through the grass?

"The snake could very likely have hit the arm and then fallen to the ground," Cobb says. "But I'm not surprised it wrapped around her arm, because that's a safety response. Snakes don't have legs and arms. It landed on something. The only way it can hang on is to wrap around it."

So we continue with the story, having established that Peggy Jones was doubly unlucky: She'd been directly beneath a clumsy hawk, and the snake that hit her was blessed with superior reflexes, fixing itself instantaneously to her arm—not like a constrictor aiming to crush its prey, but like a beast with no intention to leave, squeezing just hard enough to bruise. No amount of

flailing could rid her of the reptile, which now began striking at her face.

If that's not sufficiently appalling, allow Peggy to make it even worse: "Take your hand and hold it at arm's length and look at it," she says. "That's about the size of your hand. But now put your hand up to your face. It looks huge, right? To me, this snake looked like a super huge monster coming at me."

Leaning and straining her head, neck and shoulder as far away from her right arm as possible, Peggy screamed for Wendell. After a few seconds, she realized he wasn't coming. She was alone in this battle. So she appealed to the only being that could conceivably be of aid: "Help me, Jesus!" she yelled.

COBB EMPHASIZES that in striking repeatedly at Peggy, the snake was not just





being mean. It was terrified. “It just got through being attacked by a hawk,” he says. “It falls on her arm and wraps itself around, just trying to hang on to what it fell onto. And then it sees this woman’s face 2 feet from it. The snake sees this as another predator. That’s why the snake is striking at her face. It wasn’t attacking her; it was defending itself.”

With the tractor still rolling, the mower still cutting, Peggy still screaming and flinging, and Wendell still blissfully weed-eating out front, Peggy’s consciousness was abruptly invaded by yet another burst of sensory input too bizarre to register: Now a hawk was there on her arm, clutching at the snake with its razored talons, furiously beating its wings around and above her head in a thunderous flapping thrum. Her heart

nearly beat through her sternum.

TO MAKE SENSE of this startling development, let’s now learn a little about hawks. Why would one drop a snake from the sky? And would a hawk really brave a noisy tractor and shrieking human to go back for its lost prey?

Kevin McGowan, a biologist at the Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University, says it’s not that uncommon for a hawk to drop a snake. “It’s hard to be a hawk,” he explains. “They have to learn how to catch stuff and kill it without getting hurt and letting it get away. And that’s not easy to do.”

Rural folklore holds that hawks kill snakes by deliberately dropping them from on high, sometimes aiming specifically for barbed wire fences. Not likely, says McGowan. When snatched

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up by a hawk, unless they've been instantly dispatched, snakes might wrap around the bird's feet, a wing, its body.

"If the snake is wriggling and trying to fight back," he says, "the hawk could lose its grip while it's flying along."

Cobb concurs: "The hawk has to drop it or maybe go down with the snake."

Indeed, both experts are aware of cases in which hawks have been done in by their serpentine prey. So OK, the hawk drops the snake accidentally, or perhaps out of sheer self-preservation. But would a hawk really plunge down to retrieve its prey from a human astride a chugging tractor with a clattering mower behind?

"It strikes me as pretty weird," McGowan says. "This is an extraordinarily unusual occurrence. Most hawks are scared of people. This one should have been but apparently wasn't."

But he has a theory that might explain this unusually bold behavior. "It's conceivable this is a young bird, hatched this year and still trying to figure out how to do things," he says. This hawk hadn't learned the classic life lesson about just letting some things go.

"I mean, if it's a big snake, it's a big hunk of meat and you hate to lose it," McGowan says. "So the hawk certainly would have the urge to retrieve it."

QUICK TALLY of Peggy Jones's abysmally bad luck thus far in the story: Hawks don't usually drop their prey, but this

one did, managing to hit her with it. Snakes don't always catch themselves and wrap around the thing they landed on, but this one did. And to cap it off, not all hawks are feckless juveniles just learning their trade and thus foolish enough to come back for their fumbled prey ... but this one seems to have been.

We continue. The hawk seized the snake and pulled with such power that Peggy could feel it lift her arm forcefully skyward.

"I felt a good tug," she says. "But that's when you could feel that that snake was holding on tight." Before Peggy could react, the hawk flew off empty-handed (as it were).

Not surprising, says Cobb. "Snakes are quite muscular, and those coils are hard to break."

For the briefest moment, Peggy was left alone again with an even more beleaguered snake as the tractor zigzagged crazily up toward the mobile homes the couple rent out. But as quickly as the hawk had disappeared, it reappeared, again beating the air about Peggy's head, again clutching and slashing at her arm with its talons.

Again the hawk failed and departed. A moment later, another pass, another vicious grabbing, another failure.

Oh, my Lord. Please help me. Something's got to give here, Peggy thought.

And something did give—the snake, weakened from constant attacks by the hawk's talons. On its fourth sortie, the bird of prey managed to yank the

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snake off Peggy's arm and abscond with its meal.

Peggy was now snake- and hawk-free, but she was still not mollified. Looking at her bloodied forearm, all she could think was *This is not good*. Her flesh had been brutally torn, bruised and punctured. She stopped the tractor, reeling with adrenaline. Wendell, who had just finished out front, was there beside her now, having heard her screams, and was begging to know what was wrong. She tried to tell him but was so upset that her words were unintelligible.

**"THERE WAS VENOM
ON MY GLASSES. AND
THERE WAS A LITTLE
CHIP IN THEM."**

Wendell loaded his injured wife into their truck and raced toward the hospital. During the drive, he got her calmed enough that he could begin to understand what she was saying. It sounded like she said that "a snake fell out of the air ..."

"A snake?" he said. "A snake did all that to your arm?"

"No," she answered, frustrated. "The hawk did that to me."

She managed to convey the broadest outlines of what happened. But then a new realization hit her: She was having trouble seeing out of her right eye.

"OK," Wendell said. "We're almost

there. We're almost there."

At the emergency room entrance, he helped her out of the vehicle. "Oh," he said. "There's something on your glasses. That's why you can't see." He removed the glasses and the cloudiness that had blocked her vision vanished.

The ER workers cleaned her wounds and carefully inspected her skin for snakebites, miraculously finding none, and wiped from the right lens of her eyeglasses a milky, yellowish fluid.

"There was venom on my glasses," Peggy says. "And there was a little chip in them. They weren't chipped before this." With no sign of having been bitten, she was bandaged, put on a course of antibiotics and released.

THREE QUESTIONS REMAIN: Was that really venom on her glasses? What kind of snake was it? And what kind of hawk? Definitive answers to these three are impossible to come by.

The fluid from the lens was never tested. At the hospital, all those assembled assumed it was venom because a snake had been involved. Vincent Cobb acknowledges that venom is yellowy and viscous, as described, but for this to have been venom and for Peggy not to have been bitten would be so freakishly unlikely that his gut tells him it was some other substance, perhaps mouth secretions from the snake.

"Then again," he concedes, "it could have been venom." After all, what other parts of this story aren't freakishly unlikely?

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tailed hawks are the most often observed species, hunting in the open and perching on poles and fences. But it could also have been a red-shouldered hawk. Far less likely, yet possible, McGowan says, would be a Swainson's hawk.

IT'S TAKEN LONGER for Peggy's psyche to heal than her arm. The encounter still haunts her. For months after the incident, she scarcely slept. Every time she closed her eyes, she

Regarding the snake's ID, all Peggy Jones can tell you is that the creature was dark in color and long. (She and Wendell figured out it measured between 3½ feet and 4 feet by wrapping a tape measure twice around her forearm and extending it back to her face.) On that scant information, Cobb says, the specimen of interest could be any of six to eight species, including the pine, speckled king, prairie king, Texas rat, coachwhip and southern black racer. If the snake was indeed venomous, adds Cobb, that probably narrows it to the timber rattlesnake or perhaps the cottonmouth.

McGowan is closer to confident about the species of hawk. "Sometimes we say 'It's a red-tailed until proven otherwise,'" he says, noting that red-

would relive the terrifying ordeal—fangs, feathers, talons. But too tough to be defeated by nightmares, she has returned to working outdoors.

She's made but one change in response to the nasty tricks Mother Nature played on her that day. In August, she and Wendell went out and bought her a spanking new zero-turn lawn mower.

"It has a canopy that covers the whole entire thing," Peggy says. "We shopped canopy first and mower second. I got the biggest top that there is."

The canopy is built of aluminum tread plate. Peggy made a sign for it, visible from above: a red circle with a line through it crossing out a wriggling reptile, and featuring two simple words: NO SNAKES. **R**

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Freaky Phobias

*Just because it doesn't make sense
doesn't make it any less scary*

BY *Reader's Digest* Readers

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Sky Is The Limit

Every time I step out, I can't shake off the feeling that the sky might come crashing down on me. All that open space feels overwhelmingly vast, and I feel incredibly vulnerable. I know the ground beneath my feet is solid and that the sky has always remained where it belongs, stable and unyielding but the logic doesn't seem to work. So instead, I focus on things that bring me comfort: the warmth of the sun, the gentle rustling of leaves, the sound of passers by laughing and talking. One day, I hope to replace this anxiety with a sense of peace and appreciation for the beauty that surrounds me.

—KIZHUMUNDAYUR NARAYANAN,
Thrissur

Frozen Green

I have 'prasinophobia'—the fear of the colour green—since childhood. Whenever I spot the colour it brings shivers down my spine. I feel this more acutely at traffic points. As I wait for the signal to turn green, my heart races to the point of rendering me immobile. But the honking of vehicles trailing behind me comes to my rescue forcing me out of the freeze.

—PREETHA RENGASWAMY, *Chennai*

Not a Fan

Have you ever lain in bed, looked up and wondered what would happen if the ceiling fan dropped on you? I have! This is a fear I have harboured since I was a child, and one that still follows



me, well into adulthood. Watching the fan spin, especially at high speed when it sometimes wobbles on its clamp inspires pure terror in me.

—POONAM DESHPANDE, *Thane*

Testing Times

I will candidly admit to suffering from multiple phobias—heights, water, elevators—the list runs long! However, one phobia that continues to give me nightmares well into my current sexagenarian status, is the fear of examinations. Not that I was ever a poor student, and I never appeared for a test unprepared. Still, well before the big day, I would start feeling nervous and jittery, terrified of failing and having to repeat a grade! Once I settled into my professional life, I fully expected riddance from this irrational phobia of my childhood.

Unfortunately, it has refused to let go. Even at this ripe age, when life mercifully poses no more exams to me, I frequently have bad dreams of getting caught unprepared as I sit down to write an exam.

—ARVIND ARYA, *Mumbai*

A Needling Feeling

When I was a boy, I had what I now know is called globophobia—the fear of balloons. Given that a child's social calendar includes required attendance at many birthdays, I had little opportunity to avoid my source of terror. To make matters worse, fellow attendees who knew of my fear would follow me around, popping balloons in my face. The result: A lot of tears that no amount of cake could soothe. One day, my mother and brother got together and came up with an intervention. I

was guided into a balloon-filled room, given a needle, and instructed to pop every single balloon. They refused to talk to me if I didn't do as they asked. So I sat and popped, crying through it all. Luckily it worked!

—ANKITH SUJITH, *via email*

Slip and Slide

Has anyone ever fallen from the upper berth of an Indian train? Probably. After all, people do fall from all sorts of places, from chairs to ladders. But have I ever seen anyone fall, even children? Never. In fact, kids rather enjoy the upper berth. But here I am, a fully grown man, dreading the prospect of sliding off it in my sleep! For as long as I can remember, I have dreaded overnight train trips since it invariably means having to climb up to the higher berths. And as everyone knows, whatever one's seat number, if an elderly aunty or *dadi* is a copassenger, it's basic courtesy to offer her the lower berth for the night. So, for

me the nights are invariably sleepless as I vigilantly focus on staying within the berth's confines.

—DR RUDRAJIT PAUL, *Kolkata*

Things that Go 'Boom'!

My irrational fear is that an asteroid will rip through the sky, crash to the ground with me trapped under it. Whenever there is lightning and thunder, or I hear something go 'boom', I instinctively scan the skies fully expecting to see a giant space rock zooming towards me. Far-fetched? Absolutely. Can you convince me otherwise? Not a chance!

—P. S. MEHTA, *Jabalpur*

Eyes Wide Shut

Every time I shut my eyes while in the bathroom taking a shower, the image of sharks circling around me, ready to attack appears vividly in my mind. Needless to say, I've mastered the art of superfast face washing and may even have broken a record of some sort.

—MAHENDRA SUTHAR, *Bengaluru* 

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Meal with a View

One may soon be able to enjoy a meal from a Michelin-starred chef while in orbit. The cost: \$4,95,000, gratuity not included. Copenhagen-based chef Rasmus Munk is planning to offer a culinary experience via space tourism platforms SpaceVIP and Space Perspective while diners are in sub-orbit. The premium table will be on board the Spaceship Neptune, a space capsule that can accommodate eight people, not including crew. The idea is to offer six patrons an incomparable view of the sun rising while the capsule settles in at 1,00,000 feet above sea level.

—MENTALFLOSS.COM

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FULL STEAM AHEAD!

I GOT THE CHANCE TO DRIVE THE
WORLD'S LAST SCHEDULED STEAM TRAIN

BY *Martin Fletcher* FROM THE *FINANCIAL TIMES*

Standing in Leszno
Station, the OL49-69
steam locomotive.

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It is 5:20 a.m., and I'm sound asleep in a guest house in Wolsztyn, a small town in western Poland. The light snaps on outside my room. I hear Howard Jones, my host, shout: "It's working! It's working!" It takes me a second to register what's happening, then I leap from my bed and hurriedly dress.

Thirty minutes later, Jones and I reach the train station. It is cold, dark and raining, but sure enough there's a huge black steam engine standing at the platform with clouds of steam and smoke billowing from its chimney.

We climb up into the cab, where Andrzej and Marcin, the driver and fireman (or engine stoker) are waiting in their grimy clothes and baseball caps. At precisely 6:03 a.m., the great steel monster pulls out of the station, clanking and creaking, shaking and shuddering, huffing and puffing as it slowly gathers pace.

Thus, the world's last scheduled standard-gauge steam-train service, the last one primarily for regular passengers, not tourists, begins its morning journey.

It is also the last one on which novices like me can learn to drive. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

IT WAS FOUR YEARS AGO that a friend of a friend, who was a steam-train lover, told me about Wolsztyn's steam engines and of Howard Jones, the curious Englishman who had done so much to

keep them going by setting up courses for those who longed to drive them.

Intrigued, I contacted Jones, who invited me to visit in February 2020. I booked my flights, but the day before my departure he called to say that none of the three trains were working. Then came Covid-19 and the lockdowns.

I resurrected my plans in early 2022 and booked a flight for a three-day visit to Poland. There, I met Peter Lockley, a railway enthusiast—more commonly known as a 'gricer'. The retired solicitor from Leamington Spa, in central England, now travels the world photographing steam engines for fun, and, like me, he wanted a crack at driving one. But when I arrived in Wolsztyn, Jones broke the news that just one of the locomotives was working.

The steam train from Wolsztyn to Leszno, some 45 kilometres away, runs twice daily on weekdays most of the year, at 6:03 a.m. and 11:41 a.m. After arriving in Wolsztyn late, I opted to sleep in and take the second run. That was a mistake. The loco developed a fault in its brake pump on the early run, so the later run was cancelled.

That gave me time, at least, to be inducted into the strange and secret fraternity of gricers—most of them old enough to recall Britain's steam trains. They were raised on *Thomas the Tank Engine* books, and films like *Brief Encounter* and *The Railway Children*.

The guest house where Jones accommodates visitors is full of steam-engine memorabilia: signals, ticket-collectors'

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ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARTIN FLETCHER

caps, guards' lamps, platform signs, model trains, railway DVDs and photos.

Lockley and I explored the Wolsztyn engine 'shed', a depot where there is a splendid old 'roundhouse', a railway turntable of a sort I had not seen since childhood. There were also 18 steam engines in various states of repair. Lockley knew them all. "That," he'd say, "is a Pm36-2, built in Poland in 1937 and the last of its kind in the world."

Over a lunch of wild mushroom soup and venison in a pre-War aristocrat's country mansion, Jones, now silver-haired and 70, told me his story. Born and raised in London, his father took him to see a rare Clan Stewart steam locomotive at Liverpool Street Station when he was five. He would sneak into train sheds with names like Cricklewood, Neasden and Old Oak Common to admire the engines.

"In the summer it was trainspotting, and on the dour winter days it was a model railway in the bedroom," he said. When the last regular steam train passenger service ended in Britain in 1968, "It was almost like losing a close friend," said Jones.

He left school just as the era of cheap package holidays was starting. He worked for a couple of travel agencies, and later set up a company that organized weekend trips for British gricers to heritage railways in Germany and Poland. That was how he discovered the Wolsztyn depot.

Steam trains had survived

longer in Communist Poland than elsewhere because it produced lots of cheap coal, and diesel replacements were expensive. Steam engines were still common in the 1980s, and three or four working sheds survived until 1990, but by 1994, Wolsztyn's was the last one left. "It was just clinging on," Jones told me.

By that time, Jones's company—and his marriage—were in trouble, so he decided to follow his heart. In 1997, he moved from England to Poland to try to save Wolsztyn and its steam engines. "It was a eureka moment. Someone said, 'You'll never get beyond five years.' That was a bit of a kick in the backside. And here we are 25 years later."

He promised to raise funds for the shed if the state railway company kept running the trains. He tapped into the surprisingly large community of British train lovers. He persuaded 40 gricers to invest £2,000 each, and in return they could spend one week a year for the

Marcin, the stoker, in the locomotive's cab, among the array of levers and handles for driving the train.



next five years learning to drive the trains. He settled in Wolsztyn and began organizing steam-train trips around Poland.

By the early 2000s he was contributing about £50,000 a year to Wolsztyn's shed and attracting visitors from around the world to the Polish town. In 2006, he was awarded the Member of the British Empire for this work and his contribution to British-Polish relations. "I felt like a bit of a fraud because all I'd done is play trains," said Jones. Today the Wolsztyn-to-Leszno service carries around 50,000 passengers a year, of which only about 5,000 are tourists.

I asked Jones what he found so fascinating about steam engines. "They are the closest thing in machinery to being alive—like breathing dragons," he

explained. "No two are alike. You have to learn how each one handles. You call them 'she,' and you swear at them. It requires a lot of skill to drive a steam engine, but any idiot can drive a diesel or an electric." Jones, incidentally, can drive a steam engine but not a car.

ON MY SECOND morning the brake pump was still broken. I was due to fly home at noon the next day. So a young employee was sent on an 11-hour, 1,000-kilometre round-trip drive to a railway museum in southern Poland to get a part. When he returned, the pump was swiftly mended, and at 5:20 a.m. on my third and final day, Jones woke me. Over the next three hours I began to understand why gricers are gricers.

Dressed in a boiler suit, I climbed

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Railway workers in Wolsztyn trying to repair the steam locomotive's faulty brake pump.

two metres of metal steps to the cab of the engine, an OL49-69 built in the early 1950s. It has wooden floorboards, and doors and windows held together by wire. In front of me, over the firebox, is a bewildering bank of levers, wheels and dials. Behind is the coal tender. Every surface is oily, black and grimy. There is a strong smell of sulphur.

Jones shows me the regulator (a steel lever that serves as the accelerator), the reverser (a wheel that determines direction of travel) and a handle for the brakes. Then we're off—140 tonnes of steel rumbling into the darkness amid clouds of steam and smoke.

It is thrilling, but alarming, too. We can barely see the tracks because the loco's long boiler is in the way. Andrzej, a 67-year-old who is a 48-year veteran of the railways, relies almost entirely on his intimate knowledge of the track to know when to accelerate and when to stop. He could navigate it blindfolded.

Leszno is 45 kilometres, or 83 minutes, away. En route we stop at 11 village stations. Normally there would be lots of schoolchildren and students waiting on the platforms, but it is a school break, so today we pick up just a few commuters. They are blithely unaware that they have a beginner helping in the engine room, pulling levers and turning handles as Andrzej barks instructions in broken English.

I'm told to blow the whistle as we approach crossings. I shovel chunks of coal into the blazing firebox, filling the cab with an orange glow and blast of hot

air each time we open its steel doors to expose the red-hot furnace. At times we reach 60 kilometres per hour and the whole loco is vibrating, but somehow we make inch-perfect stops at every station.

Approaching Leszno, our branch line merges with a dozen others. An unseen signalman guides us through the tangle, and we grind to a halt in a crescendo of noise and smoke. Diesel and electric trains glide in and out almost silently, but steam engines are *prima donnas*—a statement.

A dozen passengers get off, and scarcely 20 minutes later we set off back to Wolsztyn. This time the loco is at the end; we are going in reverse.

We pass factories, warehouses and modern houses as we leave Leszno. We thunder through rich farmland, then forests of pine and silver birch, scattering deer. We pick up shoppers heading to Wolsztyn's market, and night workers going home, 38 passengers in all. Then we're pulling into Wolsztyn station, having burned our way through two tonnes of coal.

It is 9:07 a.m. Elated, I thank Andrzej and Marcin, pull off my boiler suit and sprint to a waiting car, my hands and face black and filthy. I should make it to my plane on time. Jones tells me: "You're one of perhaps 2,000 people who have helped drive a steam locomotive on a main line this century." **R**

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It Happens
ONLY IN INDIA

Crazy in Love

Angry lovers are like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get. That's what Mir Raza Mehdi discovered while trying to fly from Bengaluru to Mumbai after an argument with his girlfriend, Indra Rajwar, who called the Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) helpline to report that her paramour had a bomb in his bag. The KIA police swiftly swung into action and apprehended Mehdi but after a thorough search, came up with zilch. Turns out, Rajwar didn't want her boyfriend to leave town. Both had tickets to Mumbai booked on different flights and were spotted conversing in the departure lounge before Rajwar



"The New Educational Game Plan"

made the call. She was taken to the police station where she admitted to the hoax and was booked under the Indian Penal Code for causing public mischief. Hey, no one said

being in love is easy—or free of criminal misgivings, apparently!

SOURCE: INDIANEXPRESS.COM

A Way Out

If greener pastures are really afforded to those

willing to make the journey, the couple starring in our next mishap should have had fortune smile big and wide upon them. But alas! Guru Sevak Singh and his wife, Archana Kaur were waylaid in their attempt to impersonate sexagenarians, for the grand purpose of reaching American shores. This is how the con panned out: Sporting a white beard and blue turban, an 'elderly man' stood at the Immigration queue at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International (IGI) airport. He identified himself as 67-year-old Rashvinder Singh Sahota who was headed to Canada. But, as he spoke, the officer on duty sensed something peculiar: the man's voice appeared at odds with his age. This necessitated a closer look, and behold, they found this elderly man possessed skin bereft of time's ravages. 24-year-old Singh had

fashioned himself an elderly appearance with makeup and dye to assume the identity of the senior Sahota to reach Canada, then employ the donkey route to enter the US. A case has been registered against the couple, whose American dream now lies well beyond their reach.

SOURCE: INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Candy Crush Curriculum

We bet, assistant teacher Prem Goyal didn't know his phone etiquette could get him into such hot water at work. DM Rajender Pensiya who was out on a surprise inspection of the Composite School, in Sambhal district, Uttar Pradesh, happened to step into Goyal's classroom, and upon examining the copies of the students found scores of mistakes. Alarmed at the quality of the children's work, Goyal was questioned regarding his usage of government

prescribed education apps. Finding his warbled responses inadequate, the DM got Goyal's phone scrubbed. The findings were, um, very educational: Goyal had clocked in a little more than an hour on the game Candy Crush, was on a 26-minute phone call, and spent another 17 minutes on social media apps. His activity on the actual school lesson apps added up to a mere nine minutes. This prioritizing of virtual candy matches over curriculum has resulted in Goyal's suspension from work. Today's lesson: Sweets in schools should only ever end up in children's tummies, never on screen.

SOURCE: TIMESOFINDIA.COM

—BY NAOREM ANUJA

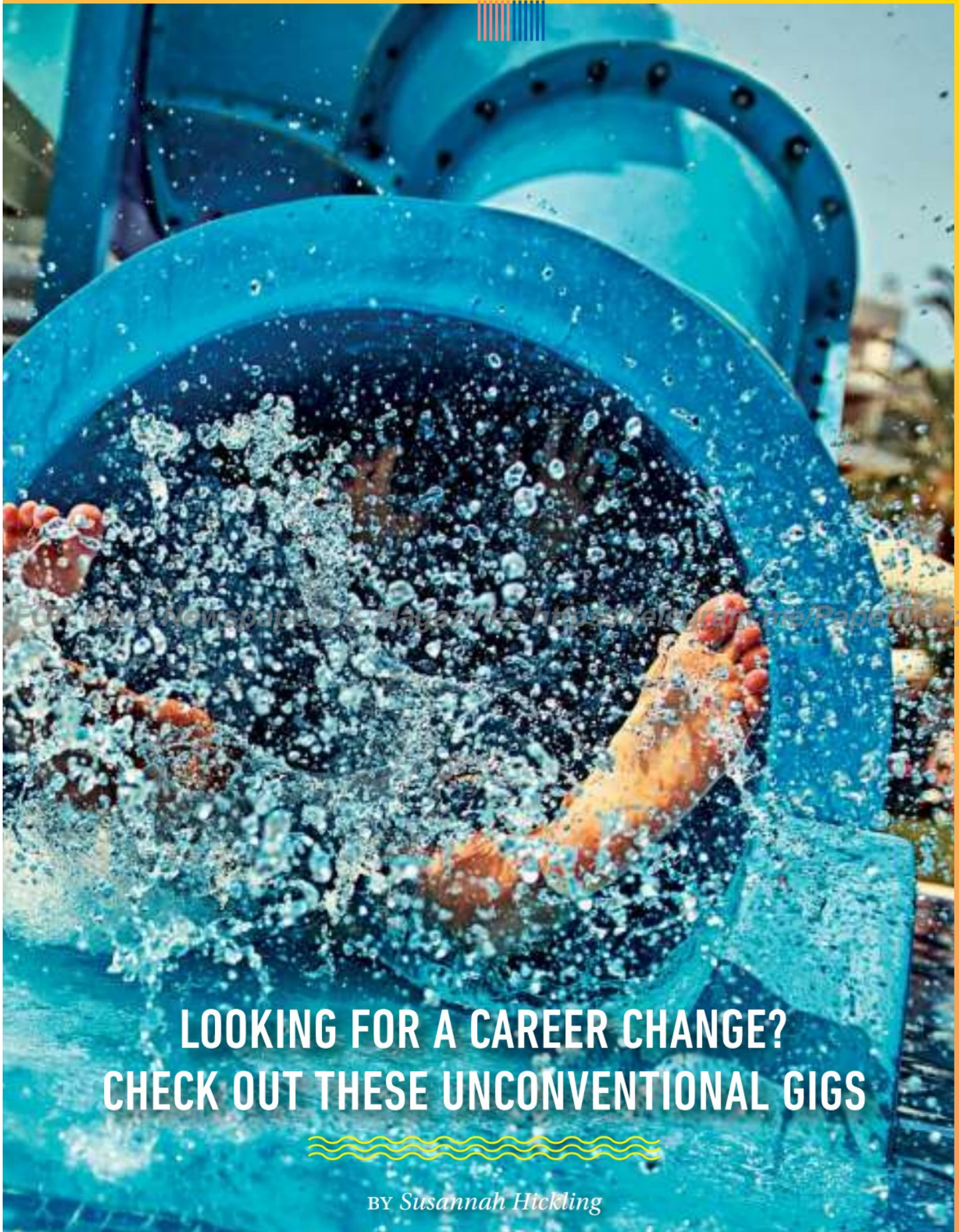
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YOUR JOB IS WHAT?

IMGORTHAND/GETTY IMAGES

WHO KNEW?



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LOOKING FOR A CAREER CHANGE? CHECK OUT THESE UNCONVENTIONAL GIGS



BY *Susannah Hickling*



Just another day in the office for Guillaume Pop.

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THE WATERSLIDE TESTER

When the pool where he worked as a lifeguard in Melun southeast of Paris was closed during the Covid-19 pandemic, Guillaume Pop took jobs at various other pools that were virtually deserted. At one of them there was a small waterslide, which gave the 22-year-old former competitive swimmer an idea: He would make a TikTok video in which he pretended to be a “professional waterslide tester.”

Shooting down a slide in hard hat and hi-viz jacket or smiling broadly in cool shades and a tiny Speedo to a groovy soundtrack, Pop soon became

a social-media sensation. He was hired to “test” slides and other facilities at water parks, swimming pools and campsites all over France. Today, he has more than half a million followers on TikTok and his own real-life waterslide-testing business. No longer working as a lifeguard, he travels the country checking the condition of waterslides, trying them out to determine how fun they are and creating amusing videos to attract customers.

“First of all, I check it without water, to make sure it’s in an acceptable state,” explains Pop, who must keep up to date on water-park regulations. If he finds a

GUILLAUME POP

waterslide needs work—for example, if there are bumpy joints, which can hurt sliders—management will bring in a specialist repairer. “After that, I test it with water,” Pop says.

Then he moves on to the fun, promotional aspect. Sometimes he takes over a leisure park and invites social-media influencers to enjoy it too. In 2022, he took 25 influencers to O’Gliss Park, an enormous water park in the Vendée region on the Atlantic coast.

Pop estimates he’s tested around 700 French waterslides and is now eyeing water parks abroad, in countries such as Switzerland, Portugal and Spain, where he has been testing slides during the winter. “It’s the best job in the world,” declares Pop, whose videos have received 80 million views. “I’m not behind a desk. I’m active and outside in the sun. And I have a great rapport with customers. In fact, all the children tell me they want to be a waterslide tester!”

THE STATUE DRESSER

Around 160 times a year, come rain, shine or frost, Nicolas Edelman, 43, climbs a ladder to dress a bronze statue of a little boy peeing into a fountain in Brussels. Located on the corner of Rue de l’Etuve and Rue du Chêne, the 58-centimetre-tall Manneken-Pis, which literally means “the peeing boy” in the local Dutch dialect, is a major tourist attraction in the Belgian capital. Edelman is thought to be the statue’s 13th official dresser since records began in the 18th century.

Manneken-Pis, which “peed” fresh drinking water until 2019, was recorded as a public drinking fountain as long ago as the 14th century and is meant to represent the spirit of resistance of the

people of Brussels. (One story has it that it’s modelled on a boy who urinated on a burning fuse, preventing gunpowder planted by the city’s enemies from going off.)



Nicolas Edelman is the official dresser for the “peeing boy” statue.



Centuries of tradition dictate the rules for outfitting the Brussels landmark.

The statue is dressed to mark special occasions such as national days, international events, anniversaries and even important matches of Belgium's national football team, when Manneken-Pis wears the Red Devils' team colours. The statue's outfits are housed in the Manneken-Pis Wardrobe, a museum open to the public. The oldest costume is a brocaded blue gentlemen's suit complete with embroidered leggings and white gloves—a gift from France's King Louis XV in 1747. It was presented to the city by the king himself to make amends after his soldiers had stolen the statue.

"The official collection currently holds 1,129 costumes," says Edelman,

a former cook who has been the statue's dresser since 2014. And the collection is growing: Foreign organizations and governments continue to donate specially made infant-sized costumes. "Around half of the clothes in the collection are from overseas," says Edelman. "Many are gifts offered as part of diplomatic friendships."

When a country or an organization wishes to offer a costume, it must get approval from an official Brussels committee. After

the finished costume is delivered, it is tried on a replica of the statue and any necessary alterations are made. Once the formal ceremony is underway at City Hall, Edelman hurries to dress the actual statue behind a curtain—with the "pee" turned off, of course. By the time the official delegation arrives and a crowd of passersby has gathered, Edelman draws the curtain to reveal the Manneken-Pis—back in full stream—in all his sartorial glory.

Edelman's favourite costumes include St. Nicholas, which adorns the statue on December 6, St. Nicholas' Day. "Picture a great saint doing a wee!" he says with a laugh.

"My job is to make people happy," Edelman says. "Manneken-Pis is part of the folk tradition of Brussels. Dressing and looking after this symbol of the city I'm from is a great honour."

THE PROFESSIONAL CUDDLER

Elisa Meyer, 37, was studying philosophy and German literature in Austria in 2016 when she read an article about an emerging therapy in the United States—cuddling. Cuddle therapy uses platonic touch, which “can reduce anxiety and stress levels and improve confidence and self-esteem,” according to Cuddle Professionals International, the training, certification and membership body for practitioners. Meyer, who is originally from Luxembourg, was intrigued, having always envisaged a career involving some kind of therapy. “My first thought was, ‘Wow, this is the perfect job because I can relax at the same time!’” she says with a laugh.

But after doing two online courses, Meyer realized cuddle therapy was a serious profession. She came away with two pages of strict rules that establish boundaries, including the fact that cuddle therapy has no sexual element. And, while she was aware cuddle therapy can’t replace medication or psychotherapy for people who have a serious mental illness, she saw how it could bring benefits when used alongside those treatments.

Meyer started practising in Vienna as a sideline to her PhD studies and university teaching and is now a full-time cuddle therapist based in Leipzig, Ger-

many. She welcomes clients to her studio where she talks to them for about ten minutes about what they want from the session. Many are lonely, such as men with social anxiety who are ill at ease with women; some are busy women who simply want to relax.

The rest of the session is spent in close contact on a bed or sofa. Meyer might start by hugging a client from behind and stroking their hair, sometimes massaging their neck if they are tense. The pair usually change position once or twice during the 50- or 80-minute cuddling session.

Cuddling releases oxytocin in the body, she explains. “Your body feels



Elisa Meyer's work harnesses the healing benefits of touch.

very relaxed and a bit like you are floating. People have the feeling that everything is and will be okay. They smile a lot afterwards. Oxytocin is known as the 'love' hormone."

Meyer recalls one client who couldn't speak because of a problem with his vocal cords. His voice came back softly during a cuddle session. "He was so happy, he was glowing," she says. Just knowing he could still use his voice to communicate and break out of his isolation was very special for him.

She also takes cuddle therapy into a home for adults with learning and physical challenges. People with physical disabilities are often keen to talk

about the pain they experience. "They talk, I listen," she says.

Besides being a good listener, what makes a successful cuddle therapist? "You have to like humans and be a trusting and positive person," says Meyer. "You have to read body language and be able to recognize what people want and adjust the way you touch accordingly."

Meyer has written two books about cuddle therapy and now trains other aspiring practitioners. "Sometimes people have lost all joy in life and may be suicidal," she says. "When I see they have hope again, that is the biggest reward."

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THE ZOMBIE TRAINER

Stevie Douglas estimates he's trained at least 1,000 zombies over the past ten years. The 52-year-old Scot from Carstairs, a village southeast of Glasgow, has taught people how to behave like all varieties of the undead. That includes the slow, shambling zombies typical of films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the truly terrifying, screaming ones who chase you as you run for your life.

Fortunately, Douglas, a co-director of the Glasgow-based ScareScotland Talent Agency, is very much alive, as are all his pupils. He started out as a "scare actor," using his 1.9-metre frame to frighten people in interactive scare

mazes across the U.K. "Before I knew it I was being hired to play various characters, from serial killers to chainsaw-wielding maniacs," says Douglas. "Zombies came up a lot too."

A big fan of horror movies, Douglas noticed that the zombies he saw in films were often unconvincing. "Their movement was poor," he says. "I thought I could do better." So, in 2012, he and a friend formed ScareScotland to provide zombies for films, television and events such as horror conventions.

A year later they started a training program for aspiring zombies. It took off when they received a request for 300 zombies for *The Generation of Z*, a huge interactive production that ran



**Stevie Douglas in his Zombie days;
(right) Douglas training students at
the Undead Academy.**

for three weeks in an underground car park at the world-famous Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The show was a hit.

Undead Academy classes are held in the upstairs room of a Glasgow theatre, where Douglas instructs students in different aspects of zombie behaviour. He asks each one to stand up, bend one leg inwards and drag their heel, then lift their head up as if it were attached to a piece of string and—voilà—you have a zombie who can lurch forward. “The noise part is easier,” says Douglas.

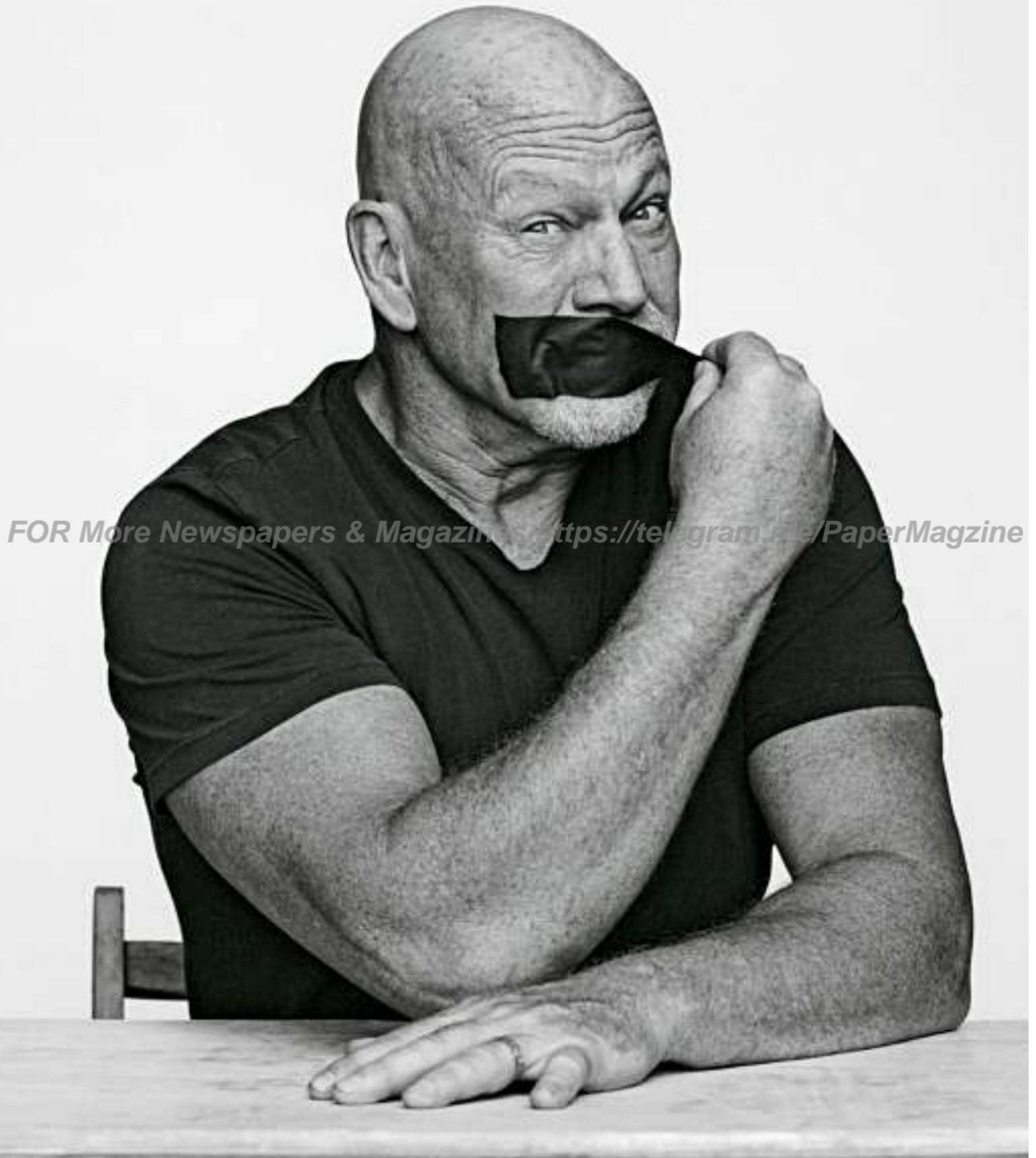
Typical zombie sounds include screams, wails, puffing and panting. He impresses on students the importance of safety when frightening people; imagine there’s a 1.2-metre box around you, he tells them, and always stay at arm’s length from a member of the public.

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Among the Academy’s alumni are a couple of wrestlers and a heavily built, 2.1-metre-tall zombie. “When Big Ross scuttles from the corner, you can see the fear in people’s eyes,” jokes Douglas, who has worked on film sets teaching professional actors how to play zombies.

He insists Academy “graduates” are not extras. “They’re skilled actors,” he says. “What they do is very specific.” They certainly have an effect. Douglas recalls an event in a park when a woman was so terror-stricken on encountering a group of “zombies” that she ran into a pond.

But many people enjoy being petrified, says Douglas—and he’s happy to oblige them. **R**



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THE SOUND OF SILENCE

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HOW SHUTTING UP FOR THREE MONTHS
AND WALKING NEARLY 1,000 KILOMETRES
TRANSFORMED MY LIFE

KATHERINE HOLLAND

BY *D.G. Marshall* FROM *TORONTO LIFE*

AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, my mouth has been getting me into trouble. Growing up, I would say anything to get a laugh, no matter how crude or cutting. I used the gift of gab to get what I wanted from my parents (money, a later curfew) and to get out of what I didn't want (chores, groundings). I was asked to leave four different schools, mostly because I talked too much, and every one of my report cards said some variation of the same thing: I'd do much better if I would just shut up.

My mouth may have served me terribly as a student, but it set me up perfectly for a career in radio. In 2003, I launched a talk show on an AM station in the Toronto area. I would ask people about their religious beliefs and the role faith played in their lives. In my 16 years hosting the show, I interviewed rabbis, nuns, witches, Wiccans and Satanist high priests, and had celebrities, politicians, religious leaders and spiritual gurus share the "why" behind their beliefs.

I think the show succeeded because it engaged people who don't usually listen to religious radio—people like me. After growing up in a churchgoing household and eventually becoming a pastor, I slowly began to reject organized religion. Still, I was fascinated by others' beliefs.

Consumed by the need to understand the unknown, I travelled the world in search of answers. I prayed among ancient petroglyphs in Australia,

slept at Stonehenge in England and wept at the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. I thought I'd find some divine truth if I visited all the sacred sites and interviewed every spiritual leader.

But the only truth I discovered was this: I was a selfish, egotistical, judgmental jerk. It hit me when I was close to turning 50 and almost every significant relationship in my life was in tatters. My wife of 28 years wanted a divorce. My kids weren't my biggest fans, and when I asked my daughter what I was doing wrong, she told me she didn't have enough time to explain it all.

I knew this much: The hunt for transcendence made me unbearable. I prioritized my radio-show guests, with whom I might spend an hour, over the people who meant the most to me. I was constantly tearing into anyone whom I perceived as less enlightened than I was. Profanity and sarcasm were my default modes of communication. I drank too much and listened too

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little. I was miserable, as was everyone caught in my caustic orbit.

My school report cards had been right—I'd do a lot better if I would just shut up. If my mouth was the root cause of my problems, maybe it was time to stop talking altogether.

Years earlier, I'd watched a movie called *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen. It followed the main character's journey along the Camino de Santiago, a series of 1,200-year-old trails that converge on the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, in northwestern Spain, where the remains of Saint James the Apostle are said to be buried.

So in 2016 I decided to take a three-month sabbatical from the radio show and walk the almost 1,000-kilometre route without saying a single word. My

plan was to finish the trek on my 50th birthday as a changed man.

WHEN I ARRIVED AT THE START of the Camino, in early October 2016, I was already worried that my quest was doomed. I was terrified that I'd accidentally speak, that my bum knees would prevent me from finishing the route, that even if I made it the whole way, I'd return home still a schmuck. Nonetheless, hungover from the night before, I walked out of the charming French town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and began my two-month journey.

The first stretch of trail was a steep incline into the Pyrenees, and my body hated every step. I quickly realized that my hiking boots were too narrow for my feet. My 13-kilogram backpack felt

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D.G. Marshall in a moment of quiet contemplation.



COURTESY OF D.G. MARSHALL



Marshall takes a break during his silent pilgrimage in Spain.

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heavier with every stride. My knees started to creak, and sweat permeated my clothing.

One hour in, I wanted to give up. I don't know whether it was my ego or the goal of becoming a better person that propelled me forward. Either way, I kept walking.

Around the 12-kilometre mark, I trudged into the first *albergue*, one of hundreds of hostels along the Camino. The rustic abode, equipped with bunk beds and a rudimentary kitchen, was crawling with hikers speaking a pot-pourri of languages. It was there that I began to understand that the physical challenge, excruciating as it was, would be far easier than the vow of silence.

When the hostel staff or fellow trav-

ellers spoke to me, I pointed to my mouth, mimed the act of talking with my hand and then slid my index finger across my neck. I could usually get what I wanted using improvised hand signals. (To ask for milk in my coffee, for instance, I pretended to milk a cow.) If that didn't get the point across, I'd show people a note on my iPhone: "Please forgive me for not talking. I'm travelling for three months in a vow of silence. You can still talk to me :)."

And people did. Along the Camino, I was joined by pilgrims from Switzerland, Holland, Israel and Ireland. Some walked with me in silence; others shared their life stories. A gay man from Ireland told me about the rejection he'd experienced from his family. A woman

COURTESY OF D.G. MARSHALL

shared her struggle to go on after the death of her child. I yearned to ask questions, to offer advice or condolences. But all I could do was awkwardly type out a few questions on my phone.

Yet I couldn't keep my judgmental side entirely in check. One morning, about a month into my trip, I woke up around 5:30 a.m., grabbed my pack and walked downstairs to the hostel lobby. There, I spotted a skinny, scruffy guy in his late 50s with his hair in a ponytail, staggering around and slurring his words. Drunk before dawn? What's your problem, dude? I didn't want him accompanying me on the trail, so I skipped breakfast and left.

Later that day, I checked out one of the many historic and architecturally stunning churches that dot the Camino. When I returned to the path, I heard a voice say, "*Buen Camino*," a common greeting among pilgrims. It was the guy I had tried to avoid. I smiled politely and hurried off, thinking I could outpace him. But three kilometres later, he was somehow still close behind me.

Finally, he yelled out to me, and though I feared I'd spend the rest of my day listening to the ramblings of a drunkard, I let him catch up. The man introduced himself as Nico and explained that he had Lou Gehrig's disease. It had ravaged his nervous system to the point where he stumbled and slurred. He'd decided to tackle the Camino while his body would still let him. I felt awful.

Before the Camino, I had absurdly

high standards for how a person should be, despite my own shortcomings. In my head, people were boring and predictable, and almost everyone fell into one of the many categories I'd devised: religious wack-jobs, arrogant show-offs, incense-burning virtue signalers, hopeless drunks and so on. Unless they had something to offer me—good looks, wealth, wisdom, a willingness to laugh at my jokes—I treated them as if they didn't exist.

BY OPENING MY HEART, I COULD ACTUALLY LIKE PEOPLE. AND BY CLOSING MY MOUTH, THEY COULD LIKE ME.

Before I knew anything about Nico, I had pigeonholed him. I nearly deprived myself of a genuine human connection. Instead, we spent three days walking together. He told me about his life as a professional kickboxer, representing Germany internationally. I helped him fasten his belt and do up his jacket. We developed a profound bond—the very thing my life was lacking. By the time we parted, it was obvious: By opening my ears and my heart, I could actually like people. And by closing my mouth, they could actually like me.

MOST DAYS FOLLOWED a familiar rhythm. I'd rise before dawn, pack my

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bag, put on my jacket, lace up my boots and walk for six to 12 hours. Every day was painful. One of my big toenails was black, and my pinky toes were calloused. My shoulders and back ached from the weight of my pack. Because of the orientation of the trail, the sun baked the left side of my face, which would leave me with long-term skin damage.

Still, there were moments of bliss. I was surrounded by endless golden fields, mountainous air and soul-shattering sunrises. I snaked through deserted country villages and rested in the pews of majestic cathedrals.

HOLDING ON TO MY REGRET WASN'T HELPING ME OR THE PEOPLE AROUND ME. I HAD TO LET IT GO.

One morning, a little over halfway through my trip, I spotted the Spanish city of León in the distance. For most pilgrims, León serves as a brief dose of civilization, a place to sleep in a proper bed, to wine and dine, to visit a museum or gallery. For me, it was a reckoning: The city of 1,25,000 shared a name with my mother, Leone.

She and my father adopted me when I was an infant. They were a loving couple who ran a funeral home together and raised me and my sister in the apartment above the business. They were kind, patient peo-

ple of integrity who gave back to their community.

Despite their love and affection, I could never shake the fear of rejection. I'd do anything for other people's approval. As a kid, I once accepted a dare to give a bag of multicoloured rocks to a developmentally challenged child and tell him they were pieces of chewing gum. It was just one of many times throughout my life that I'd done something for a laugh at someone else's expense.

I put my parents through hell. After Grade 9, I dropped out of school entirely. But I refused to get a job and even stole the funeral hearse for joyrides before I had my driver's licence. When my parents tried to discipline me, I would rage at them and run away from home.

Just after I turned 17, I left home for good to work at a ranch in California. Despite receiving numerous letters from my mother, I never called or wrote back. Four years later, she died of pancreatic cancer. I didn't get to say goodbye.

By the time I was old enough to grasp how much pain I'd caused my mother, it was too late to apologize. That truth ate at me every day. I hated myself because of what I'd done, and that disdain emanated from me like a toxic cloud, infecting every relationship that followed.

Outside León, I continued along the trail past a cemetery, where I noticed an elderly lady carrying flowers to a gravestone. As I approached, her face



Marshall at the end of the route (left); at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

broke into a warm smile. I was stunned. She looked exactly like my mother. "Buen Camino," she said, continuing on her way.

I almost chased her down—to do what, I don't know. Even if I did speak, what would I say? "You look just like my dead mother. Can I give you a hug?"

I knew it couldn't be her, but the sight of her made me realize how much I missed my mom, how much I wished I could tell her I was sorry. I broke down in tears as pilgrims and cyclists passed me by.

A few days later, I came upon a monument called the Iron Cross. Compared to the elaborate ruins and ornate churches along the route, it was a remarkably ordinary structure: a metal cross atop a tall wooden post. At its base were tens of thousands of stones left by pilgrims. It's a Camino

tradition to leave a rock, symbolizing the unloading of a burden.

Knowing this, I'd brought one from home. I held it in my hand, thinking of the regret I'd carried with me since my mother's death. Nothing will ever excuse the way I treated her. But holding on to my regret wasn't helping me or the people around me. I knew I had to let it go. Sobbing, I threw the stone on the pile and continued walking.

ON 30 NOVEMBER 2016, I woke up at 3:30 a.m., buzzing with excitement. I was only a few kilometres from the end of my journey. Just as I had planned, it was my 50th birthday.

My final destination was Cape Finis-terre, on the west coast of Spain; its name means "the end of the earth." With less than an hour left in my 62-day hike, I wandered off the path to climb

to a high point in the predawn darkness. Sitting alone, I watched the sun inch above the horizon, casting the clouds in shades of pink and orange as fishing vessels began to leave the harbour. It was the most awe-inspiring sunrise I'd ever seen.

Climbing down from my perch, I soon arrived at a worn metre-tall stone marker denoting the end of the trail. An unfamiliar feeling swelled up inside me: pride. I had done it. My back was spasming with pain, and my whole body throbbed, but I was elated. I'd overcome

I SPOKE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 90 DAYS. IN A CROAKY, UNEVEN VOICE, I APOLOGIZED TO MY WIFE FOR EVERYTHING.

my fears, completed the journey and kept my vow of silence. I felt good about myself for the first time in a long time.

To cap off my trip, I'd arranged to spend a few weeks in a monastery on the Canary Islands, just off the western coast of Africa, silently writing and reflecting. The Camino was everything I'd hoped it would be. I had seen the good in humanity. I had shed my shell of negativity. And I had begun to make peace with the deep-seated pain that was preventing me from being the person I wanted to be.

What would the monastery reveal? This: One night, I awoke and realized that I needed to repair the most important relationship in my life. My marriage.

I met my wife when we were both 20. She got pregnant, so we got married. We weren't madly in love, at least not then, but we were bringing life into the world, so it felt like the right thing to do. We had a son, then a daughter a few years later, and we poured ourselves into our kids' lives, ferrying them to school and sports.

As they got older, my wife and I retreated into our jobs. She worked at a youth camp, managing the barn, and I had my radio show. By the time our kids were adults, we were sleeping in different rooms. Our love had gone cold.

When she turned 50 in early 2016, she went on a solo trip to Australia and did some reflection of her own. Two weeks after she left, she sent me an email: She wanted out of our marriage. I was gutted, but I wasn't surprised. Yet before I left for the Camino, I had convinced her to stay.

Lying in the monastery bed, I shuddered at the thought of ever letting her slip away again. Despite our ups and downs, she was the person I needed most in the world. She tolerated me with saintly patience, and I loved her intensely for it. My worst mistake was that I'd neglected to show it.

After returning home that December, I spoke for the first time in 90 days. On Christmas Eve, in a croaky, uneven voice,

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I apologized for everything and asked my wife to remarry me. She said yes.

I WISH I COULD TELL YOU that was my happily-ever-after moment. That, after all my soul-searching, I restored all my relationships and never acted like a jerk again. But life isn't a Hallmark movie.

Months after my return, my wife explained that she'd felt ambushed by my sudden proposal. She hadn't wanted to bring me down from my Camino high, so she'd said yes. Not long after that conversation, she left. It felt like the end. But after a couple years of separation, we started going on dates again, and then we signed up for couples' therapy. We concluded that investing in a future together was worth a shot. Giving up after 36 years of shared history seemed too easy.

It took two years for me to realize that there was no squaring the new me with my old life. Returning to the radio show, I felt myself reverting to the irritable, judgmental person I once was. The more I talked, the more I yearned for the serenity of unplugging from everything, which the Camino had given me.

Eventually I decided that if I was truly

dedicated to becoming a better person, I needed a radical, permanent change. I quit the radio show, got rid of my phone, abandoned my social media accounts and moved back in with my wife on a 40-hectare farm northwest of Toronto.

Silence is now a part of my daily life. I am perfectly happy sitting on our front porch, literally watching the corn grow. Four horses, seven dogs, 30 chickens and an ass named Grace keep me company. When I get a craving for social interaction, I ride my horse to the local watering hole.

It still takes all my effort to keep my inner jerk at bay, and I fail often. But I've found a way to keep the lessons of the Camino close at hand through SOS Retreats Canada. A couple of times a year, I welcome groups of people to the farm for a weekend during which they walk a 50-kilometre trail in silence. In the evenings, we relax and verbally debrief around the fire.

I'm not offering to help anyone find themselves, repair their marriage or cope with grief. All I'm offering is a place to slow down, shut up and listen. Because I know that it's in the silence that the important stuff gets louder. **R**



Tidy Truths?

Household tasks are easier and quicker when they are done by somebody else.

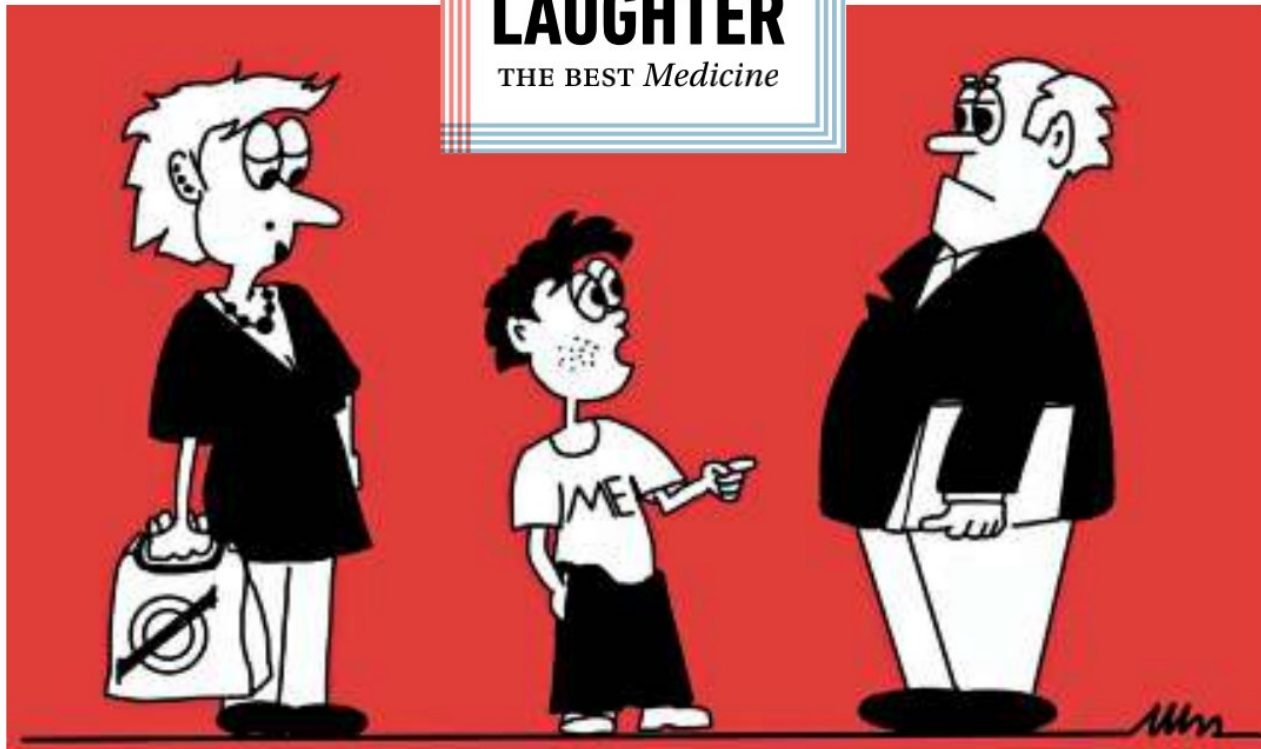
JAMES THORPE, ATHLETE

Housework can't kill you, but why take a chance?

PHYLLIS DILLER, COMEDIAN

LAUGHTER

THE BEST *Medicine*



"My new teacher? Gosh, he is real! I thought they existed only on Zoom"

My friend got me an elephant for my room. I said thanks and she said, don't mention it.

—REDDIT.COM

As the in-charge of a kids' library, I receive requests for books from parents every day on WhatsApp. It is all usual stuff, until a parent messaged

"I need a new bum. Do you have it?" It took me full two minutes to realize she was referring to the pretty memorable title of a children's book that she wanted to borrow!

—C. V. JAYAGOVIND, *Mumbai*

Apologies to our waitress Amy who said to

my dad, "Wanna box for the leftovers?" and he replied, "No, but I'll wrestle you for them." Hope we tipped enough.

—FUNNYTWEETER.COM

Things I'm Great At

- ★ Forgetting someone's name 10 seconds after they tell me.
- ★ Buying produce ... and throwing it away two weeks later.
- ★ Digging through the trash for the food box I just tossed, because I already forgot the directions.
- ★ Leaving laundry in the

The human body is like a condominium.
The thing that keeps you from really
enjoying it is the maintenance.

—JERRY SEINFELD, *comic*



dryer until it wrinkles. Then turning on the dryer to remove the wrinkles. Then forgetting it again.

★ Calculating how much sleep I'll get if I can just "fall asleep right now".

—GCFL.NET

"Today's topic for discussion is fever," I announced to my class of medical students. "Can any of you tell me, what fever is?" Pat came the reply from a student, "Today's topic, sir".

—DR VIJAY MOHAN
Hyderabad

Salesperson: Roll up, roll up! Come to our mammoth sale. Mammoth bargains to be had in our mammoth sale. Customer: Forget it! No one around here's got room in their houses for a mammoth.

—B2BSALESCONNECTIONS.COM

Signs You're Getting Older

- ★ Everything hurts and what doesn't hurt doesn't work.
- ★ Your children begin to look middle aged.
- ★ The gleam in your eyes is from the sun

hitting your bifocals.

- ★ You look forward to a dull evening.
- ★ Your back goes out more than you do.
- ★ You quit trying to hold your stomach in, no matter who walks into the room.
- ★ You know all the answers, but nobody asks you the questions.

—GCFL.NET

Reader's Digest will pay for your funny anecdote or photo in any of our humour sections. Post it to the editorial address, or email: editor.india@rd.com

THE BEST OF BAD DAD JOKES!

★ Whoever stole my copy of Microsoft Office, I will find you. You have my Word.

★ What part of the body dies last?
The pupils. They dilate.

★ Why did the coffee cup go to the police station?
He was mugged.

★ How do you make a tissue dance?
Put a little boogie into it.

★ What do you get when you put your hand in a blender?
A handshake.



★ What did one sea say to the other sea?
Nothing it just waved.

★ How heavy is darkness?
I don't know but I do know it sure isn't light.

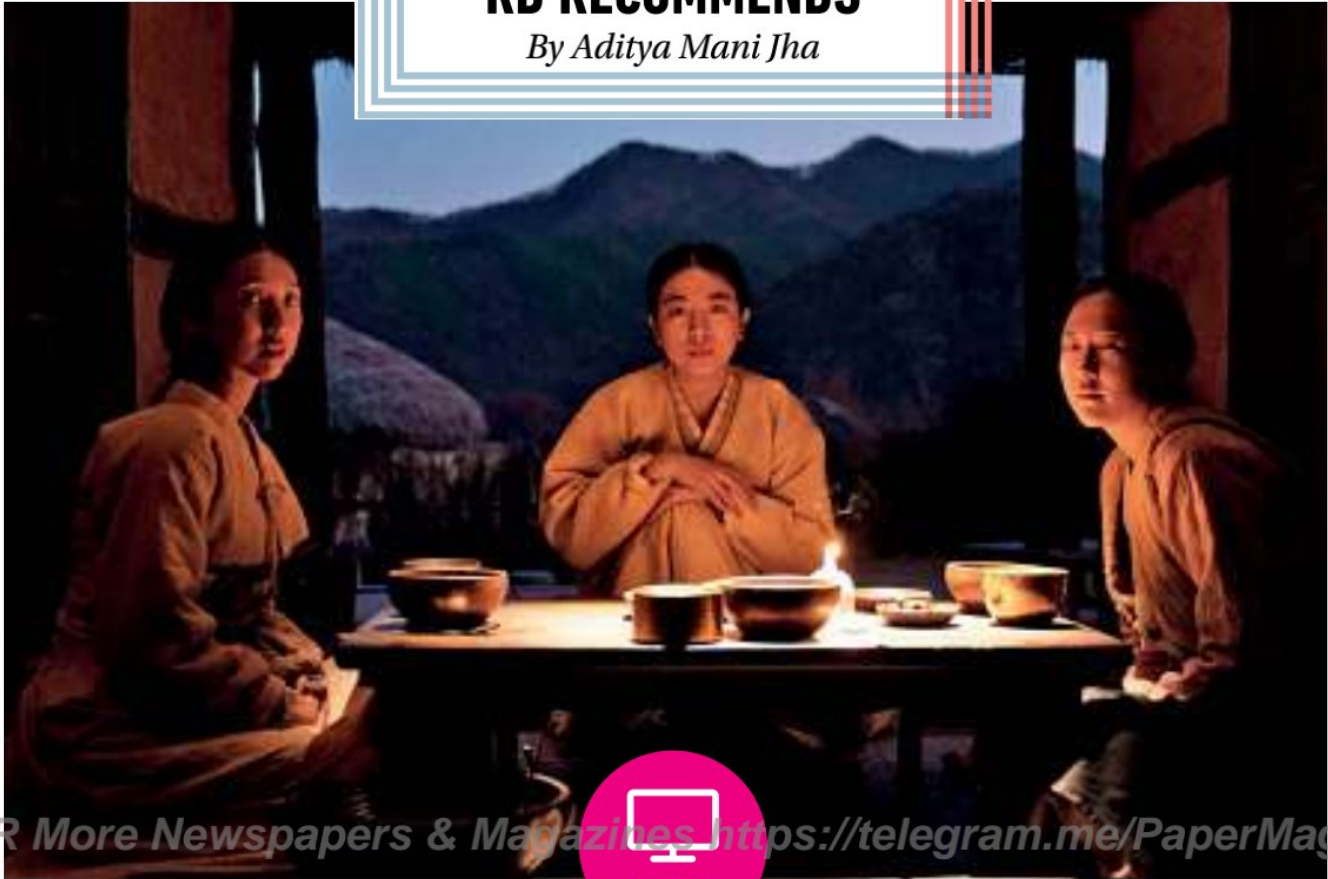
★ Why did the scarecrow win the award?
Because he was outstanding in his field.

★ What do you call a criminal landing a plane?
Condescending.

—BOREDPANDA.COM, REDDIT.COM

RD RECOMMENDS

By Aditya Mani Jha



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PACHINKO (Season 2)

Apple TV+ on 23 August

Based on Min Jin Lee's bestselling 2017 novel of the same name, *Pachinko* is an epic historical drama that follows a Korean family across the span of the 20th century, as they make their lives as immigrants in Osaka, Japan. Both Lee's novel and this series have received widespread acclaim for their portrayal of the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910–1945). The title refers to the pachinko machine, a mechanical arcade game that's like a cross between the Western pinball and slot machines, commonly used across Japan for low-stakes gambling. It's a powerful metaphor for the vagaries of fate that the central characters have to face for several generations. *Pachinko* is the rare historical drama where attention to detail does not mean sacrificing character arcs.

PHOTOS: IMDB



AURON MEIN KA-HAAN DUM THAA

In theatres, 2 August

Neeraj Pandey, the director of hit thrillers like *A Wednesday* (2008), *Special 26* (2015) and *Baby* (2017), is back with a romance-drama starring Ajay Devgn and Tabu as separated lovers. Krishna (Devgn) and Vasudha's (Tabu) picture-perfect romance is nipped in the bud when Krishna gets involved in multiple murders and is sent to prison. After two decades behind bars, Krishna wants to reconnect with his lover but meanwhile, Vasudha has married the well-meaning Abhijeet (Sheirgill). Will their first meeting in over 20 years provide closure or will it set them both upon another path they cannot hope to control? The film marks the 10th collaboration between Devgn and Tabu, whose last film together, 2019's *De De Pyar De*, also saw them playing former lovers.



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THANGALAN

In theatres, 15 August

Pa. Ranjith is the creator of some of the most memorable Tamil-language blockbusters of the last decade, including the Rajinikanth triumphs *Kaala* and *Kabali*. His latest action-fantasy spectacle, *Thangalaan*, sees veteran Vikram playing the titular tribal chieftain who is assisting the British in tracing a streak of gold running through his village. In doing so, however, he incurs the wrath of a sorceress named Aarathi (Mohan) and their dispute escalates into an existential battle for the village. Ranjith is known for his keen visual sense and pointed symbolism. He is very good at marrying large-screen extravaganza with a sense of social realism. And in Vikram, he has a charismatic lead with a distinctly theatrical style, one that's suited for period dramas like this one.





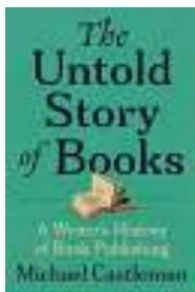
The Company of Violent Men

by Siddharthya Roy (Penguin Random House India)

In 2018, Siddharthya Roy won a Pulitzer Center in Crisis Reporting grant for his work documenting human trafficking and the drug trade in Rohingya camps across South Asia. That investigation, as well as several others in conflict zones across Asia, make up Roy's book *The Company of Violent Men*. Highlights include



a deep dive into Chhattisgarh, where the state has been at war with its citizens for decades, and, of course, Kashmir home to one of the longest ongoing civil conflicts in the sub-continent. This is solid, old-fashioned investigative journalism, written in a style that's compassionate without devolving into oversimplifications or clichés.



The Untold Story of Books: A Writer's History of Book Publishing

by Michael Castleman (Unnamed Press)

For an industry that's now over 600 years old, publishing has a surprisingly opaque reputation. Castleman's

The Untold Story of Books provides a concise yet thorough history of publishing, right from the year Gutenberg printed his first Bible. Seasoned readers can expect delightful and counter-intuitive answers to questions like how and why did gifting books at Christmas become a tradition? (The answer lies in the 1823 poem *Twas the Night Before Christmas* after its opening line) What are 'blurbs' and who named them that? Why is copyright law so important and controversial to this day? Castleman gives us the answers with the confidence of a practiced raconteur.



A Bouquet of Dead Flowers

by Swadesh Deepak, Translations by Jerry Pinto, Sukant Deepak et al (*Speaking Tiger*)

Playwright, novelist and short-story writer Swadesh Deepak (born 1943) is considered one of Hindi literature's most original voices.

His 1991 play *Court Martial*, about an Indian army jawan facing caste-based discrimination by his superiors, is widely performed even today. His 2003 memoir

Maine Mandu Nahi Dekha (I Have Not Seen Mandu) is an irreplaceable book about his own deteriorating mental health. This volume brings together stories from across three decades of writing. Deepak's stories never shied away from critiquing social structures but his great subject was masculinity itself.

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MUSIC



SHAKKAR, THE RAGHU DIXIT PROJECT

Raghu Dixit's self-titled band is known for its penchant for fusion, its musical range and the colourful outfits adorned by the singer-composer onstage. The latest offering *Shakkar* is full of their usual easy-listening, feel-good vibes with songs in both Hindi and Kannada. The opening track 'Shakkarpari' is an unclassifiable ballad with playful vocals that allow Dixit to flex his malleable voice. The infectious 'Alemaari' has genuine pizzazz, not to mention mridangams and slick guitar riffs reminiscent of early-career Red Hot Chili Peppers. Dixit also takes lyrical leaps of faith, as in the upbeat 'Khud Se Naina Char', where an early line goes 'Yaar tu pehla khudkaa/dooja hai khudaa' (You're the first friend you'll ever make/the second being God).



PODCASTS



PRIMER

This one is highly recommended for music nerds in particular but it's a superb entry point for general listeners as well. *Primer*, produced by Maximum Fun, is an informative and engaging podcast about musical history, specifically the history of different musical genres. Host Christian Duenas takes listeners down memory lane with impeccably researched and snappily told stories about synth-pop, rock n' roll, Euro-pop, Japanese 'City Pop' and so on. A particularly appreciable thing about this podcast is that it takes a three-dimensional view of its subject matter. Songs and genres are deemed important not only on their own raw musical merits, but also what they mean in terms of overall cultural influence and a lasting legacy.



SIXTEENTH MINUTE (OF FAME)

A podcast highly recommended for the terminally online, *Sixteenth Minute (of Fame)* by Jamie Loftus has a novel and super-fun concept at its heart: Loftus interviews people who for one reason or another have found themselves—however briefly—as the Internet's 'main character'. Influencers, people who were featured in viral 'candid camera' moments and so on. For example, she interviews the person who designed 2015's most infamous dress. You know the one: you probably thought it was either black and blue, or gold and white. What's impressive is everything Loftus extrapolates from these moments, broad-ranging points about the rapidly-changing nature of the Internet. This is a funny, bittersweet historical document about online fame.

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**Man with
printed sarong**
Lionel Wendt,
c. 1933-44,
Gelatin silver print
54.9 x 40.4 cm

FOR More Newspapers & Magazines <https://telegram.me/...> Magazine

A lawyer, pianist, critic, and mentor to artists, Lionel Wendt is best known for his photographs of Sri Lanka, especially those of people indigenous to the island, captured amidst the lush landscape or posing in his studio. All of Wendt's photographs were made during a period of great experimentation that began in 1932 and ended with his premature death in 1944. These photos started gaining renewed attention within Sri Lanka with publication and exhibition in the 1990s, and further after a trove of prints accidentally found in storage began making its way to dealers and institutions across the world. The recognition of Wendt's pioneering work is not



surprising given that his images challenge the colonial documentation of ethnographic types and emphasize form and sensuality, particularly in his portraits of working-class men and folk artists. *Man with Printed Sarong* is one such example, but like other similar images it reveals little about the subject and instead points to the

photographer's intent of evoking a mood of eroticism. While Wendt's work captures people and places of Sri Lanka in the years before it gained independence, it also opens itself to the present in scholarly reconsiderations of modernism and queer-ness in art practices outside the West. **R**

— BY ZEENAT NAGREE

IMAGE COURTESY JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

QUOTABLE QUOTES

There are so many men, all endlessly attempting to sweep me off my feet. And there is one of you, trying just the opposite. Making sure my feet are firm beneath me, lest I fall.

—Patrick Rothfuss, *author, in The Wise Man's Fear*

I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book.

—Groucho Marx, *comedian*

We are ordinary people. Our friends are ordinary. Our relatives are ordinary. We didn't have a single important person in our phone books. But, you know, such ordinary people are 90 per cent of the country.

—Sanjana Jatav, *on becoming one of the youngest MP's of the 18th Lok Sabha*



Waiting is thinking, and to think deeply is, very often, to change one's mind."

—Salman Rushdie, *novelist, in Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*

Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart.

—Tennessee Williams, *author, in The Glass Menagerie*

Democracy does not survive only because of courts and the press. It survives only because people believe in it. People want to act for it.

—Prabir Purkayastha, *founder of the news platform NewsClick*

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ME & MY SHELF

Coimbatore-born **Prashanth Srivatsa** is a science fiction/fantasy writer whose stories have appeared in magazines such as *Asimov's*, *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, among others. Prashanth's debut fantasy novel, *The Spice Gate* chronicles the journey of Amir, a young man born with special abilities who unravels the power that keeps the world in balance.



Invisible Cities

BY ITALO CALVINO, *Vintage Classics*, ₹450

A timeless book, an ode to travel and cities. Marco Polo's adventures told cryptically to Kublai Khan serve as a reminder of what it means to leave our home, and sometimes, what it means to return to it. A marvellous feat of imagination.

Pedro Paramo

BY JUAN RULFO, *Profile Books*, ₹499

A beautiful, haunting, bizarre novel, set in the town of Comala in Mexico, and my favourite read this year. Written in a fractal, non-linear structure, the story plays between life and death, between past and present. It is a story of forgotten lives, and the envy of every writer who dreams of enchanting their reader.



Wolf Hall

BY HILARY MANTEL

Fourth Estate, ₹1399

A poignant, often witty, and always clever account of the life of statesman and lawyer

Thomas Cromwell, in service of Henry VIII. *Wolf Hall* and its sequels are arguably the greatest novels I have ever read, in no small part to its richness of character, place and the sheer wealth of language at Mantel's disposal.

Gormenghast BY MERVYN PEAKE, *Vintage Classics*, ₹1,099

Few books have had the kind of influence on my writing as Peake's *Gormenghast*. Named after its eponymous castle, it is an atmospheric and brooding tale of family, ritual and

PHOTO: HARPERCOLLINS

power. Read it on a winter night, under the flame of a shivering candle.

A Fine Balance

BY ROHINTON MISTRY, *Faber*, ₹599

A quintessential Indian novel. Set during the Emergency and its aftermath in the 70s and 80s, the story follows four characters swept into the winds of rapid social and political change. Mistry's eye for detail and for relationships painted in the harsh colours of despair will leave you seething with anger, but also, in some poignant moments, breathing the scent of hope.

Seasons of the Palm

BY PERUMAL MURUGAN, *Penguin*, ₹303

A master of articulating the experiences of the marginalized, and critiquing the ceaseless and relentless oppression against Dalits in rural Tamil Nadu. His long descriptions of the countryside, of local deities and folklore, the subtle interplay between traditional and modern, give the social environment as much character as his young protagonists.

Perdido Street Station

BY CHINA MIEVILLE, *Pan*, ₹1,173

Weird fiction is often underrated simply for what is its feature. *Perdido* is an example of why it shouldn't. The world of New Crobuzonis a work of imaginative genius. Its myriad characters, societies and livelihoods intertwine to give you the strangest story you will ever read.

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell

BY SUSANNA CLARKE, *Bloomsbury Press*, ₹799

Set in an alternate 19th century England, where magic had once flourished and is now resurging, this Dickensian and Poe-ish tale is a masterpiece of fantasy. Its plethora of footnotes are rich in imagination and gave me some of my most memorable reading experiences.

Earthsea Cycle

BY URSULA LE GUIN, *Clarion Books*, ₹918

Speculative fiction is incomplete without Ursula K. Le Guin. In four beautiful, brilliant stories, Le Guin proves why she is a master storyteller. The tales follow the life of Ged, a young wizard in a culturally complex archipelago, and are a delicate reminder of why adults must read more children's works.



Everything The Light Touches

BY JANICE PARIAT, *HarperCollins*, ₹599

Written across time and space, *Everything the Light Touches* converges upon the misty hills and vales of Meghalaya, among the Khasi tribes and their folklore. The novel is beautifully narrated through letters and archives, diaries and poems, from the distant past of Goethe in Italy to a present-day journalist rediscovering her roots. **R**



Crossed Letters

EASY Place one of A, B, C or D into each of the 25 empty cells so that the number of letters in each row and column is as indicated by the numbers. Identical letters cannot be next to each other in the grid either horizontally or vertically. Can you complete the grid?

				A	1	2	1	3	1
				B	1	1	2	1	1
				C	1	1	1	0	2
				D	2	1	1	1	1
A	B	C	D						
2	0	2	1						
2	2	0	1						
1	3	1	0						
1	0	2	2						
2	1	0	2						

Arch Rivals

DIFFICULT Three archers are having a contest. Each fires three arrows at three different targets (for a total of nine arrows from each archer). Archers score zero points for any arrow that misses a target. Each target has three scoring sections, and the lowest sections for targets A, B and C are 1, 2 and 4 points, respectively. Each of the remaining scoring sections has one of the following values: 3, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10 points. Can you reconstruct the targets, given the scorecard below?

	A	B	C
WASIM	16	14	17
ROBIN	9	25	13
KARISHMA	17	12	20

Two's Company, Three's a Crowd

MEDIUM The numbers below are increasing according to a specific pattern. What number should come after 61?

1 → 5 → 13 → 29 → 61 → _____

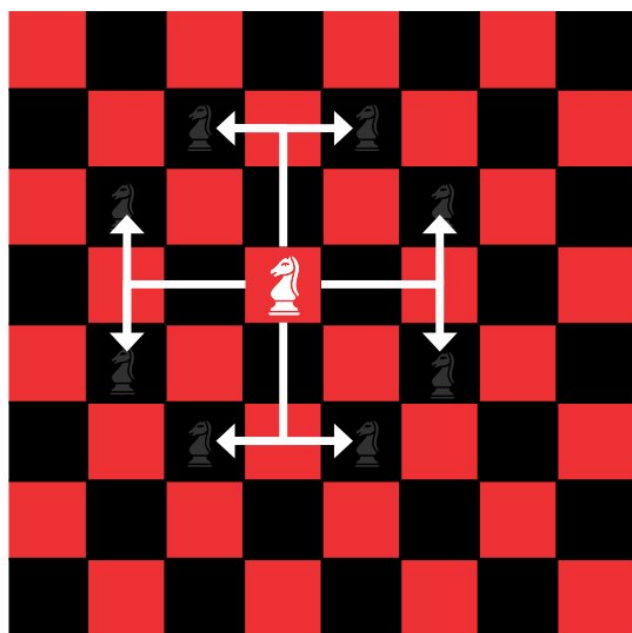
On Vacation

EASY Eshaan, Khushi, Neera and Yuri are all going away this month, each to one of these places: Australia, Italy, Mexico and Switzerland. Can you figure out who's going where?

- ♦ Eshaan is travelling to Europe; Khushi isn't.
- ♦ Neera has been studying Italian in anticipation of her trip.
- ♦ Yuri has already been to Australia, and Eshaan to Switzerland. They're both going someplace new.



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Knight Moves

MEDIUM In chess, the knight moves in an L shape. It moves either two squares away horizontally and one square away vertically, or two squares away vertically and one square away horizontally. All possible moves for a knight located toward the center of the board are shown to the left.

What is the maximum number of knights that can be placed on a chess board such that no knight could then move to a square occupied by another one?

For answers, turn to **PAGE 112**.



BY *Louis-Luc Beaudoin*

		1	8		2		9	
	5						4	
8		3		6		2	1	
	8	6			4	1		
			3					7
2				9				
	7		5					
4						5		3
				2	8			

To Solve This Puzzle

Put a number from 1 to 9 in each empty square so that:

- ◆ Every horizontal row and vertical column contains all nine numbers (1-9) without repeating any of them;
- ◆ Each of the outlined 3 x 3 boxes has all nine numbers, none repeated.

SOLUTION

1	7	4	8	2	6	5	9	3
3	8	5	9	1	7	6	2	4
2	9	6	3	4	5	8	7	1
4	5	8	1	6	9	7	3	2
7	2	9	5	8	3	4	1	6
6	3	1	4	7	2	9	8	5
5	1	2	7	9	4	3	6	8
8	4	7	6	3	1	2	5	9
9	6	3	2	5	8	1	4	7

BRAIN GAMES ANSWERS

FROM PAGES 110 & 111

Crossed Letters

C	A	D	A	C
D	B	A	B	A
B	C	B	A	B
D	A	C	D	C
A	D	B	A	D

Arch Rivals

Target A: 1, 3, 8.

Target B: 2, 5, 10.

Target C: 4, 7, 9.

Two's Company,

Three's a Crowd

125. To get each new number, double the previous one and add 3.

On Vacation

Eshaan is going to Italy, Khushi to Australia, Neera to Switzerland, and Yuri to Mexico.

Knight Moves

32. A knight can move only to a square of the opposite color. So, place knights on all the squares of the same color. There are 64 squares on the board, half white and half black, and half of 64 is 32.

WORD POWER

No rain, no rainbows—or so they say—so grab your *galoshes* and prepare to be *inundated* with the language of rainy days: as *overcast*, *drizzly* and downright *pluviose* as they come. Or stay warm and dry indoors, venturing outside only to take in the *petrichor* after the storm.

BY Leila El Shennawy

1. sunshower *n.*

- A** post-storm light
- B** ancient ritual
- C** sunny rain

2. sodden *adj.*

- A** soaked
- B** melancholy
- C** earthy

3. hydroplane *v.*

- A** skid
- B** float
- C** sink

4. virga *n.*

- A** pitter-patter
- B** evaporating rain
- C** droplet

5. inclement *adj.*

- A** incoming
- B** cold
- C** turbulent

6. billabong *n.*

- A** backwater pool
- B** type of umbrella
- C** static charge

7. pluviose *adj.*

- A** refreshing
- B** rhythmic
- C** rainy

8. mire *n.*

- A** hail
- B** spongy earth
- C** rainy walk

9. stratus *n.*

- A** atmosphere
- B** type of cloud
- C** forecast

10. torrential *adj.*

- A** rapidly falling
- B** tropical
- C** sideways

11. iridescent *adj.*

- A** hazy
- B** humid
- C** rainbow-like

12. cataclysm *n.*

- A** major flood
- B** surprise storm
- C** sheet of rain

13. brumous *adj.*

- A** bone-chilling
- B** relentless
- C** foggy

14. deluge *v.*

- A** overwhelm
- B** soak
- C** drain

15. squally *adj.*

- A** gusty
- B** having low visibility
- C** snowy

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The Sweet Smell of Rain

If you've ever found yourself enjoying the earthy scent of post-rain air, you've experienced 'petrichor,' a term Australian scientists coined in 1964. This unique smell is caused by compounds such as ozone, plant oils and geosmin in rainwater. Our noses are particularly sensitive to geosmin (which is also responsible for the earthy taste of beets), possibly because our ancient ancestors depended on rain for survival.



Word Power ANSWERS

1. sunshower

(c) sunny rain

While out walking her dog on a bright spring afternoon, Simran was treated to a refreshing sunshower.

2. sodden (A) soaked

A malfunctioning washing machine left James's laundry sodden.

3. hydroplane (A) skid

If you don't slow down, your vehicle's tires may hydroplane on the wet asphalt.

4. virga

(B) evaporating rain

Meteorologists said the intense summer heat caused virga last weekend.

5. inclement (c) turbulent

The reporter warned residents of inclement weather on Thursday.

6. billabong

(A) backwater pool

On your next visit to Australia, you may come across a billabong.

7. pluviose (c) rainy

Emei Shan in the southwestern province of Sichuan, China, is among the most pluviose regions in the world.

8. mire (B) spongy earth

The biologist carefully stepped over the mire as she made her way across the bog.

9. stratus

(B) type of cloud

Layers of stratus clouds typically streak low across the sky.

10. torrential

(A) rapidly falling

A torrential downpour made the last day of Rima's beach vacation in the Caribbean a total nightmare.

11. iridescent

(c) rainbow-like

The glossy, iridescent wings of the Japanese jewel beetle make the insect a sight to behold.

12. cataclysm

(A) major flood

Heavy rainfall can contribute to a destructive and dangerous cataclysm.

13. brumous (c) foggy

Peering into the brumous valley ahead, Sally decided to cut her hike short.

14. deluge (A) overwhelm

The company was deluged with complaints.

15. squally (A) gusty

Squally conditions almost knocked the climber off the mountainside.

Vocabulary Ratings

9 & BELOW: Dry conditions

10-12: Light showers

13-15: A real soaker

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TRIVIA

BY *Naorem Anuja*

1. Returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, which region was the last significant British colony?

2. What was the term popularized by Winston Churchill in 1946 to describe Soviet relations with Western powers?

3. Which was the first country to put a woman in space?

4. Athena, the goddess of practical reasoning, was born in an unusual way—she emerged fully grown from another god's head. Name the god.

5. Which is the only other element besides mercury that remains liquid at room temperature?

6. What was The All India Radio was previously called?

7. The Janjatiya Gaurav Divas, celebrated on 15 November commemorates which tribal leader's birthday?

8. Which world renowned theoretical physicist said, "People who boast about their IQ are losers"?

9. Which book written by Rachel Carson was instrumental in the banning of DDT in the United States of America in 1972?

10. Inspired by a home-made egg timer crafted from a cocktail shaker filled with oil and water, Edward Craven Walker created which light fixture?

11. Butterflies drink turtle tears. True or false?

12. What do the popular Thai dessert Khao Neoo Mamuang and the Great Wall of China have in common?

13. Caviar should not be eaten with a metal spoon. True or false?



Answers: 1. Hong Kong 2. The Iron Curtain. A year after World War II, Winston Churchill delivered a speech in which he used the term to describe the political, military, and ideological barrier between the "Soviet sphere" and the West. 3. Russia. Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space in 1963. 4. Zeus. 5. Bromine. 6. The Indian State Broadcasting Service. 7. Birsu Munda, who led the Munda revolt against colonial land-grabbing activities which demolished the conventional tribal land-holding system. 8. Steven Hawking. Hawking shared this opinion upon being asked what his IQ was in an interview. Hawking didn't know. 9. *Silent Spring*. The book brought into attention the dangers of the indiscriminate use of chemical pesticides. 10. The Lava Lamp, which was initially called Astro Lamp. 11. True. Butterflies need salt, and acquire it from turtle tears when other sources such as plants, droppings or mud fail to provide it. 12. Sticky rice. Khao Neoo Mamuang combines mango with sticky rice, which was used as mortar for the Great Wall. 13. True. Caviar—sturgeon (fish) eggs—absorb bitter flavours from metal utensils so spoons made of bone, ivory or mother of pearl should be used instead.