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Reader's Comments And Opinions

Flood Of Tears

'Yellow Dog's Travels' (My Story, Feb/Mar) made me reminisce back to 2010 when our family dog, Molly, disappeared after we were hit by a flood. Molly was very close to my grandmother and losing Molly made her feel a little lost.

A year went by. One day, my father and I were driving through the countryside when, like a bolt out of the blue, we saw a brown dog that looked like Molly. She was guarding a



warehouse about 45 kilometres from our home. We rushed to pick up Grandma and drove back excitedly. Their reunion made us all cry. They were never separated after that. MARCELLA ADISUHANTO

Medical Miracles

I was profoundly inspired by the article 'Lives In The Balance' (Bonus Read, Feb/Mar). On my first reading, I was impressed by the tenacity and dedication of neurosurgeon Dr Christopher Honey. After I reread it, the thought that came to me was, *this transcends medicine*. It is about the miracles of medicine.

Dynamic Metropolis

I loved reading the travel story 'Heart & Seoul' (Feb/Mar). The article brilliantly captures Seoul's vibrant blend of tradition and modernity, offering readers a vivid glimpse into its rich cultural tapestry, from ancient palaces to dynamic street markets. It is a captivating guide for anyone considering a visit to Seoul. SUJEEVA WIJERATNE >

Let us know if you are moved – or provoked – by any item in the magazine, share your thoughts. See page 7 for how to join the discussion.

EDDIE RUSSELL

РНОТО: GETTY IMAGES

EDITOR'S NOTE

An Honest Opinion

CELEBRITY CHEF Jamie Oliver, this month's cover feature (page 22), is well known for his views on the importance of healthy eating, particularly for children. But his opinions have attracted criticism. In a frank interview, the 49-yearold father of five discusses his food campaigns and why honesty has always been his starting point.

Also in this issue: we learn of the 20-year legal fight to clear a mother's name after she was imprisoned for the deaths of her four infants ('A Mother's Conviction', page 94); explore the not-so-often trekked but ever-so beautiful and remote parts of Laos ('Next Stop: Who Knows?', page 84); and expose some longstanding myths about ten common foods that nutritionists want cleared up ('10 Nutrition Myths', page 60).

All these great stories and much more.



LOUISE WATERSON Editor-in-Chief

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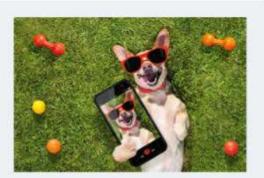
Like in 'Empty Nest Syndrome' (Feb/ Mar), my youngest son, 26, moved out. When he left, I sat on his bed and cried. Now we are learning to find our way back to the days before children. KATHRYN HEATHCOTE

Apology And Correction

Photographs of Olympic fencer Edgar Cheung used on the cover of the Reader's Digest Hong Kong edition, contents page and the feature about him were sourced from his Facebook account without permission and published in error. The feature article was also incorrectly promoted as an exclusive interview. We deeply regret the publication of both and sincerely apologise to Edgar and his family. This does not embody the values of Reader's Digest and we have taken steps to avoid this happening in the future.

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PUPPY PAW-TRAIT We asked you to think up a funny caption for this photo.

Mastering the art of a 'fur-fect' selfie! AFIEKA "Let's paws for a selfie!" CHAN JIN MING Dogumenting the day. LESLIE YEE A day in the life of a canine influencer. SANA NADEEM Smile, you're on candog camera. CAROLYN DOWNING

Congratulations to this issue's winner, Chan Jin Ming.



CAPTION CONTEST

Come up with the funniest caption for the above photo and you could win \$100. To enter, email asiaeditor@readersdigest.com.au or see details on page 7.

PILOT



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When I Stopped Hiding

Everyone is concealing something — but embracing that secret part of yourself can change everything

BY Ruth Rathblott

y birth was a little more dramatic than the standard way a baby enters the world. Within minutes of coming out, I was whisked away into another room while doctors gave my parents the difficult news: I was born missing my left hand. I'm sure it was quite jarring for them. An entire hand was just... not there?

As surprising as it was at the time, it isn't super rare. Having extra fingers or toes is the most common limb difference. My form, called amniotic band syndrome, is more rare, occurring in one out of every 10,000 to 15,000 births. Regardless of the form the disability takes, these families have to learn all the ins and outs of navigating that disability – from finding accessible travel to building confidence in their kids – from day one.

Indeed, that announcement of my limb difference would come to define

the rest of my life, and it might have been a disaster if it hadn't been for what happened next. I'm told that a nurse placed me in my mother's arms and instructed: "You will take her home. You will love her. You will raise her like you would any child. You will treat her as normal."

My parents took that admonition seriously. I played sports, acted in theatre, excelled in school, participated in student government and had playdates. While I did get some stares and 'polite' questions about my disability, I am lucky because I wasn't made fun of for my limb difference.

As kids do, I learned to adapt. One of my earliest memories is my father trying to teach me to tie my shoes. I gently nudged him out of the way because his two-handed method wouldn't work for me, and I figured out a way to do it with one hand. Not every challenge was that simple, however. Because my parents were trying so hard to make me feel 'normal', that also meant I didn't really have space to talk about my limb difference – and it was different. No matter how we tried to reframe it, other kids had two hands and I had only one.

The fact that I was different hit me hard my first day of high school. I was 13, an age when kids are already very self-conscious. I remember getting on the bus and one of the other kids stared just a little too long at my left arm. The staring unnerved me in a way it never had before, and I felt a sudden urge to hide my hand, so I impulsively slipped it into my pocket.

I spent the next two decades keeping my limb difference hidden at all times. I'd keep it in my pocket, cover it with extra-long sleeves or tuck it behind bags or underneath jackets. But the thing about hiding is that the very act implies there is something bad or wrong (or else why would you need to hide it?). In my mind, I had decided that my missing hand made me hideous and that if people knew about it they would not want to be around me anymore. I internalised this self-loathing, and it only strengthened over the years.

Making friends felt challenging



By learning to be comfortable with herself, Ruth Rathblott made others more comfortable as well

enough, but trying to find love felt particularly daunting. As I started dating, I made deliberate efforts to hide my limb difference. Eventually we'd reach a point in the relationship where I knew I had to tell them. I'd agonise over the 'big reveal' and build it up in my mind and theirs for days. I'd tell them, "There's something I really need to tell you," and then leave them to imagine what terrible thing I was hiding. When I had steeled myself, I'd call them on the phone and say abruptly, "I was born missing my left hand" - and then immediately hang up before they could respond. I'd wait in shame and fear for them to call me back (which they all did, to their

Ruth Rathblott is a diversity and inclusion speaker, non-profit leader and TEDx speaker.

credit), but even then, I couldn't bear to talk about it, so I'd let it go to the answering machine and then listen to their message later.

Everyone I shared this with – friend, co-worker or boyfriend – said kind things like, "You shouldn't hide it" or "It's no big deal." But their words didn't matter to me. The only words that really mattered were the ones I was telling myself, that story of how I was unworthy of love. Hiding feels a lot like lying, and it's hard to build relationships when you feel like you're lying to your loved ones.

When I was 38 years old, exhausted of hiding, I met someone special and invited them in. The combination of me finally feeling ready to unhide and his willingness to go through the unhiding process with me was what I needed. For the first time in my life, I allowed someone to really hold my limb, look at it, take pictures of it, touch it, love it – love me.

That relationship ended after ten years, but I kept the self-love and compassion I learned from it. From that point on, I saw my limb difference as something unique and beautiful about me, something that should be shown, not hidden.

It was a transformational experience, and through that process, I learned to love me, too. This ability to love myself changed how I lived my entire life, and it made me happier.

It started with physical care: for

years, I'd gotten frostbite on my left hand every winter because I'd shove it so deep into my pocket that I wouldn't feel it freezing. Unhiding it meant learning little things, like how to keep it warm and protected.

My relationships also improved. I learned that being comfortable with myself made other people more comfortable as well. Talking about my struggles gave them permission to talk about theirs as well, and I was able to bond on a deeper level with a much larger group of people.

For 25 years, I'd worked in nonprofit organisations working with young people, but accepting my disability sparked a passion in me to educate others about disability as part of diversity, through public speaking and writing.

If I've learned one thing through my advocacy work, it's that hiding is universal. My missing hand is just a tool to talk about it. Hiding things, especially from loved ones, is exhausting and isolating, and it prevents us from getting support.

So why do we all do it? It's that primal shame for being different and the fear of being rejected. It's such a universal experience, yet we all feel like we can't talk about it. It's time to change that.

Do you have a tale to tell? We'll pay cash for any original and unpublished story we print. See page 7 for details on how to contribute.



⁻ Topseller He Ltd calculation based in part on data reported by NielseniQ through its Retail index Service for the Rice category for the 52-weeks peri anding December 2022, for the Total Singapore Modern Trade Market. (Copyright © 2023, NielseniQ.)

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Good Pet. Better Friend GEORGENE A.

When I first got my turtle, Nicky, I was ten years old, and she was about the size of a coin. We've grown together (I'm now 80 and she weighs 2.5 kg), and she's been my best friend through it all.

Nicky lives in our backyard pond in the summer, and has her own room and filtered kiddie pool in the winter. She's also quite social and curious. As the star of 'Show And Tell' for four kids and eight grandchildren, she cranes her neck out of her shell to get a good look at her fans. Nicky loves munching on the tomatoes and pretzels the neighbourhood kids feed her, and she's even gutsy enough to steal a mouthful of dog food.

On her 50th birthday (these turtles typically live 50 years or more), we threw her a party, complete with a gift any turtle would die for: her own in-ground pond.

She is a good pet and a better friend. She keeps all my secrets. Nicky was in my lap the day after my wedding and each time we moved home. I hope she'll be there till the very end.

You could earn cash by telling us about the antics of unique pets or wildlife. Turn to page 7 for details on how to contribute.

A Most Amazing Cat

JOAN ANNE MARR

When I was younger and living in a small flat on my own I was lonely, so went to the cat shelter for a kitten. As I walked down the rows of cages with the assistant, one mature cat sat huddled in the back looking sad, so I stopped for a moment.

"Oh, you'll like this one," the woman said, and before I could reply she opened the door. The cat flew out onto me and wrapped his paws around my neck in a tight hug. "Oh, I've never had one do that before," the assistant said. It was a job prying him off me and putting him back into the cage.

When I got home I couldn't stop thinking about that poor cat. He was going to be euthanised, so I rang early the next morning and said I'd pick him up later that day.

When I went to work the next day, I left the cat, Sylvester, in my flat. When I got home round 6 o'clock and opened the door, Sylvester bolted outside. I thought he'd run away and was rather upset. A few minutes later, a meow at the door told me he'd come back. Then I realised I hadn't left him a kittylitter tray. I bought one the next day but he never seemed to use it.

One night I was awoken by Sylvester sitting on my chest with his paws over my mouth. As I started to move he pushed harder with his paws as if to say, don't speak or move. It was then I heard drawers being quietly opened and closed. *Good grief, I've got an intruder,* I thought. I had nothing really to steal and lay still and quiet. I heard my flat door quietly open and close. Sylvester sprung off the bed, checked all around the flat and came back to me purring, as if to say, it's safe now.

Later, after I got married, I discovered Sylvester was using the toilet when he needed to go. He was the most amazing cat. When I arrived home from anywhere, he would jump and hug me like that very first meeting.

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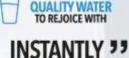








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Staying Active

The advice for living with arthritis is to participate in physical activity. But which sports should you choose?

BY Susannah Hickling

YOGA

In a survey from health website patient.info, 64 per cent of healthcare professionals recommended yoga and Pilates for arthritis. Both are gentle, lowimpact exercises that strengthen the muscles. This in turn helps to support joints. A good yoga or Pilates teacher will adapt the movements to your condition.

GOLF

Physical activity can ease the pain and stiffness of arthritis, but exercising isn't always that easy.

One manageable low-impact sport is golf. Regular golfers stay active thanks to all the walking they do, but there are other advantages, too. A survey by UK and Australian academics found that 90 per cent of golf-playing respondents with osteoarthritis rated their health good, very good or excellent compared with 64 per cent of the general population with the condition. Golfers also reported better mental health, possibly due to the sociable nature of the game.

WALKING

If a round of golf doesn't grab you, normal walking brings the same health benefits, including a reduction in the risk of heart disease, diabetes and obesity. Brisk walking helps to keep joints flexible. Use walking poles if you need to – you might even want to try Nordic walking, which uses poles to propel you forward and work your core muscles. But never force a painful joint.

SWIMMING

Exercising in water literally takes the weight off your feet. Water supports your body weight and reduces the strain on joints. It also provides resistance, which helps strengthen your muscles. And, like other sports, it's good for your general health and wellbeing. A Korean review of existing research found aquatic exercise reduced pain and joint dysfunction more effectively and improved quality of life more than land-based exercise.

Breaststroke, however, is best avoided if you have arthritis in the hips or knees. If swimming isn't for you, there are plenty of other aquatic activities to choose from, including aqua aerobics classes or aqua walking, which you can do by yourself by simply walking round the pool.

CYCLING

Get outside on your bike and you'll see improvements to your mental health as well as physical benefits. But a stationary bike is just as good for fitness and for building up muscle around your knees, and you don't have to worry about the weather or the traffic. A 2021 review of studies by Chinese and Australian researchers found that stationary cycling reduced pain and had a positive effect on joint function in people with knee osteoarthritis. Aim to ride for 20 minutes three to five days a week.

BOWLS AND BOULES

I bet you didn't realise the civilised, sedate game of bowls, or boules if you prefer the French variety, was good for you. Again, there's minimal stress on joints, and you'll be enhancing your mobility – and your social life – just by getting out onto a lawn or a pétanque pitch with friends.





BY Susannah Hickling

esearch has shown that over the past couple of decades, people's attention spans have shrunk in measurable ways. But there are steps you can take to help you focus better.

Minimise distraction. Removing yourself from people and devices will allow you to concentrate better. If you find yourself sidetracked by digital devices, turn off notifications and train yourself to check them at set intervals. Set a timer. **Find the right sound.** Whether it's music, white noise or even silence, you might find there's a particular sound that helps you maintain your attention. This enhances alpha waves, brain waves that promote relaxation and are thought to play a role in cognition and, according to a small 2015 US study, make you more creative.

Move your body. When you exercise, your heart rate increases, prompting your body to release a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, which aids nerve cell growth. This is important for concentration, memory and learning.

Follow a healthy diet. You might get a boost from certain so-called 'brain foods'. These include fish, nuts, blueberries and leafy greens.

Sleep well. Who doesn't suffer from brain fog after a bad night? Everyone needs different amounts of shut-eye, but aim for seven to nine hours.

Structure your life. Having a daily routine, including breaks, will minimise the brain fatigue that goes with having to make endless spontaneous decisions and allow you to focus on the the important stuff.

Fix health issues. Tackle hearing problems, which demand sometimes exhausting concentration, sleep apnoea or depression.



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News From The

WORLD OF MEDICINE

YOU CAN'T REVERSE SLEEP DEPRIVATION

With help from people who volunteered to stay up overnight, US scientists tested two popular ways of compensating for sleep deprivation: caffeine and napping.

Sleeplessness took a toll on people's ability to stay focused on a task and to follow a complex set of directions. Consuming caffeine equal to two cups of coffee improved focus but not direction-following. Taking a 30- or 60-minute snooze didn't fully restore their brain function, either. So while loading up on caffeine and taking a quick nap at midday might help you get through the day, neither will have you performing at your best.

DOSE OF GOOD NEWS

Although bad news stories can be worth your attention, adding some good news into your media diet could benefit your mental health, concludes a new UK experiment. More than 300 participants began by reading stories about cruelty or violence. Some stopped there, while others were asked to proceed to either light-hearted anecdotes, or stories about acts of kindness.

Not surprisingly, the negative reports dampened readers' moods. The amusing tidbits helped to temper this effect, but it was the stories about kindness that cheered people the most.

COMMON VACCINES HELP AVERT ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Staying up to date with your immunisations reduces your chances of developing Alzheimer's disease, suggests a US study of people over 65. Specifically, the vaccines for tetanus and diphtheria (adults should get a booster every ten years),

> shingles (recommended for people over age 65) and pneumococcal disease (recommended for seniors over 70) lowered the relative risk of Alzheimer's by 30 per cent, 25 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively.













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INTERVIEW

Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver on success, credibility and better nutrition

"The Only Thing I Can Do Is To **Be Honest**"

By Michael Neudecker

oday he is a global star. His cookbooks have made him the second most successful British author after *Harry Potter* creator J.K. Rowling. Jamie Oliver's career began in the kitchen of his parents' pub in a small town in the county of Essex. As a chef in the TV cooking series *The Naked Chef*, he won over an audience of millions. Thirty years on, Oliver's conviction to simple 'naked' ingredients is as fundamental to any delicious dish that still holds firm.

In addition to your cookbooks and restaurants, you are famous for your campaigns for healthy eating for children. Eighteen years ago, you were in a school in London's Greenwich district with television cameras for Jamie's School Dinners. There was criticism at first, but later 270,000 people signed a petition for better school meals.

Knowing that what I do is ultimate-

ly wanted by most people is the most important thing for me. And I don't campaign if I don't know that I'm 99 per cent right: right in terms of the facts, but also morals, law and ethics. That sounds arrogant. But I would never waste my time doing something

controversial. Nothing we've done in our campaigns so far has been particularly clever. It's always about fundamental things.

For example: in the UK, it's estimated that 5.5 million children are fed breakfast and lunch in schools every day, 180 days a year. That means about half of those children's diet throughout their childhood takes place at school. Do we have any standards or rules for this? No. We have standards for dog food, and if you don't adhere to them, you are punished. So you think: aha, the British like their dogs more than their children.

I BELIEVE IN ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN EVERYTHING, NOT JUST IN COOKING, BUT IN LIFE

In the county of Yorkshire, angry mothers tried to launch a countercampaign against you and your school meals a few years ago. Have success and wealth impacted your credibility?

To be honest, when I start a campaign, I don't really enjoy it. It's very hard, especially as I'm much shyer than people think. I like peace and quiet. But when I have to fight, I

> fight, because I think that's what people ultimately expect from me. Selling books is like a vote for me, and a real one at that. Not a meaningless 'like', not a cheap comment on social media.

Don't you worry that some people now see

you as the rich, hip Jamie Oliver with the fancy house who wants to tell people what to eat?

I didn't get rich on my own, the public made me wealthy. And I see myself as their servant in my campaigns. For me, it's a very simple, very clean, very pure relationship. I don't do these campaigns because I feel like fighting. On the contrary, I hate that. The period after the launch of *Jamie's School Dinners* was the 18 worst months of my life.

Our house was broken into, computers were hacked, I had to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds fixing it all. I have a full-time security service, including a guard dog, and of course that's incredible. But when you're playing with the Matrix ... I mean, if you expose parts of the food industry and its morals in your stories, you'll see how your career fares.

That sounds grim.

Come on, that shouldn't surprise you! You're stirring up a can of worms. It's all a blatant game in which I, too, am just a puppet. A puppet in the puppet theatre of the establishment, however you want to define the establishment, with money, status, whatever. And you are also part of the system, the media, in both a negative and positive sense. I was the a**hole, the do-gooder, the pain-in-the-ass for a year and a half back then.

When I put chili con carne on my menu, people got upset, *now he's ruining chili con carne*. *Chili con carne is now posh*, and so on. Come on! Chili con carne is never posh, I just made sure that the meat was good quality.

One day a newspaper ran a positive story, and when it was printed, everyone was suddenly nice to me. I learned then what and by whom I should feel offended and what and by whom not. The only thing I can do is to be relentless and honest – and always put the children's health first.

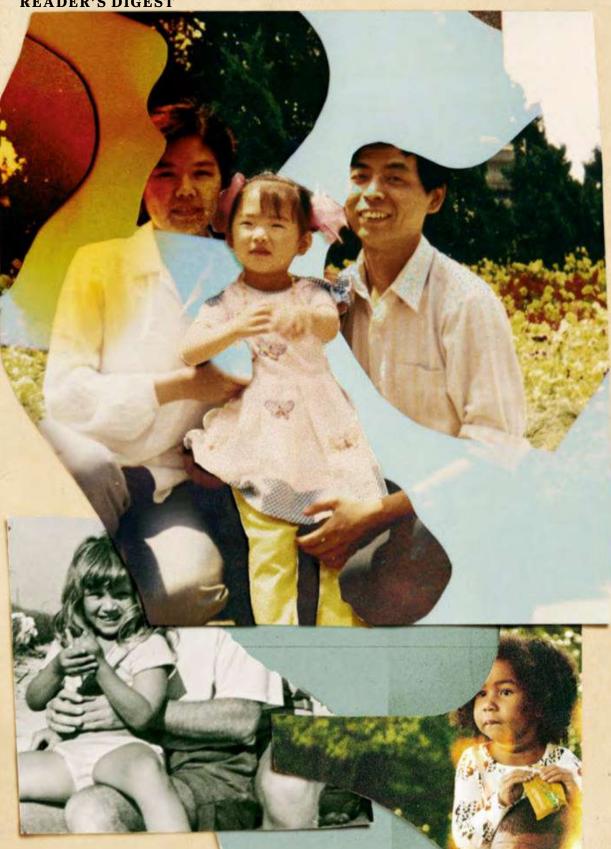
JAMIE OLIVER

Jamie Oliver's parents Trevor and Sally ran The Cricketers pub in Clavering, a small town in Essex, England. Oliver, who had struggled with dyslexia since childhood, worked there from an early age. The TV show *The Naked Chef* made Oliver globally famous in the late 1990s. Today, he is active in various campaigns for better nutrition and his cookbooks have sold almost 50 million worldwide.He is married and has five children.

If it all affects your life so much, you could just keep selling a lot of books and enjoy life.

That's right, with the right timing, the right tone and because you're hitting a certain zeitgeist, you can sell a few million books. But I'm heading for 50 million books sold. That's more than just successful, that's a very clear vote for me. It's not as if I'm a bloody genius. Perhaps the only thing I'm good at is listening. And being persistent. And yes, OK, I'm famous now, but I wouldn't advise anyone to aspire to that. Being famous is not healthy, neither for yourself nor for your family. I'm at a point now where there's no way out of fame for me. I'm stuck in my role. And if that's the case, I might as well make sure it's worth it. That what I do, I do well. 🔳

SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG (28/29 OCTOBER, 2023); © SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG





Reunited

How DNA testing is bringing families together

BY Sarah Treleaven

ILLUSTRATION BY

In 2018, Jeff Highsmith started a Facebook page on behalf of his family. The page had one objective: to find Melissa Suzanne Highsmith, Jeff's sister. At just 21 months, she had been abducted from the family home in Fort Worth, Texas, by her babysitter 51 years earlier and the family was desperate for answers.

In addition to the Facebook page, they made flyers with baby Melissa's face and age-progression photos that indicated what she might look like now, in her 50s. Remarkably, they were convinced she was still alive all these years later, and determined to be reunited with her.

They knew that more tools were now available to help locate missing persons – such as genealogy kits with DNA tests. And so, the family bought DNA DIY kits, and then uploaded the results to a public genetic genealogy research database called GEDmatch. It seemed like a shot in the dark, but it worked.

In November 2022, the Highsmith family found Melissa through a key DNA match: Melissa's daughter. By pulling the threads of DNA matches, triangulating connections on a much bigger family tree, they zeroed in on the baby snatched so long ago. The family reunion was a joyful one. Melissa described being found as "the most wonderful feeling in the world."

The story of Melissa Highsmith and her family got global news coverage. But it's only one of many cases of people being connected by DNA analysis. Two sisters – one in the United Kingdom, the other in the Netherlands – met for the first time in 75 years after learning that they have the same father. While in Canada, siblings separately adopted from Romania when they were babies were reunited in their 50s when both took a DNA test to learn more about their biological health; it turns out they had spent much of their lives within a 30-minute drive of each other.

There are countless stories. In Spain, a DNA database has been set up to identify the 'stolen babies' of the Franco dictatorship. Black Americans are using DNA tests to learn about family lineages disrupted by slavery. And stories about recent tragedies – including the devastating February earthquake in Syria and Türkiye – have included details about how DNA was being used to reunite children with their parents.

Much of the news coverage of DNA technology advances has focused on capturing a killer or identifying a long-dead victim. But there's another, equally compelling possibility: solving cold cases involving a living



victim or missing person. In other words, someone out in the world, location and identity unknown, who can be made aware of who they really are only through DNA.

Law enforcement agencies have stepped up efforts to use it, and private businesses have also hopped on board, creating databases and putting the tools for DNA collection into the hands of consumers. Crucially, there's also been a rise in citizen sleuths and investigative genetic genealogists, perhaps bolstered by our insatiable love for true crime, who are helping to bring ordinary families together again.

According to Michael Marciano, director of research for the Forensic and National Security Sciences Institute (FNSSI) at Syracuse University's College of Arts and Sciences in New York, there have been major advances in recent decades in how forensic DNA analysis is done. One has to do with sensitivity: our ability to detect lower amounts of DNA than ever before. That means researchers can now identify the DNA that's deposited from someone touching an object or a person.

It also means that mixed DNA samples (samples that include more than one person's DNA) can be disentangled. "For example, a perpetrator enters a bank, picks up the pen where you fill out your deposit slips, writes a note and gives it to the teller," says Marciano. "We know the perpetrator picked up the pen, but how many other people did? Their DNA might be on it too." Now, it's much easier to isolate the perpetrator's genetic material.

The second major development has to do with how results are analysed.

CONSUMERS ARE BUYING THE PROMISE TO UNCOVER THEIR HERITAGE AND MAKE CONNECTIONS

Software and computing power have improved sufficiently that we can create better models and more accurate statistics that help analysts interpret the samples they've collected.

But still, to get a match, researchers must be able to link a sample to a DNA profile. "Forensics is about comparisons," says Marciano. "If I have a fingerprint or DNA profile but nothing to compare it to, I can't determine whose it is."

This is where databases of DNA profiles come in. Sometimes, those profiles are derived from court-mandated samples or samples collected from crime scenes or missing persons cases. Dean Hildebrand runs a forensics lab at B.C. Institute of Technology in Canada, and for decades he has done work for the government coroner service, running DNA samples that primarily come from missing persons or their families. Some are from remains found at scenes. Other times, he runs samples from the belongings of a missing person – a blanket the person couldn't sleep without, or a pair of broken glasses left behind.

"We have an avalanche of those samples coming through all the

TWENTY YEARS AGO, WE COULDN'T SIMPLY SPIT IN A TUBE AND GET A REPORT ON OUR LINEAGE

time," says Hildebrand. Many are attached to long-cold cases. More than a decade ago, Hildebrand helped develop a missing persons database so law enforcement officials can log unidentified remains and the samples from missing persons.

But lately, DNA searching has had little to do with foul play. Companies such as Ancestry.com, 23andMe, FamilyTreeDNA and MyHeritage have sold consumers on the idea of uncovering their heritage and making connections. It's DNA analysis as a party game for the whole family.

And it's very popular. By the start of 2019, according to *MIT Technology Review*, more than 26 million people had sent their DNA to one of four commercial ancestry and health databases.

These products and their analysis are the result of technological advancement; 20 years ago, it wouldn't have been possible for you and your family to spit in tubes, put them in the mail, then receive a report on your lineage. But they also reflect a growing social phenomenon: a fascination with drawing connections and insights into the self through the use of genetic material.

With good quality DNA, these labs can capture vast amounts of information about an individual. And as databases of private ancestry or genealogy kit companies have grown, individuals now have the option of putting their DNA sample on public databases, and people can make additional connections.

GEDmatch is one such public database. It allows users to compare samples across a broader spectrum than a single site, looking for matches with overlapping genetic material. The bigger the overlap, the more likely the match is a close relative such as a parent, child, grandparent or first cousin.

The more people in the database, the more potential there is to make a connection, even if it's a far-out one. Then it's the genealogists' and the investigators' job to rebuild all that missing information for these big family trees or kinship determinations.

The work of armchair detectives, uploading samples and combing through DNA matches, can yield a mixed bag of implications, and is doing a lot of good solving cold

Reunited

cases. Yet not everyone likes the information they find, especially when there's been infidelity and things of that nature that were previously not known or discussed.

The number of public and private databases for genetic identification is growing. In China, authorities keep a database that includes the DNA of parents of missing children, and of any children found by police. The system was thrust into the spotlight in 2021 when a family was reunited with their kidnapped son after 24 years – a case that also drew attention to the devastation of living with the uncertainty of a loved one's disappearance.

Before the family was reunited, the son's father, Guo Gangtang, spent years criss-crossing the vast country determined to find his son, Guo Xinzhen, often sleeping outdoors and travelling by motorbike with flyers and a flag displaying his son's image. Without the help of DNA, he likely would never have found his son. According to Chinese media, thousands of missing children have been found thanks to the database.

The desire to connect with family members, missing or not yet discovered, has given rise to another phenomenon: Investigative Genetic Genealogy (IGG). IGG takes all the newly public DNA information being uploaded to genealogy websites and combines it with other sources of public and private data – such as Facebook profiles, marriage records



Guo Xinzhen was reunited with his family 24 years after he was abducted at age two

and even worn paper copies of family trees – to infer relationships and build out networks of people.

It's as much a social phenomenon as a technological one, and a wave of IGG investigators are now working in tandem with families and law enforcement to find missing persons and solve long-standing mysteries. One recent example is when an IGG investigator, a retired lawyer with a PhD in biology named Barbara Rae-Venter, helped police track down California's 'Golden State Killer,' who had eluded authorities for decades, by combing through DNA of the killer's distant relatives.

But IGGs are also being consulted to help families find long-lost relatives. In 2022, Christa Hastie of California decided to help her mother, Vera, age 80, solve a family mystery: what had happened to Vera's sister, Rosemarie, when she vanished from the streets of Montreal one winter's



Vera (left, at age 11) with her sister, Rosemarie (at 13)

day in 1954 at the age of 14. Over six months, Vera and Christa dedicated themselves to searching for any and all information related to Rosemarie's disappearance.

Christa already had a DNA profile on Ancestry, and then she added profiles to other major sites. She also got an investigative genealogist to help her zero in on the maternal matches. They found a DNA match close enough to be Rosemarie's grandchild, but when Christa reached out to the person, they claimed not to know Rosemarie.

Since Vera had been born in Germany, she and Christa enlisted the help of a genealogist with experience in DNA testing there. Carolin Becker put Vera's grandmother's surname into a database she had constructed,



An age-progression poster of what Rosemarie might have looked like as an older adult

and her software found nine generations of ancestors. "A whopping 34 pages of tiny text," says Christa.

Becker cross-referenced the data with matches from DNA sites, ruling out anyone who wasn't both a maternal and paternal match to Vera. And she helped Christa and Vera reach out to long-lost relatives, adding their DNA to the family tree and bolstering the search.

Ultimately, more than 900 people fleshed out that family tree, dating to the 17th century. Using DNA Painter, a website with genealogy research tools, Christa was able to re-confirm the specific match: Rosemarie's granddaughter, who had been identified before.

Christa reached out again, this time with proof, and Christa and Vera connected with Rosemarie's whole family. The truth was astonishing: Rosemarie had died years earlier, but her life hadn't ended when she disappeared all those decades ago; she went on to have children and grandchildren. So while there would be no reunion, no explanation for Rosemarie's disappearance, knowing she had not been murdered was a huge comfort to Vera.

There was another upside to their search: because the IGG helped them map out a comprehensive family tree, they were united with or introduced to relatives they now keep in touch with. Christa and Vera emerged from this exercise with an expanded sense of family.

That's exactly the promise of commercial DNA sites. And it's easy to imagine any number of positive outcomes. We now have the capability to reunite lost family members separated by war or other circumstances. We can pinpoint the ancestral homes of adoptees or others whose biological connections have been severed.

But now imagine a less rosy scenario: a family tries DNA kits as a fun activity, swabbing the inside of their cheeks while standing around the dinner table, and then eagerly awaits the results – only to have those kits show, unexpectedly, that one of the kids is not a biological match. "The more information we're collecting from our DNA, the more we open this Pandora's box of ethical considerations," says Hildebrand. "Because there can be big surprises awaiting – some of them really great, and some shocking."

The privacy implications can also be astounding. At least one consumer site (GEDmatch) now has an optin clause allowing what you upload to be searched by law enforcement and the public. Since DNA is shared between biological family members, if a relative uploads theirs to one of these sites, they are potentially implicating you, because their DNA is linked to yours. So anyone who wants to, say, anonymously donate sperm or give up a baby for adoption could one day be identified, even if they never provide their own DNA sample.

"I think it's a very powerful thing," says Hildebrand, adding that if only around ten per cent of people add their DNA samples into one of these public or private databases, we would be able to identify every human on Earth. And that comes with benefits and drawbacks.

"As people get more into this, we'll be closer to the point where you pretty much can't hide," he says. "It'll be possible to link every family in the world."

For the Highsmith family, who were happily reunited in Texas after decades apart, DNA was the link. "Our finding Melissa was purely because of DNA, not because of any police involvement, podcast or our family's own private investigations," notes one Facebook update. "DNA WINS THIS SEARCH!" INSPIRATION

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MY DAY OF NO PLASTIC

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Is that even possible? One man went to extremes to find out.

MONDICICE (MA

BY *A.J. Jacobs* FROM **THE NEW YORK TIMES**

34 JUNE/JULY 2024

n the morning of the day I had decided to go without using plastic products – or even touching plastic – I opened my eyes and put my bare feet on the carpet, which is made of nylon, a type of plastic. I was roughly ten seconds into my experiment and I had already committed a violation.

Since its invention more than a century ago, plastic has crept into every aspect of our lives. It has made possible thousands of modern conveniences, but it has come with downsides, especially for the environment. In a 24-hour experiment, I tried to live without it altogether in an effort to see what plastic stuff we can't do without and what we may be able to give up.

At the start of my no-plastic day, I made my way towards the bathroom, only to stop myself before I went in. "Could you open the door for me?" I asked my wife, Julie. "The doorknob has a plastic coating."

She opened it for me, letting out a *this is going to be a long day* sigh.

My morning hygiene routine needed a total revamp, which had required detailed research and preparations before my experiment. I could not use my regular toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo or liquid soap, all of which were encased in plastic or made of plastic. Fortunately, there is a huge industry of plastic-free products targeted at eco-conscious consumers, and I had bought an array of them, a haul that included a bamboo toothbrush with bristles made of wild boar hair. Instead of toothpaste, I had a jar of grey mint-charcoal toothpaste pellets. I popped one in, chewed it, sipped water and brushed. It was nice and minty, although the ash-coloured spit was unsettling.

I liked my shampoo bar, which is just what it sounds like. Mine was scented pink grapefruit and vanilla, and it lathered up well. According to shampoo bar advocates, it is also cheaper than bottled shampoo on a per-wash basis (one bar can last 80 showers), which is good, because the plastic-free life can be expensive.

Taking a blogger's advice, I mixed a DIY deodorant out of tea tree oil and baking soda. It left me smelling a little like a medieval cathedral, but in a good way. Making your own stuff is another way to avoid plastic, but it requires another luxury: free time.

Before I was done in the bathroom, I had broken the rules a second time, by using the toilet.

Getting dressed was also a challenge, given that so many clothing items include plastic. I had ordered a pair of woollen pants that promised to be plastic free, but they had not arrived. In their stead, I chose a pair of old Banana Republic chinos. The tag said '100% cotton', but when I checked the day before with a very helpful Banana Republic public relations representative, the full story turned out to be a little more complicated. The main fabric



is indeed 100 per cent cotton, but there was plastic lurking in the zipper tape, internal waistband, woven label, pocketing and threads, the representative told me. I cut my thumb trying to slice off the black brand label with a metal knife. Instead of a Band-Aid – yes, plastic – I used some gummed paper tape to stop the bleeding.

Happily, my underwear – blue boxers from Cottonique made of 100 per cent organic cotton with a cotton drawstring in place of the elastic (which is often plastic) waistband – did not represent a plastic violation. I had found this item via an internet list of '14 Hot & Sustainable Underwear Brands for Men'.

For my upper body, I lucked out. Our friend Kristen had knitted my wife a sweater for a birthday present. It was 100 per cent merino wool.

"Could I borrow Kristen's sweater for the day?" I asked Julie.

"You're going to stretch it out," Julie said.

"It's for planet Earth," I reminded her.

The world produces about 400 million metric tonnes of plastic waste each year, according to a UN report. About half the plastic we encounter in daily life is tossed out after a single use.

The report noted that "we have become addicted to single-use plastic

products – with severe environmental, social, economic and health consequences."

I'm one of the addicts. I'd estimate that I toss about 800 plastic items in the garbage each year – takeaway containers, pens, cups, packages with foam inside and more.

Before my Day of No Plastic, I immersed myself in a number of no-plastic books, videos and podcasts. One of the books, Life Without Plastic: The Practical Step-by-Step Guide to Avoiding Plastic to Keep Your Family and the Planet Healthy by Jay Sinha and Chantal Plamondon, came from Amazon wrapped in clear plastic, like a slice of cheese. I mentioned this to Jay Sinha, and he promised to look into it. I also called Gabby Salazar, a social scientist who studies what motivates people to support environmental causes, and asked for her advice.

"It might be better to start small," she said. "Start by creating a single habit, like always carrying a stainless-steel water bottle. After you've got that down, you start another habit, like taking produce bags to the supermarket. You build up gradually. That's how you make real change. Otherwise, you'll just be overwhelmed."

"Maybe being overwhelmed will bring some sort of clarity?" I said.

"That'd be nice," Salazar said. Admittedly, living completely without plastic is probably an absurd idea.

Despite its faults, plastic is a crucial ingredient in medical equipment, smoke alarms and helmets. There's truth to the plastics industry's catchphrase from the 1990s: "Plastics make it possible."

In many cases, plastic can help the environment: plastic plane parts are lighter than metal ones, which means less fuel and lower carbon dioxide emissions. Solar panels and wind turbines have plastic parts. That said, the world is overloaded with the stuff, especially the disposable forms. The Earth Policy Institute estimates that people go through one trillion single-use plastic bags each year.

The crisis was a long time coming. There's some debate over when plastic entered the world, but many date it to 1855, when a British metallurgist, Alexander Parkes, patented a thermoplastic material as a waterproof coating for fabrics. He called the substance Parkesine. Over the decades, labs across the world birthed other types, all with a similar chemistry: they are polymer chains, and most are made from petroleum or natural gas. Thanks to chemical additives, plastics vary wildly. They can be opaque or transparent, foamy or hard, stretchy or brittle. They are known by many names, including polyester and Styrofoam, and abbreviations like PVC and PET.

Plastic manufacturing ramped up for World War II and was crucial to the war effort, providing nylon parachutes and Plexiglas aircraft windows. That was followed by a post-war boom, said Susan Freinkel, author of *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*, a book on the history and science of plastic. "Plastic went into things like Formica counters, refrigerator liners, car parts, clothing, shoes, just all sorts of stuff that was designed to be used for a while," she said.

Then things took a turn.

"Where we really started to get into trouble is when it started going into single-use stuff," Freinkel said. "I call it prefab litter."

The outpouring of straws, cups, bags and other ephemera has led to disastrous consequences for the environment. According to a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts, more than 11 million metric tons of plastic enter oceans each year, leaching into the water, disrupting the food chain and choking marine life. Close to 20 per cent of plastic waste gets burned, releasing CO_2 into the air, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which also reports that only nine per cent

of plastics are recycled. Some aren't economical to recycle, and other types degrade in quality when they are.

Plastic may also harm our health. Certain plastic additives, such as BPA and phthalates, may disrupt the endocrine system in humans, according to the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Worrying effects may include behavioural problems and lower testosterone levels in boys, and preterm births and lower thyroid hormone levels for women.

"Solving this plastic problem can't fall entirely on the shoulders of consumers," Salazar told me. "We need to work on it on all fronts."

Early in my no-plastic day, everything looked menacing, as if it might be harbouring hidden polymers. Anything I could use for cooking was off-limits – the toaster, the oven, the microwave. Even leftovers were a nogo. My son waved a plastic bag filled with French toast. "You want some of this?" Yes, I did.

Instead, I decided to go foraging for raw food items.

I left my apartment using the stairs, rather than the lift with its plastic buttons, and walked to a health food store nearby. I brought along shopping bags of varying sizes, all of them cotton. I also had two glass containers.

At the store, I filled up one of my bags with apples and oranges. Each had a sticker. Another likely violation, but I ignored it. At the bulk bins, I scooped walnuts and oats into my glass containers using a steel ladle I had brought from home. The bins themselves were plastic, which I ignored, because I was hungry.

I went to the cashier. It was time to pay, which was a problem. Credit cards were out. So was Apple Pay, as smartphones contain plastic. And although US paper currency is made mainly of cotton and linen, each bill likely contains synthetic fibres, and the higher denominations have a security thread made of plastic to prevent counterfeiting. To be safe, I had brought along a cotton sack full of coins that I had withdrawn from the bank and my kids' piggy banks.

At the checkout counter, I started stacking coins as quickly as I could between nervous glances at the customers behind me.

"I'm really sorry this is taking so long," I said.

"That's OK," the cashier said. "I meditate every morning so I can deal with turmoil like this."

He added that he appreciated my commitment to the environment. It was the first positive feedback I'd received. I counted out \$19.02 – exact change! – and went home to eat my breakfast: nuts and oranges on a metal tray, which I balanced on my lap.

A couple of hours later, in search of a plastic-free lunch, I walked to a sandwich and salad shop, toting my rectangular glass dish and bamboo

My Day Of No Plastic



cutlery. "Can you make the salad in this glass container?" I asked.

"One minute please," the man behind the counter said tersely.

He called over a manager, who said OK. Victory! But the manager then rejected my follow-up request to use my steel scooper.

After lunch, I headed to the park, figuring that this was a spot where I could relax in a plastic-free environment. I took the subway there, which scored me more violations, since the trains themselves have plastic parts and you need a MetroCard or smartphone to get through the turnstiles.

At least I didn't sit in one of those plastic orange seats. I brought my own: an unpainted fold-up chair, hard and austere. It's what I had been using at the apartment to avoid the plastic-tainted chairs and couches. I plopped my chair down near a pole in the middle of the carriage. The other passengers were so buried in their phones that the sight of a man on a wooden chair didn't faze them.

Walking through the park, I spotted dental floss picks, a black plastic knife and a plastic bag.

Back home, I recorded some of my impressions. I wrote on paper with an unpainted cedar pencil from a Zero-Waste Pencil Tin Set (regular pencils contain plastic-filled yellow paint). After a while, I went to get a drink of water, which brings up perhaps the most pervasive foe of all: microplastics. These tiny particles are everywhere – in the water we drink, in the air we breathe, in the oceans. They come from, among other things, degraded plastic litter.

Are they harmful to us? I talked with several scientists, and the general answer I got was "We don't know yet". But those who are extra cautious can use products that promise to filter microplastics from water and air.

I had bought a jug by LifeStraw that contains a membrane microfilter. Of course the jug itself had plastic parts, so I couldn't use it on the Big Day. Instead, the night before, I spent some time at the sink filtering water and filling up jars. Our kitchen looked as though it was ready for the apocalypse. The water tasted particularly pure, which I'm guessing was some sort of a placebo effect.

I wrote for a while. Then I sat there in my wooden chair. Phone-less. Internet-less. Julie took some pity on me and offered to play a game of cards. I shook my head.

"Plastic coating," I said.

At about 9pm, I took our dog for her nightly walk. I was using a 100 per cent cotton leash I had bought online. I had



ditched the poop bags – even the sustainable ones I'd found were made with recycled or plant-based plastic. Instead, I carried a metal spatula. Thankfully, I didn't have to use it.

At 10.30pm, exhausted, I lay down on my makeshift bed - cotton sheets on the wood floor, since my

mattress and pillows are plasticky.

I woke up the next morning glad to have survived my ordeal and to be reunited with my phone – but also with a feeling of defeat.

By my count, on my day of no plastic, I had made 164 violations. As Salazar had predicted, I felt overwhelmed. And also uncertain. Is it a good idea to use boar's hair toothbrushes, tea tree deodorant and microplastic-filtering devices, or does the trouble of using those things make everyone so bonkers that they actually end up damaging the cause?

I called Salazar for a pep talk. "You can drive yourself crazy," she said. "But it's not about perfection, it's about progress." Believe it or not,



My Day Of No Plastic

individual behaviour matters. It adds up. "Remember," she continued, "it's not about plastic being the enemy. It's about single-use as the enemy. It's the culture of using something once and throwing it away."

I thought back to something that the author Susan Freinkel had told me: "I'm not an absolutist at all. If you came into my

kitchen, you would be like, 'You wrote this book and look at how you live!'" Freinkel does make an effort, she said. She avoids single-use bags, cups and packaging, among other things. I pledge to try, even after my not wholly successful attempt at a one-day ban.

I'll start with small things, building up habits. I liked the shampoo bar. And I can take produce bags to the supermarket. I'll start packing my steel water bottle and bamboo cutlery. And from there, who knows?

And I'll proudly wear the 'Keep the Sea Plastic Free' T-shirt I bought in the days leading up to the experiment. It's just ten per cent polyester.

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A Very Short Amount

Often used as a phrase, 'in a jiffy' can be a real measurement of time. In computer animation, 1/100th of a second is a jiffy. MATHNASIUM.COM



Seeing The Funny Side



"Much better! I swapped our bowls so they match the shape of our faces."

Swept Along

I was waiting for my wife at the checkout of a supermarket when I noticed that someone had left behind their broom.

When no one came to claim it, I went outside to search for a couple of women I remembered seeing in the queue while I stood there. I spotted them getting into their car and hurried over.

"By any chance, did you leave your broom inside?" I asked one of the women.

She smiled and replied, "No, I came by car."

STEVE HOLLANDS

Making The Rules

My granddaughter was playing a board game with her cousins and was clearly not playing by the rules. Her dad told her off and said she was cheating.

"I am not cheating, Dad," she replied indignantly. "I am just helping myself win." JANE HARDEN

Technical Difficulties

No one is more panicked than me when I call customer service with a complex issue and the automated rep asks me to describe what I'm calling about "in a few words".

@COPYMAMA

Life's Like That

Slip Of The Tongue

My front doorbell rang late one night. This made me a bit nervous, so I texted my neighbour to see if someone had also knocked on their door. It was only later that I realised a mistake in my text: I'd also told my neighbour I was 'licking' my back patio door. I have since reiterated that I don't do that. They were relieved. AUDREY BEATTY

Stop And Go

My husband and I were a few hours into a road trip when I asked him to pull over so I could use a restroom. He nodded and drove on, passing potential pit stops at petrol stations and fast-food places. After half an hour, I said with urgency, "I really have to go!"

Looking puzzled, he asked, "Still?" LINDA FINK

Falling Short Of The Goal

My football crazy brother came to visit me with his three-year-old son. After watching a match on the TV, my nephew confessed, much to the delight of my brother, that he would like to be a football player when he grows up, after all.

On the way to my house, my brother had told him to, "Tell Aunty Denise what you would like to be when you grow up."

My nephew had replied, "A pink cat."

DENISE BURGESS



THE GREAT TWEET-OFF: FASHION-FAILS EDITION Our tweeters recommend checking

the mirror before leaving home.

I once wore a silver jacket to college and turned up late for class. I apologised and the lecturer said it was OK, then waited until I was halfway across the class before saying: "Trouble with the spaceship again, was it?" @MRWEIR

I wore an orange rain poncho to an outdoor show during a storm. A girl who was on the phone trying to find her friends said: "I'm standing next to someone who looks like a traffic cone." @BILLYANANIA

During my goth days and dressed all in black, I overhead an elderly lady in a village shop say, "Bless, she must have lost someone dear to be in constant mourning like that." @EILEENLEFT5

Going on a date and dressed in a nice pair of jeans and smart jumper, I had an Uber driver tell me I looked like an undercover policeman. @COMEDYSAVAGE

I wore a camouflage T-shirt once. The response in the pub was "Oooooh, it's a floating head."

@DAMIENSREENAN

HEALTH

Conquer Your Heartburn

A variety of new treatments could finally mean relief from acid reflux

BY *Lisa Fields* illustrations by **antoine doré**



In 2019, after enduring three years of headaches and frequent bouts of heartburn,

Murali Bharadwaj learned what sparked his discomfort: gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD, or GERD), a chronic condition caused by stomach acid repeatedly rising into his oesophagus. Whenever Bharadwaj drank beer or ate late in the evening, he experienced symptoms.

"The acid reflux meant I couldn't focus on the present moment, in meetings, playing sport or having social drinks with my friends," says the 41 year old. "My thoughts always went to the burning sensation in my throat."

He began taking medication called proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) to lower the acidity in his stomach. It helped, but only a little. In 2021, his doctor suggested a procedure to strengthen his lower oesophageal sphincter, the valve between the stomach and oesophagus. Bharadwaj was sceptical, but when he learned that transoral incisionless fundoplication (TIF) didn't involve invasive surgery – it's performed endoscopically through the mouth and oesophagus – he decided to try it.

In TIF, a small portion of the upper stomach is folded over the bottom of

the oesophagus and stapled in place. After the procedure, Bharadwaj says his quality of life improved, and he no longer needed to take PPIs as often.

"I used to take them once per day, minimum, sometimes twice," he says. "Since the procedure, it's been just three times per week. I get acid reflux sometimes, but it's way more manageable – less frequent and less intense."

GASTRO-OESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE (also known as chronic acid reflux) affects up to 25 per cent of Europeans, around 12 per cent of Australians and up to eight per cent of people in East Asia, according to a 2018 American study. When stomach acid repeatedly enters the oesophagus, it can change the delicate tissue, which over time can lead to bleeding or ulcers. Complications may include narrowing of the passage due to repeated healing and scar formation, which can make swallowing difficult, or Barrett's oesophagus - permanent changes in the lower oesophagus lining that, in very rare cases, can lead to cancer.

Many people experience occasional acid reflux, perhaps after

Conquer Your Heartburn

overindulging in alcohol or certain foods. The vast majority of people will never see a doctor about it, says Dr Arjan Bredenoord, gastroenterologist at University Medical Centres Amsterdam. And that's OK, because "bothersome symptoms can be managed with lifestyle adjustments or over-the-counter antacids," he says.

But GORD is different. It happens when people experience heartburn, regurgitation, chronic cough, hoarseness or chest pain three or more times a week. People with GORD often also have a hiatal hernia – when part of the upper stomach pokes through the diaphragm muscle in the chest, making it easier for stomach contents to enter the oesophagus.

"The symptoms of GORD are typically heartburn and regurgitation," says Dr Edoardo Savarino, assistant professor of gastroenterology at the University of Padua in Italy. "So when you have these two symptoms, it's likely that you have reflux disease."

Doctors may diagnose GORD after performing an upper endoscopy to examine the oesophagus. If it looks normal, other tests may be offered, including catheter-based pH-impedance monitoring or a wireless pH test. Proper diagnosis is necessary because if it isn't GORD, treatments for GORD won't help (for example, if the problem is actually dyspepsia, commonly known as indigestion; an ulcer; or gastroparesis, when the stomach empties into the small intestine too slowly).

Ten per cent of GORD sufferers will develop Barrett's oesophagus. "With



Barrett's, you need to get an endoscopy every two or three years to see if there are any changes, because you can treat it early," says Dr Rami Sweis, a gastroenterologist with University College Hospital in London who advises the non-profit Guts UK. If any pre-cancer or cancer is detected, he says, treatment can be provided through the endoscope.

When doctors diagnose GORD, they usually prescribe PPIs, medication that suppresses acid production within the stomach. H2 blockers, another type of acid suppressor, are prescribed less often because they are less effective.

"In reflux, gastric acid comes up into the oesophagus and causes symptoms or lesions," says Dr Jan Tack, gastrointestinal (GI) disorders researcher at KU Leuven in Belgium. "So controlling acid makes a big difference for the majority of patients, and apparently does not have a negative effect on the digestive process."

Doctors also recommend lifestyle changes to discourage stomach acid from entering the oesophagus. They include refraining from eating between two and four hours before bedtime, sleeping with your head elevated (wedge pillows are specially designed to relieve GORD; they go underneath your regular pillow), avoiding tight-fitting clothing and



losing weight. "In perhaps 75 per cent of patients with reflux, treatment with lifestyle changes plus medication are absolutely successful," says Dr Sebastian Schoppmann, head of the upper GI department at Medical University of Vienna.

Some GORD patients seek other kinds of treatment because medication doesn't improve their symptoms well enough, as with Bharadwaj, or it has unwanted side effects.

The good news for patients is that the number of GORD treatments has grown in recent years. "The reason there are more treatment choices is that no one thing is perfect for everyone," says Dr Paul Goldsmith, an upper GI surgeon at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust in the UK.

Fundoplication

Fundoplication is the most common treatment to strengthen the valve between the oesophagus and stomach.

FOODS THAT TRIGGER REFLUX

For many people, certain foods or drinks cause reflux, especially acidic and fried foods, caffeine, carbonated beverages and alcohol. Common 'trigger foods' are pizza, sausages, cheese, tomatoes, bacon, citrus fruits, chocolate, peppermint and anything containing chilli or black pepper.

It is performed laparoscopically, meaning that open surgery (when one large incision is made) can usually be avoided. The surgeon makes several small incisions in the abdomen and inserts the tools and a camera. The hiatal hernia is corrected by returning the upper stomach to its place below the diaphragm. Next, the uppermost portion of the stomach is wrapped around the valve, which strengthens its ability to stay closed – reducing the risk of stomach acid rising into the oesophagus.

In the past, surgeons mostly performed a 360-degree stomach wrap, but that was often too tight; as a result food didn't move down the oesophagus as easily, and some patients had difficulty belching or vomiting. Some also had trouble swallowing Avoiding your triggers may minimise symptoms. How much you eat, and when, may also impact your symptoms, according to Dr Radu Tutuian of the Civic Hospital Solothurn in Switzerland.

Having smaller meals and not eating late in the evening may ease symptoms.

food. Today, surgeons can perform one of several partial wraps, such as a 270 or 180 degrees, which improve GORD symptoms without causing more discomfort.

Dr Radu Tutuian, chief of gastroenterology at Civic Hospital Solothurn in Switzerland, recalls treating a man in his 60s with heartburn, regurgitation and a chronic cough. After he underwent fundoplication, most of his GORD symptoms faded, although he had trouble swallowing and was not able to eat full meals during recovery.

"For a couple of weeks he was very uncomfortable," Dr Tutuian says. "But he said, 'I don't want to go back to how I was before, to my reflux and the cough.' He felt better and no longer needed to take PPIs. So his goals were met."

Transoral Incisionless Fundoplication (TIF)

Appropriate for people with small hiatal hernias, TIF is a version of fundoplication that surgeons perform endoscopically, placing a camera and tools through the mouth and oesophagus to the upper stomach. A barrier is created at the lower oesophageal sphincter by folding a portion of the upper stomach over itself and stapling it in place.

Dr Tack was involved in a study of the treatment that was published in 2015 in the journal *Alimentary Pharmacology and Therapeutics*. He says 59 per cent of patients who had TIF did not experience GORD symptoms for six months afterwards (the end point of the study) and were able to stop taking PPI medication.

LINX Device

A band of magnetic titanium beads is placed around the lower oesophageal sphincter during this laparoscopic procedure. The magnetic force among the beads helps to tighten the valve, discouraging stomach acid from entering the oesophagus. When you eat, the force of swallowing moves the beads apart, and food passes easily from oesophagus to stomach.

Whereas most other GORD procedures are irreversible, the LINX device can later be removed if needed. And a hiatal hernia can be repaired during the procedure. Years ago, there were problems with the device, as the beads migrated from where they were implanted. But newer versions of the device fit better and are lighter, so that risk is substantially reduced.

Stretta

For this endoscopic procedure, surgeons insert a camera and catheter via the mouth and oesophagus to deliver radiofrequency energy to the oesophageal wall near the stomach opening.

"The idea is that, over time, it strengthens the sphincter muscle," Dr Tack says. "There is evidence, based on measurements of pressure in the sphincter, that it has an anti-reflux effect. However, it is not a huge effect and does not match the efficacy of fundoplication."

RefluxStop

During this laparoscopic procedure, which is done under general anaesthetic, surgeons repair a hiatal hernia, then place a spherical device the size of a ping-pong ball into the upper stomach – the area that may contribute to the reflux – to bulk it up. The procedure is reversible.

"It restores our anatomy to the way it was before we were suffering from reflux," Dr Goldsmith says.

RefluxStop is the newest GORD treatment, and researchers have only two to three years' worth of safety data. It may appeal to people who worry that tightening the lower

Conquer Your Heartburn

oesophageal sphincter could cause swallowing difficulties.

The benefits of GORD therapies don't necessarily last forever. "This is soft tissue that moves," Dr Sweis says, for example, when you swallow. So, the new structure might change over time.

After five or ten years, some patients need to go back to PPIs if their symptoms return. "Therapy for your GORD does not necessarily guarantee that you're going to have 30 years of proton-pump-inhibitor-free life," says Dr Ian Gralnek, chief of gastroenterology at Emek Medical Centre in Afula, Israel, and president of the European Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy. Within a few years, doctors may be able to prescribe potassium-competitive acid blockers (P-CABs) to treat GORD. The medication, which has been approved in Japan and Korea, is more effective than PPIs at neutralising stomach acid. "The suppression of the gastric acidity is longer," Dr Savarino says. "With PPIs, you have to take them one hour before a meal. But with P-CABs, you can take them even if you have just eaten."

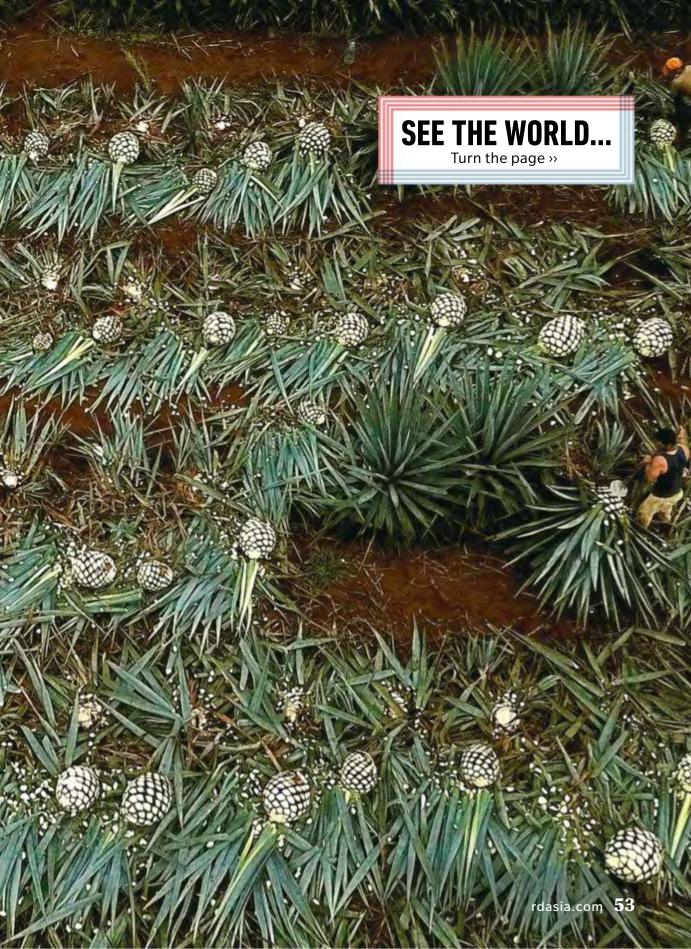
Another possible therapy which may alleviate symptoms is strengthening the oesophageal lining, making it less sensitive. "This is an avenue of further research," Dr Tack says.

Pet Theory

Scientists believe they have discovered why dogs wag their tails, a question that has long fascinated humans. A team of animal experts, including from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics and the University of Rome, suggests that humans may have "deliberately bred dogs that wag their tails because we find the rhythm of it soothing and enjoyable". They looked at the existing research on tail-wagging and found dogs do it much more than other canines, such as wolves. In the wild, the tail has a practical function as it helps swat away pests as well as improving balance, but dogs wag their tail far more than other species to which they are closely related. The researchers suggest this could be down to two reasons, either tailwagging is an inadvertent side effect of humans breeding dogs that are docile and friendly; or humans have intentionally bred dogs that wag their tails because we find the rhythm of it soothing. Humans are good at picking up rhythms, the scientists explain, and they can trigger parts of the brain related to enjoyment. NEWS.YAHOO.COM

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...DIFFERENTLY

Giant Pineapples?

When pruned, the blue agave looks like a giant pineapple. But, from a botanical point of view, the blue agave belongs to the asparagus family. And like the vegetable asparagus, lots of people enjoy it. However, the blue agave is consumed in liquid form – tequila is distilled from it. It takes ten to eight years for the plants to be harvested, as seen here on a plantation in Jalisco, Mexico – the country's centre for agave cultivation.

PHOTOS: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES/ULISES RUIZ

rdasia.com 55



QUOTABLE QUOTES

I THINK OUR *First Heroes* WITH WHOM *We Discover Flaws* ARE *Our Parents*.

TAIKA WAITITI, FILM DIRECTOR

You should never apologise for who you are and what makes up your world and your life. You should always ask for help when you need it. DONNA HAY, FOOD EDITOR



No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.

HERACLITUS, GREEK PHILOSOPHER





RICHARD FORD, AUTHOR

TONI COLLETTE, ACTOR

Too much joy, I swear, is lost in our desperation to keep it.

OCEAN VUONG, POET



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The Best Medicine



"My wife ordered iced coffee!"

Rewording Word Of The Day

The Merriam-Webster dictionary produces a word of the day, and the folks at Fark helpfully show us how to use it in a sentence:

M-W word of the day: gainsay Helpful Fark: "I'm going to eat way too much over the holidays and gainsay five to ten kilograms."

M-W word: abandon

Helpful Fark: "Paul McCartney and Wings' biggest hit was abandon the run."

M-W word: countenance

Helpful Fark: "We were curious how many insects were in the colony, so we spent the whole day countenance."

Dinner Guest

When asked by *The New York Times Book Review* which writer he'd invite to a dinner party, comedian John Cleese answered, "Mark Twain... because he said, 'Wagner's music is much better than it sounds,' which I think is the greatest joke ever made."

Laughter

Bragging Rights

Don't want to brag, but at school I was voted most likely to cling on to past achievements.

CRAIG DEELEY

Licence To Chill

It's -35°C in Alaska, and Ned is drinking at his local bar.

"Ned," says the bartender, "you owe me quite a bit on your tab."

"Sorry," says Ned, "I'm flat broke."

"That's OK. I'll just write your name and the amount you owe right here on the wall."

"But I don't want my friends to see that."

"They won't," says the bartender. "I'm going to hang your parka over it until it's paid."

SUBMITTED BY ERIK FREEMAN

Slow Progress

There were three men in suits in my coffee shop. One of them said, "My personal idea of progress is moving things forward." Which is the definition of the word.

@STILLORANGED

Direct Answer

The hotel receptionist asked me, "How do you find your room?" I thought, *Is this a test*? But I replied anyway: "Go up to the third floor, turn right, and it's the second door in the hallway." I only realised later that that's not what she meant.

SUBMITTED BY AN XIU XIE

BAG SOME LAUGHS

As we pun our way through the shopping aisles.

Customer: May I try on that dress in the window, please? Assistant: No, ma'am. You'll have to use the fitting room like everyone else.

While I was shopping, I saw an ad in a window. It said, "Television for \$1, volume stuck on full." There's no way I can turn that down.

My wife asked me to put tomato sauce on the shopping list. Now I can't read anything.

I don't like how shopping centres are so similar. You see one, you've seen a mall.

What do you call security guards working outside Samsung shops? Guardians of the Galaxy.

So my wife wondered how the pancakes got into our shopping trolley. I said maybe they crêped in there.

SOURCES: WWW.SCARYMOMMY.COM, LAFFGAFF.COM

Nutrition Myths

And what health experts want you to know instead

BY Sophie Egan FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES

60 JUNE/JULY 2024

MYTH 1: Fresh fruit and vegetables are healthier than canned, frozen or dried varieties.

HFAITH

Despite the enduring belief that 'fresh is best', research has found that frozen, canned and dried fruit and vegetables can be just as nutritious as fresh.

"They can also be a money saver and an easy way to make sure there are always fruit and vegetables available at home," says Sara Bleich, a professor of public health policy at Harvard University.

One caveat: some canned, frozen and dried varieties contain added sugar, saturated fat and sodium, so be sure to read nutrition labels, especially on prepared foods. Choose the ones that keep those ingredients to a minimum.

MYTH 2: All fat is bad.

When studies published in the late 1940s found correlations between high-fat diets and high levels of cholesterol, experts reasoned that if you reduced the amount of total fats in your diet, your risk for heart disease would go down. The assumption was that a low-fat diet could benefit everyone, even though there was no solid evidence that doing so would prevent heart disease, obesity and other health issues.

As a result, says Dr Vijaya Surampudi, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles, Center for Human Nutrition, many people – and food manufacturers – replaced kilojoules from fat with kilojoules from refined carbohydrates such as white flour and added sugar.

"Instead of this helping us stay slim, rates of overweight and obese people went up significantly," she says.

In reality, not all fats are bad.

While certain types, including trans fats, can increase your risk for heart disease or stroke, healthy fats help reduce your risk. Examples of those include monounsaturated fats (olive oil, avocados, some nuts and seeds) and polyunsaturated fats (sunflower oil, fish, flaxseed).

Good fats also supply energy, produce important hormones, support cell function and aid in the absorption of some nutrients.

If you see a product labelled 'fatfree', don't assume it is healthy, Dr Surampudi says. Prioritise products with simple ingredients and no added sugar.

MYTH 3: 'Kilojoules in, kilojoules out' is the most important factor for maintaining weight.

It's true that if you consume more kilojoules than you burn, you will probably gain weight. And if you burn more kilojoules than you consume, you will probably lose weight – at least for the short term.

But research does not suggest that eating more will result in becoming overweight or obese.

Rather, it's the types of food we eat that may be the long-term drivers of those conditions, says Dr Dariush Mozaffarian, a professor of nutrition and medicine at Tufts University in Massachusetts. Ultraprocessed food – such as refined starchy snacks, cereals, crackers, energy bars, baked goods, fizzy drinks and sweets – can lead to weight gain. That's because they are rapidly digested and flood the bloodstream with glucose, fructose and amino acids, which the liver converts to fat.

The best way to maintain a healthy weight is to make the shift from counting kilojoules to prioritising healthy eating overall. Go for quality over quantity.

MYTH 4: People with type 2 diabetes shouldn't eat fruit.

While fruit juice can raise blood sugar levels because of its high sugar and low fibre content, research has found this isn't the case with whole fruit. Some studies show, for instance, that those who

10 Nutrition Myths

consume a serving of whole fruit per day (particularly blueberries, grapes and apples) have a lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

And other research suggests that if you already have type 2 diabetes, eating whole fruit can help control your blood sugar.

It's time to bust the myth, says Linda Shiue, director of culinary medicine and lifestyle medicine at Kaiser Permanente San Francisco. She says that everyone – including those with type 2 diabetes – can really benefit from fruit's health-promoting vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fibre.

MYTH 5: Plant beverages are healthier than dairy milk.

Kathleen Merrigan, professor of sustainable food systems at Arizona State University disagrees. She says that while the nutrition of plantbased beverages can vary, many have more added ingredients – such as sodium and added sugar, which can contribute to poor health – than cow's milk.

Consider protein: typically, cow's milk has about eight grams of protein per 250 millilitres, whereas an almond beverage typically has one or two grams in the same amount. Oat beverages usually have around two or three grams.

MYTH 6: Potatoes are bad for you.

Potatoes have been vilified because of their high glycaemic index, which means they contain rapidly digestible carbohydrates that can spike your blood sugar. However, potatoes can actually be beneficial for health, says Daphene Altema-Johnson, a programme officer of food communities and public health at Johns Hopkins University.

Potatoes are rich in vitamin C, potassium, fibre and other nutrients, especially when consumed with the skin on. They are also inexpensive and available year-round. The healthiest ways to prepare them include baking and boiling.

MYTH 7: Never feed peanut products to little kids.

For years, experts told new parents that the best way to prevent their children from developing food allergies was to avoid feeding them common allergenic foods, such as peanuts or eggs, during their first few years of life. But now, allergy experts say, it's better to introduce peanut products early on.

After checking with your doctor to confirm your baby isn't at risk of having severe eczema or a potential food allergy, you can start introducing peanut products (such as peanut powders or watered-down peanut butter, but not whole peanuts) when they



are four to six months old, around the time your baby is ready for solids.

Start with ten millilitres of smooth peanut butter mixed with water, breast milk or formula, two to three times a week, says Ruchi Gupta, director of the Center for Food Allergy & Asthma Research at Northwestern University in Illinois. "It's also important to feed your baby a diverse diet in their first year to prevent food allergies," Dr Gupta says.

MYTH 8: The protein in plants is incomplete.

"'Where do you get your protein?' is the most common question vegetarians are asked," says Christopher Gardner, a nutrition scientist and professor of medicine at Stanford University in California. "The myth is that plants are completely missing some amino acids," also known as the building blocks of proteins, he adds. But in reality, all plant-based foods contain all 20 amino acids, including the nine essential ones. The difference is that the proportion isn't as ideal as the proportion of amino acids in animal-based foods.

So to get an adequate mix, you simply need to eat a variety of plantbased foods – such as beans, grains and nuts – through the day, and eat enough total protein.

"It's easier than most people think," Dr Gardner says.

10 Nutrition Myths



MYTH 9: Eating soy can increase breast cancer risk.

High doses of plant oestrogens in soy, called isoflavones, have been found to stimulate breast tumour cell growth in animal studies.

"However, this relationship has not been substantiated in human studies," says Frank B. Hu, chair of the department of nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. So far, the science does not indicate a link between soy and breast cancer risk in humans. Instead, consuming soybased foods and drinks – including tofu, edamame, miso and soy milk – may even have a protective effect towards breast cancer risk and survival.

"Soy foods are also a powerhouse of beneficial nutrients related to reduced heart disease risk, such as high-quality protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals," Professor Hu says.

MYTH 10: The best nutrition advice keeps changing.

Not true, says Marion Nestle, a professor emerita of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University. In the 1950s, she explains, the first dietary recommendations for prevention of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and other ailments advised balancing kilojoules and minimising foods high in saturated fat, salt and sugar. That is still the case today.

Yes, science evolves, but the bottom-line guidance remains consistent. As famed author Michael Pollan put it: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." That advice leaves plenty of room for eating foods you love.

THE NEW YORK TIMES (JAN. 19, 2023), © 2023 BY NEW YORK TIMES COMPANY.

Question For Grammar Nerds

"Why is it that writers write and painters paint, but fingers don't fing? Why don't grocers groce, and why don't hammers ham?" AUTHOR UNKNOWN; BABBEL.COM



The View From

These benches invite you to linger – and offer magnificent perspectives

BY Doris Kochanek

rdasia.com $\mathbf{67}$

▲ Silence in the hustle and bustle.

The Taj Mahal in Agra, India, is a crowdpuller. However, anyone who takes the time to sit apart can admire the harmony of the building in peace.

Reward of the effort. The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain is the destination of pilgrims on the Way of St James. Seen from this park bench, its silhouette rises above the city of Santiago.

Colourful splendour. Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies is famous for its shimmering turquoise water. If it is undisturbed, the banks are reflected in it.

▼ Wonders of nature. You can fly over, hike or boat across the Grand Canyon in the USA. But you can also simply let yourself be overwhelmed by its majesty.



1AGES; STEVE SMITH

PHOTOS: (CLO GETTY IMAGE:



Photo Feature





Photo Feature

PHOTOS: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) STANISLAV SABLIN/GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO; GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO; UWE UMSTAETTER/GETTY IMAGES/WESTEND61 ◆ Far in the north. Before the film Leviathan was released in cinemas, hardly anyone knew about the Russian village of Teriberka, where part of the filming took place. Since 2014, the moments when you can look north all alone on the beach have been rare.

> The peaks beckon. Viewed from this bench on the Blomberg in southern Germany, the peaks of the Alps seem near and far at the same time. Like many of the 'bergs', or mountains, in the region, the Blomberg has a cable car for visitors who prefer comfort.

♥ Witness of time. Across the Hudson River you have the best view of the southern tip of Manhattan in New York. Today, One World Trade Center rises in place of the twin towers that were brought down by the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.



ART OF LIVING

BELOVED PAINTER BOB ROSS WAS RIGHT: THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, JUST HAPPY ACCIDENTS

BY Reader's Digest Readers ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANGELA SOUTHERN

WRONG PERSON, RIGHT TIME

I saw an old high school friend's name pop up on Facebook. The account had no photo, but I was excited and wrote her a message: "Melinda, I'm so happy to find you again!" She replied, "Nice to hear from you, Bonnie. Let's catch up." We went back and forth, updating each another on the years since high school. But something wasn't right. The stories just didn't jibe with my memories. Turned out this was a different Melinda from high school, not the one I had thought. But we were having so much fun, we kept in touch, and she's become a valued friend. I'm quite thankful for the case of mistaken identity. —BONNIE DRURY

Old Flame Name Game Years ago, I called my then-boyfriend by my ex's name. I felt horrible, but then I realised I missed my ex and had never got over him. We've been back together ever since.

–NICOLE TREVISAN



DOWN TO A FINE ART

As a primary school art teacher with one classroom sink, I found it challenging to clean 30 pairs of hands at the end of class. I usually stood at the front of the line passing out paper towels.

One day I accidentally dropped a full roll into the running sink. Frustrated, I grabbed the soaked roll, gave it a quick squeeze, and passed damp towels down the line. Our routine was forever changed.

Clean-up helpers love passing damp paper towels out while students wait at their tables, and everyone's hands are clean in no time. I passed this tip down to the art teacher who succeeded me, and she loved it.

-JEANNE CROSBY

MISTAKING THE CAKE

Years ago, I was making a chocolate cheesecake for a social function. As I mixed ingredients, I was suddenly unsure if I had included the correct amount of chocolate. Overcompensating, I added three times the amount of chocolate that the recipe called for. But my cheesecake was a huge hit and was dubbed Joanne's Chocolate Truffle Cheesecake, much to my delight.

-JOANNE BIRNBERG

READER'S DIGEST

PARK THAT THOUGHT

I parked my car in a hotel car park while I played in a tennis tournament. I won second place in men's doubles. A group of us, including the cute redhead who had won second place in women's doubles, were heading out to celebrate when I realised my car had been towed away. I recovered it quickly and was still able to meet up with the group. The redhead and I began dating, and we've now been married for 38 years. To this day, she claims my calm reaction to my car being towed away helped her realise I was special.

-TIM FERGUSON

Making A Splash

During a water fight at camp, I filled a bucket to toss at a fellow counsellor. He ducked, and to my horror, I drenched a random visitor who was standing behind him. I ran into my cabin to hide, and when I slunk out, the stranger was waiting on the roof and got me back by dumping his own bucket of water on me. He was the camp bus driver, and to my surprise, he asked me on a date. Ron and I enjoyed 59 years of marriage. I wouldn't trade those years for anything.

-EILENE ROECKER

TIKTOK WIN

A few years ago, my daughter asked me to film her doing a silly dance. The next morning, she screamed in disbelief. She'd mistakenly posted it publicly on TikTok and it had already gone viral. We agreed she could keep the video up if I made my own account to keep an eye on things.

I'm a human resources consultant and I began posting industry knowledge of my own. Recently, a follower thanked me because my post helped her realise that her company was under-paying her and she was compensated \$10,000 in back pay.

Hard to believe this old gal now has an account with thousands of followers and hundreds of people thanking me for the help I've been able to provide. —CINDY OPEKA

The Best Mistake I Ever Made

Burning Out And Starting Up I realised I was out of fuel for my grass trimmer. I needed only a bit more and thought it wouldn't matter if I used chain saw fuel. Turns out, it did matter, and I burned up my engine. However, that inspired me to create a tool that could easily mix a small amount of fuel in any ratio. Thirty years later, we have sold 2.6 million units.

-TIM RICHARDS

A CHANGE OF JOB

I left a job at McDonald's to work for a telephone company at a significant pay cut. At first, I wondered if I'd made a mistake: Mc-Donald's might've been a dead end, but it paid more. But my new gig turned into a 30-year career during which I benefited from the company's tuition assistance programme to finish my undergrad and graduate degrees. I also became a manager and worked with wonderful people who are still my friends. Best 'mistake' I ever made, for certain. —JAN CARTER

THE PRICE IS RIGHT

My husband and I had just opened a business selling cleaning products. I accidentally priced some cleaning scrapers at \$0.79 instead of \$1.79. I realised my mistake when a customer bought out the entire stock. Turns out he was the buyer for the local district and inquired about prices for several other products. They have been our best customer since.

-TERRI COSTANZO

Moon Caverns Could Make Ideal Homes

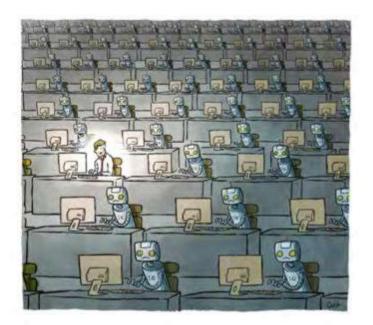
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Slight variations in the moon's gravitational tug suggest that kilometres-wide tubular lava caverns lurk beneath the lunar surface. Planetary geophysicist Dave Blair of Purdue University and colleagues theorise in *Icarus* that the colossal caves will be prime real estate for lunar pioneers. Lava tubes could offer protection from the extreme temperatures, harsh radiation and meteorite impacts on the surface. SCIENCENEWS.ORG

READER'S DIGEST



Humour On The Job



"Now, before my lunch break, does anybody else need help with a CAPTCHA?"

All Part Of A Teacher's Day

I was walking through the hall at school when I noticed a fellow substitute teacher standing forlornly with his forehead against a steel locker.

"How did you get yourself into this?" he whispered, over and over.

Knowing he'd been assigned a difficult class, I asked, "Are you all right?"

He replied, "I'll be fine as soon as I get the kid out of his locker."

SUBMITTED BY YEFIM M. BRODD

Perfect Crime

Mystery writer Carol Higgins Clark liked to share the excellent advice that her mother, Mary Higgins Clark, also a mystery writer, once gave her: "If someone's mean to you, make them a victim in your next book."

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Passing The Buck

Replying "that sounds like a you problem" to every work-related email as a social experiment.

@DRAKEGATSBY

All In A Day's Work

Call Into Question

Literally no one understands something more completely than a woman in a meeting who starts a question with "Just so I understand..." @TAYKAYPHILLIPS

Mottos Nurses Will Swear By

"Be nice to nurses. They're the ones who choose your catheter size."

"Yes, I am a nurse. No, I don't want to look at it."

"You can't cure stupid, but you can sedate it."

"Emergency department nurse – the first person you see after saying 'Hold my beer and watch this'."

NURSEBUFF.COM

Gazing Into The Future

Our son is an officer on a large tugboat that delivers fuel up and down the coast, so he spends many hours at the helm checking navigation, looking for shoals and various other hazards. He chuckles when he recalls one of his high school teachers telling him he would never get a job "just sitting and gazing out the window".

SUBMITTED BY BOB AND CAROL PETRIE

Punchy Punctuation

There really needs to be a semi exclamation point for when a full stop conveys too little enthusiasm in a work-related email but using the full exclamation point makes you seem like a psychopath.

@NATESILVER538

YOU MAY WELL ASK

Employsure, one of New Zealand's largest external employment relations advisors, shared with Newshub some of the odd questions they've received from Kiwi businesses.



"Can I pay my workers half in cash and half in food, if I can prove that the value of the food is of equal value? I can attach the food pricing to their payslip if they ask for it."

"My employee has called in sick because his cat is sick, and the vet has given him a medical certificate for the cat."

"Can I issue my staff with a warning letter for wearing the same perfume?"

"My employee is a bit of a downer. Can I terminate them for not being happy at work?"

"Do I have to pay the security guard dog wages?"

"I received a complaint about one of my staff stripping naked at a hotel swimming pool, while wearing company uniform. Can I fire him?"

SOURCE: NEWSHUB.CO.NZ



SHIP AHOY!

Ten questions about gigantic ships and other vessels

BY Karin Schätzle

QUESTIONS

The world's largest bulk carriers are over 360 metres long and 65 metres wide. The Valemax class ships carry up to 400,000 tonnes of cargo. How do these colossuses manage to float instead of sinking from their own weight?

- a) Their shape assists in remaining buoyant.
- b) Helium in their double bottom gives them buoyancy.

c) Ships are made of aluminium.d) A ship's total weight is at most equal to the amount of water they displace.

Chinese junks undertook great voyages long before Europeans took to the world's oceans. Marco Polo made his return trip from China in 1292 on such a ship. Even then, junks had ...

a) a stern rudder.

b) a keel-less, flat bottom.

c) watertight bulkheads.

d) all of the above.

Only the best sailors have a chance in ocean races. Considered the toughest in the world, the Vendée Globe starts and finishes in Les Sables d' Olonne on the French Atlantic coast. What is the special challenge in this race? a) The boats are assigned by lot. b) Competitors sail only at night. c) Each sailor competes independently, without a support crew.

d) The race is against the clock.

As a naval power, the ancient Tunisian port city of Carthage was superior to ancient Rome for a long time. This changed when the Romans developed the corvus. What was this secret weapon?

- a) A raven trained to attacked enemy boats.
- b) A ram spur below the water line.
- c) A barbed boarding bridge.
- d) A type of torpedo.

In order to be visible to others at night while at sea, ships use different coloured lights that are visible to the naked eye. Where does the red light go?

- a) On the stern.
- b) On the port side, i.e. in the direction of travel on the left.
- c) On the starboard side, i.e. in the direction of travel on the right.
- d) On the top of the mast.

The price paid by ships for passage through locks and canals is usually based on the vessel's gross tonnage. This also applies to the Panama Canal. The cheapest ticket ever issued by the Panama Canal dates back to August 1928 and cost US36 cents. Who used the canal at this ridiculously low price?

- a) Amelia Earhart on a surfboard.
- b) Richard Halliburton swimming.
- c) Sir Edmund Hillary in a boat.
- d) Queen Elizabeth II while on board the royal yacht HMY *Britannia*.

Today, countless tankers and cargo ships sail under the flags of countries with which they have no real link. Third place on the list of countries with the most registered merchant ships is occupied by one of the smallest countries in the world. Which one is it?

- a) Marshall Islands.
- b) San Marino.
- c) Vatican City State.

d) Monaco.

On November 17, 1869, the Suez Canal was opened with great fanfare. It shortens the route of a ship sailing from Rotterdam, Netherlands to Singapore by about 6000 kilometres. How many days of travel time does the Suez Canal save on average?

a) Three.

- b) Six.
- c) Nine.
- d) Eight.

Privateers, who existed in ancient times, have been described as pirates with papers. These private individuals would sail privately-owned, armed ships and carry out quasi-military activities commissioned by governments and sovereigns, which included permission to plunder merchant vessels. What was this permission called?

- a) Letter of marque.
- b) Letter of praise.
- c) Letter of reprisal.
- d) Letter of ownership.

As a result of the sinking of the RMS *Titanic* on April 15, 1912, the first version of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea was adopted in 1914. What has been required for every ship since then?

- a) Places for everyone in life boats and on life rafts.
- b) Searchlights on the bow.
- c) Radio watches manned around the clock.
- d) Iceberg detectors.

In 1985, the deteriorating wreckage of the RMS *Titanic* was located in the North Atlantic at a depth of around 3800 metres

>> Turn to page 82 for quiz answers

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ANSWERS

1d) Like all ships, those of the Valemax class float as long as their total weight does not exceed the weight of the water they displace.

2d) Junks were equipped with stern rudders, watertight bulkheads and a flat bottom – and they still are today.

3c) The Vendée Globe is a single-handed sailing race. On their trip around the world, the participants are all alone on their boat. They are also not allowed to set foot on solid ground along the way.

With the corvus, the Romans turned a sea battle into a land battle. This barbed boarding bridge enabled the soldiers to storm the Carthaginian ships.

5b The port side of a ship is marked with a red light at night. The starboard side has a green light. If the stern also carries a light, it is white. Large ships over 50 metres long will carry two masthead lights.

6b In August 1928, the travel writer Richard Halliburton swam the Panama Canal. It took him ten days and he paid a fee of just US36 cents to do so. In today's money, that would amount to around US\$6.18.

7a) In 2021, ships with a total gross tonnage of 274 million sailed under the flag of the Marshall Islands, which has an area of only 181 square kilometres.

8C) About 12 per cent of the trade goods transported by sea pass through the Suez Canal. On the Rotterdam-Singapore route, it saves ships about nine days of travel time.

9a) The letter of marque allowed privateers to plunder ships of those nations with which their home country was at war. It was not until the Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law of 1856 that privateering was abolished.

10a+c) The RMS *Titanic* had places in lifeboats and on life rafts for only about half of its passengers and crew – and yet this was still more than legally required at the time.

The SS *Californian*, which was close by, did not respond to distress calls because its radio watch was not manned that night.

Since 1914, ships have been required to keep rescue stations available for everyone on board, and radio watches have been manned around the clock.

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NEW ZEALAND





We wanted to do a once-in-a-lifetime trek in northern Laos. Just getting there became the adventure

NEXT STOP

WHO KNOWS?

BY Bonnie Munday

Dusk on the Nam Ou River in northern Laos

rdasia.com 85

I recently read that a new highspeed train route had opened in Laos at the end of 2021. The Lao-China Railway can get you the 150 kilometres from the ancient capital of Luang Prabang north to the Chinese border in just 90 minutes. It carries more than 1.5 million passengers a year, a game-changer for a country with very little transport infrastructure.

As someone who has visited this remote corner of Laos, I wondered: what fun is that sort of speed when you can take three days to do pretty much the same trip by boat – never knowing if you'll actually get there?

It was the spring of 2017, and my husband, Jules, and I had just spent two weeks travelling around Laos. We had poked around the humid, sprawling capital, Vientiane, in the south and explored the fascinating Plain of Jars in the middle of the country. We were really enjoying it – the people were kind, and it wasn't as touristy as we knew Vietnam, the country we planned to visit next, would be.

We saved Luang Prabang, Laos's historic former capital, for last. Located at the confluence of the Mekong and the Nham Khan rivers, the UNESCO World Heritage Site was quiet, with several gilded Buddhist monasteries. Its well-preserved French colonial buildings date back to the first half of the 20th century, when Laos was part of French Indochina. We strolled the peaceful back streets and colourful craft markets and climbed Phousi Hill to take in the view. Relaxing at a bistro across from a wat (Buddhist temple), we watched saffron-robed monks stroll by as we enjoyed coffee and croissants, another vestige of France's colonial regime. At a bamboo-stilted riverfront café we ate traditional Lao *larb* – spicy ground pork or chicken mixed with fresh seasonings – served with the refreshing local brew, the rice-based Beerlao.

As the sun sank on the Mekong River, we watched multicoloured longboats glide by while the breeze carried the deep, soft sounds of the wats' gongs. I couldn't think of a more serene place to spend our final days in Laos.

Then things took a sharp turn. Walking down Luang Prabang's main drag on our second-last day, Jules spotted a trekking outfitter that offered a multi-day hike among the Akha hill tribes outside the small city of Phongsali. It would mean travelling to the mountainous frontier area near Laos's northern border with China and Vietnam.

Jules and I had talked about visiting the area once we got to Vietnam. We had seen photos of Akha women wearing silver-beaded headdresses, and we were intrigued by the fact that the ethnic minority Akha people, along with other tribes living in the mountainous regions of Laos, Myanmar, China and Vietnam, had managed to maintain their traditional way of life.

But we'd been having second thoughts. Though numerous tour companies ran treks to the Akha villages in Vietnam, we weren't big fans of overly planned group tours. Maybe a hike to the Akha villages in less-touristy Laos, just the two of us with a guide, would be more our style.

"Let's not go to Vietnam yet," Jules said. "We should see more of Laos."

I liked the idea, but I needed to know how we'd get to northern Laos before committing to it. Phongsali was so far away and the roads weren't great. Our *Lonely Planet* guidebook had very little information about that part of the country.

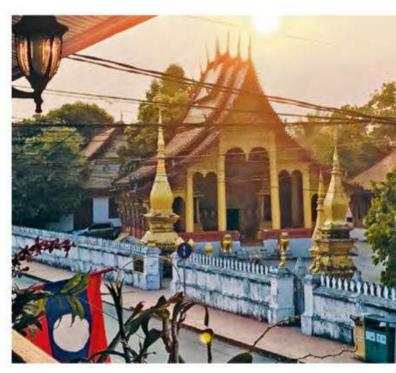
Maybe we could go by plane? At the local tourism office we were told that Lao Airlines did not fly there at that time of year because of thick smoke: it was 'burning season' in central Laos, when farmers torch their fields ahead of planting.

We could catch a bus, but it would take 15 hours, much of it on mountainous switchbacks. What was worse, reviews on Trip-Advisor had tales of the bus drivers falling asleep at the wheel. That didn't sound like much fun. We called a trekking outfit in Phongsali on WhatsApp. "You might be able to get a riverboat," the owner, Sivongxay, told us. "But I'm not sure. Call me if you make it here and we'll take you on a trek!"

So we would just head into the unknown? I'm the type who likes to plan my journeys, but the idea of travelling by river sounded very appealing. I tamped down my reservations and said to Jules, "Let's give it a try."

The local tourist office told us that any boat journey that might get us to Phongsali would be on the Nam Ou River. To get to the river, we'd need to take a four-hour minibus ride to a town called Nong Khiaw. Seemed reasonable.

A Buddhist temple in Luang Prabang



"And from there?" I asked the young tourism officer.

"I think boats go north, but I don't know how far," she responded. We bought the minibus tickets anyway, for the next morning.

That evening in our guesthouse we hit Google to find out about boat rides on the Nam Ou. We had no luck. While there was decent information about the popular tourist regions of Laos, there was hardly anything about the country's farthest reaches.

One reason for this is that some areas are littered with unexploded bombs dropped by the Americans during the Vietnam War, as a deterrent to Viet Cong using the Ho Chi Minh Trail through eastern Laos. Nearly five decades later, the stilllive bombs, partially or fully buried, remain a daily danger to farmers and road builders.

Our journey into the unknown had to start somewhere, and the first step was catching the minibus the next morning. We arrived in Nong Khiaw at about noon and walked to the riverboat ticket office. It was closed. But according to a schedule posted outside the office, a boat did head north once a day – and today's had just departed.

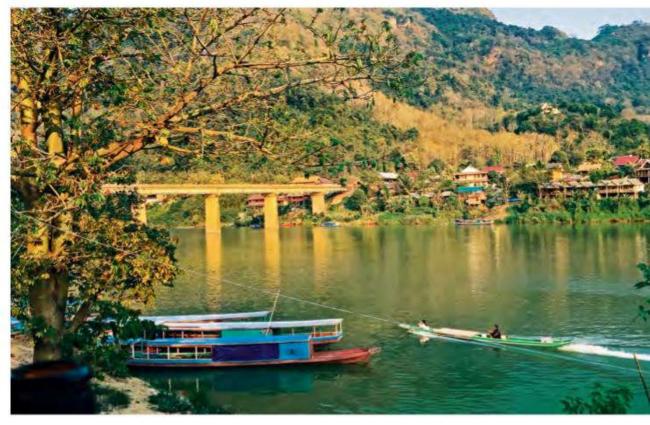
There are worse places to be stuck for a night: Nong Khiaw, which had a population of around 3500 at the time, was surrounded by misty, jungle-covered limestone karst formations. We spent much of the afternoon exploring the town. Later we found a guesthouse that served noodles and Beerlao, plugged our phone into their speaker system, put on some music and watched a mother washing clothes in the river while her kids splashed around, jumping to the beat of the music.

The next morning, we arrived at the boat office at 9.30. We were eager to find out how far these boats actually went and where in Laos we might end up sleeping that night. We learned that one leaving at 10.30 would take us to the village of Muang Khua, a five-hour journey.

Would there be another boat from there to Phongsali? We couldn't get an answer, and our map of Laos, which was short on details, didn't help. The map did have one important piece of information: Muang Khua had a tourist office. We were confident our questions would be answered once we arrived there that afternoon.

We took the front two seats of the blue wooden longboat and placed our packs at our feet; a dozen young backpackers piled into the boat and sat down behind us. Two hours later, at the first stop, everyone except us got off. With the entire boat to ourselves for the next few hours, we sat back to enjoy the rest of our journey.

And what a journey it was, like something out of an Indochina period film: the Nam Ou was wide, smooth and brown, and the clear sky



The boat jetty at Nong Khiaw on the Nam Ou River

had a misty quality above the lush banks. We munched on our packed lunch – water, apples and baguettes with Laughing Cow cheese – and sipped boxed red wine from our travel mugs as we slipped past tall, rounded karst landforms and quiet villages of bamboo huts where goats wandered the dusty lanes.

Children shrieked as they ran along the riverbanks in the shallow waters. Mud-covered water buffalo ambled down to cool themselves, too. Women filled their woven baskets with the greens they grow on the edge of the river at this time of year, when the water is low. It was truly a blissful, magical boat trip that we treasure even more now. Because although we didn't know it at the time, we were among the last to experience this particular river journey, one that people had been taking for centuries. Just eight months later, in late 2017, a massive hydroelectric dam on this stretch of the river would be completed, ending a way of life for several villages whose lifeblood was the Nam Ou.

One by one, dams were being built along the river as part of the Belt and Road initiative, China's massive international infrastructure programme. Many villagers had been relocated, river transport was reduced to the short stretches between the dams, and fishing and local riverside agriculture had taken a hit, reducing local food resources.

We later realised that this was why we had so much trouble finding information about travel on the river: the dams were being built so quickly that it was hard for anyone who didn't live in the area to know what stage each one was at.

Just before 4.30pm we stepped off the longboat at Muang Khua and walked up the steep road, packs on our backs, in search of the tourist office. We found it – just as the young woman who worked there was locking up. Uh-oh. Still hoping to travel onward that day, we asked, "Is there a boat to Phongsali? A bus?" She shook her head and pointed to a sign that

Oxen cooling themselves on the Nam Ou River



said the office would open at 8am the next day. We were staying the night.

Walking the dusty roads along with strutting chickens and the odd wandering dog, we came across a concrete bunker of a hotel, checked in and went in search of a café where we might find other tourists we could ask about getting to Phongsali. We were in luck: at the only place in town with an English menu, we met a British couple in their 60s – and they had just come from Phongsali!

"Don't take a boat any further north," the man warned. They had done it, but to get to the next stretch of the river, they had to bypass one of the massive new dams; they'd spent two hours in the back of a *songthaew* (a modified pickup truck) on a rough road, hanging on for dear life. The road was packed with heavy trucks

loaded with building materials.

"We kept getting hit with gravel coming off the trucks," the woman explained. "Once you get to the other side of the dam, there's no guarantee a boat will be waiting to take you the rest of the way. If there isn't, you're sleeping on the side of the river."

Instead, they said, we should take the eight-hour bus trip from Muang Khua to Phongsali. That definitely sounded better.

The next morning, we

awoke to the sound of a tinny loudspeaker. It was blaring an authoritative female voice speaking in Lao and some really jarring marching music. We learned later that it was a daily update from the central government.

We got to the tourist office at 8am on the nose. A dapper middle-aged man arrived and unlocked the door. Luckily for us, he spoke English. "Good morning!" I said with a hopeful smile. "What time is the bus to Phongsali?"

He looked at his watch. "It left at 7.30," he replied. Jules and I stared at each other, crestfallen. It was the bus from Luang Prabang, the man explained (the 15-hour journey we had earlier decided not to take). It came just once a day.

Now what? "Time to call Sivongxay," Jules said, referring to the trekking guide we were hoping to meet up with in Phongsali. "Maybe he knows another option."

Sivongxay paused after Jules explained where we were. "I think there's a bus that starts in Vietnam and goes through there," he said. "It comes up here a few times a week. I don't know if there's one today. If there is, it's maybe at noon? Or 2pm? You have to flag it down."

Full of doubt, but with nothing better to do, we walked to Muang Khua's main street. Sivongxay had told us to look for a bus with a sign that said 'Phongsali' on the front. (Would 'Phongsali' be in English letters, Vietnamese characters or Lao script? And would the 'bus' be a full-size coach, a minibus or a songthaew? We had no idea what to watch for.)

It was only 8.30am so we had hours to wait, maybe for nothing. We explored the town on foot, and later that morning we found a spot on the main street with some shade and two plastic stools, complete with a litter of newborn puppies and their mother underneath. To pass the time, we read our books and drank strong Lao coffee. We negotiated with a woman who lived nearby to use her outdoor bathroom – let's just say it was rudimentary – in exchange for a few kip (a little over one cent US).

But mainly, as the sun moved across the sky, we kept an eye to the east – the direction of the Vietnamese border some 70 kilometres away – watching for buses. There were plenty of shapes and sizes, most with Lao script on the front. As noon approached, Jules started jumping up to stop buses as they barrelled into town stirring up dust.

"Lodme Phongsali?" he asked the drivers, using the Lao word for bus. Each time, the driver shook his head and sped off.

We were pretty much resigned to staying on the plastic stools for the rest of the afternoon, knowing that the bus might not come and we'd be back in the concrete bunker that

READER'S DIGEST

night. We grabbed a snack for lunch from a nearby vendor and settled in. Then things changed – fast.

Looking up as yet another bus approached, we couldn't believe our eyes: the sign in the front window read 'PHONGSALI'. But it was flying past us. We grabbed our packs and scrambled behind the bus, waving frantically in its dust. You can't imagine our relief when it slowed to a stop.

"Lodme Phongsali?" we asked the driver in unison.

"Yes, each 40,000 kip," he said – about US\$3.70. After paying, we were waved onto the minibus packed with sacks of rice, construction materials and other goods from Vietnam.

It was the start of another journey into the unknown.

What followed felt like a visit to another planet. We arrived in Phongsali that evening, and the next day we met Zheng, a guide Sivongxay had hired for us. To start our trek to the Akha hill tribes' region, Zheng (who spoke Lao, English and the Akha language) shepherded us onto a minibus for a half-hour ride to the edge of the Nam Ou River. Yes, we were returning to the same river that had taken us from Nong Khiaw to Muang Khua.

A longboat took us further north, and we were dropped off after an hour or so at a muddy landing point. Then, with small packs on our backs, up, up we climbed in the sweltering heat through a forested mountainside



An Akha mother wearing a beaded headdress

towards the clouds and the cooler air of the Akha villages, where views over the green hills are misty.

Over the next three days, we saw no other foreigners. As arranged by Zheng, we stayed with local families in the villages we visited and learned about the traditional existence of the Akha – one in which the men hunt for food with slingshots while the women do just about everything else. That includes growing cotton, turning it into thread, then using the thread to make fabric. After dying the fabric indigo, they make a long, embroidered jacket that, along with leggings and an elaborate headdress, they wear on their wedding day - and every day after that.

The women's tasks also include

collecting water in huge bamboo pipes, which they lug on their backs up the steep hills.

Bathing took place in the centre of each village, with designated hours for women and men to give everyone a measure of privacy. At least that was the theory. Neither Jules nor I was able to wash without drawing a crowd. We did our best to cover ourselves with towels.

Meals, which we ate at people's homes, consisted of rice, foraged greens and whatever meat was available – often chicken, but we had squirrel soup for dinner once.

Seated on short stools on a dirt floor, pigs and chickens hovered nearby, waiting for scraps. Jules was thankful for their services when a squirrel skull ended up on his spoon; he quietly deposited it on the floor behind him.

To an outsider like me, the lives of the Akha people look difficult. Yet they are managing to keep their culture alive in the quiet hills, up in the clouds, and avoid being assimilated into mainstream Lao, Chinese or Vietnamese society. Fortunately, in many villages the local chief has a motorbike, giving them access to markets and emergency healthcare when necessary.

I'm thankful to have travelled a lot in my life, and whenever I am asked about memorable trips, I always mention this one-of-a-kind, never-to-be-repeated experience. I am so thankful there was no railway, high-speed or otherwise, to northern Laos back then. Our snap decision to abandon our original plan for one that literally had no road map added a layer to life I didn't realise I'd enjoy so much.

In the end, the journey was as rich as the destination. By willingly plunging into the unknown, I discovered what truly makes you feel alive: the surprises waiting around the next bend on a river less travelled.

Century-old Race Revived

Hordes of Parisian waiters hurtled down the streets of the capital in March carrying trays laden with a cup, croissant and glass of water, as thousands of spectators gathered to watch the 'Course des Cafés', the newly revived version of a century-old race. More than 200 servers traversed a two-kilometre loop, suited up in traditional crisp white shirts, black trousers, neatly tied aprons and bow ties. The goal of the race is to cross the finish line as quickly as possible without running, spilling the water or using two hands on the tray. NPR.ORG

READER'S DIGEST



AMOTHER'SCONVICTION

After all four of Kathleen Folbigg's children died in infancy, a court found her guilty of murder.

> Twenty years later, science finally uncovered the truth

> > BY Sarah Treleaven

DR CAROLA VINUESA

was in her office at the John Curtin School of Medical Research in Canberra one afternoon in August 2018 when she received a call that both changed her life and saved another. As a professor of immunology, Vinuesa immersed herself in the fascinating and complex world of genetics.

The call was from David Wallace, a former student at John Curtin. He presented Vinuesa with a scenario that was equal parts shocking, intriguing and devastating: a woman named Kathleen Folbigg had been sentenced to decades in prison for murdering her four children, all infants, over a period of ten years. The case had captivated the nation. Many were abhorred by Folbigg's crimes; others questioned the veracity of her guilt.

Given the paucity of evidence used to convict Folbigg, asked Wallace, could Vinuesa's research shed light on what actually happened to the children? Over the next five years, Vinuesa and an international team of scientists would dedicate much of their lives to answering this question. Their findings would shake up Australia's judicial system, raise questions about the treatment of mothers accused of killing their children, and shine a light on the misuse of scientific evidence. Folbigg, who was born Kathleen Megan Britton in Balmain, an inner-city suburb of Sydney, on June 14, 1967, was haunted by tragedy, instability and alienation from the very beginning. In December 1968, her father, Thomas Britton, stabbed her mother to death during an argument; he served 15 years in prison before being deported to his native England. Young Kathleen was shipped off to live with her mother's sister in western Sydney.

Any hopes that Kathleen would have a warm and safe childhood were soon dashed. The girl's aunt, known in court records as 'Mrs Platt,' complained to child-welfare authorities in spring 1970 that Kathleen was aggressive, impolite, and unclean and preoccupied with masturbation – and that the strain of caring for her niece was causing her marriage to deteriorate. She no longer wanted the girl. Kathleen was not yet three years old.

Doctors determined that the girl had likely been abused by her father. She was also found to have an unusually low IQ, largely attributed to her withdrawn and restless nature. In September 1970, she was placed into the care of a foster family, Deirdre and Neville Marlborough, who lived in Newcastle, 120 kilometres north of Sydney.

At first she bonded with the family and settled into school. But the legacy of her catastrophic early years took its toll: she was caught shoplifting, left school early and struggled in her relationship with Deirdre. At 17 she left home and moved in with the family of a friend.

A year later she met a 23-year-old forklift driver named Craig Folbigg at a nightclub in Newcastle. Craig was tall with brown hair, a pronounced nose and an easy smile. Charming and chatty, he seemed like Kathleen's rescuer. Together, they could make the home she had always needed. They married in 1987, when Folbigg was just 20, and rented an apartment in Newcastle. Folbigg found a job as a waitress at an Indian restaurant.

AFTER SARAH'S BIRTH, Folbigg became obsessed with the possibility of losing her

Craig was one of eight children and wanted a big family. Soon the couple was expecting. Thrilled, Folbigg became protective of her unborn child: Craig was forbidden from smoking indoors, and Folbigg improved her diet. When Caleb was born in February 1989, Folbigg told people that she felt complete; after so many years of upheaval, she had a husband, a home and a baby.

But on February 20, 1989, tragedy struck. Folbigg found Caleb, just 19 days old, dead in his crib. An autopsy identified the cause of death as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Folbigg was devastated but not deterred, and she was soon pregnant again. When Patrick was born in June 1990, he underwent extensive testing, including a sleep study. The results were normal. Still, Folbigg was terrified for Patrick's life.

It turned out that she had reason to be afraid: on October 18, 1990, fourmonth-old Patrick had what was known as an apparent life-threatening event, typically associated with oxygen deprivation. It resulted in brain damage, visual impairment and seizures for which Patrick was repeatedly hospitalised.

Caring for her disabled baby became the focus of Folbigg's life. Few waking moments were spent without Patrick on her mind or in her arms. By February 1991, he was gone, too. The cause of death was listed as asphyxia due to airway obstruction related to his seizures.

Feeling that she was to blame for the deaths of her two children, Folbigg fell into a deep depression. She decided that she and Craig needed to uproot their lives if they were going to beat whatever was plaguing their family. They sold their house and moved to Thornton, just north of Newcastle. Craig got a job selling cars, and Folbigg found work at a baby-product retailer, a job that spoke to her heartbreaking desire for a family. Sarah was born on October 14, 1992. She, too, underwent numerous tests, which didn't find any problems. Sarah appeared to be developing typically, but Folbigg became obsessed with the possibility of losing her. The couple started to feel the strain.

One night, when Sarah was ten months old, Craig saw Folbigg 'growl' at Sarah as she tried to get the baby to fall asleep. She passed Sarah to him, telling him to deal with her. The next day, August 30, 1993, Sarah died. The autopsy concluded that the cause of death was SIDS.

What could possibly explain this terrible misfortune? In the wake of Sarah's death, Craig became severely depressed, beyond the reach of his wife's attempts to help. In a bid to change their luck, they bought a home in Cardiff, west of Newcastle, not far from Craig's family.

The marriage started to crack under the strain. The couple separated repeatedly, but they reunited each time – whether through genuine mutual love or the shared bond of repeated trauma. They moved yet again, this time to the nearby Hunter Valley, and decided to have another baby.

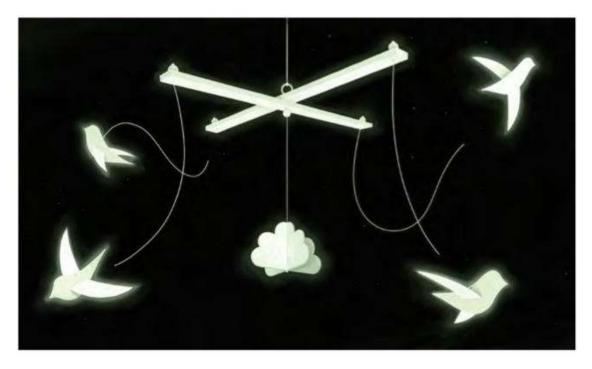
Laura was born on August 7, 1997, almost four years after Sarah's death. She was another healthy baby but was subject to even greater scrutiny, including a full panel of biochemical, blood and metabolic tests. For 12 months, cardiorespiratory monitoring indicated no problems with Laura's breathing and heart function. As Laura's first birthday approached, Folbigg planned a big party. She finally had a healthy baby, and her anxiety eased. The life she had planned for herself was coming to fruition after three heartbreaking false starts.

But the couple was once again falling apart. Folbigg was a devoted mother, but Craig was concerned about her flashes of anger. One night in late February 1999, he noticed the strain between Folbigg and Laura, then almost 18 months old. "Oh, she's got the sh**s with me," Folbigg told him. "It's probably over what I did to her last night. I lost it with her."

At breakfast the next morning, March 1, Folbigg was struggling to feed cereal to Laura. She then pulled her out of the high chair, put her on the ground and told her to "go to your f***ing father." When Craig went to work, Laura was watching television.

Later that morning Folbigg called Craig at work and apologised for losing her temper. She then took Laura to visit him during his morning break. Laura fell asleep in the car on the way home, and Folbigg carried her to bed. Laura died later that day. This time, the autopsy was inconclusive, though it did note that Laura had myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart.

On the afternoon of March 1, 1999, shortly after Laura became the fourth Folbigg child to be pronounced dead in ten years, a police officer met the



couple at the hospital. The sudden deaths of the four Folbigg children, all apparently healthy at birth, suggested something sinister to police: it wasn't a one-in-ten-million unlucky happenstance. Could Folbigg have killed them?

As the police ramped up their investigation – including a search of the Folbiggs' home – the couple's relationship was once again on the rocks. They separated permanently in June 2000, still under police suspicion. On April 19, 2001, Folbigg was arrested and charged with four counts of murder. She pleaded not guilty to all charges.

The jury trial began in spring 2003 at the Supreme Court of New South Wales in Sydney. In photographs taken during the trial, Folbigg looked as if she were sleepwalking – her eyelids heavy, her complexion pale. The prosecution's case laid out a cold take on the children's deaths: Folbigg had asphyxiated each one. The circumstantial evidence seemed overwhelming. Each child was apparently healthy before dying in their own bed, and Folbigg was both the last person to see each one alive and the one who had found them dead.

But the case wasn't just circumstantial. After the couple had separated for good, Craig discovered his wife's diaries. He later told the jury that what he read "made me want to vomit". Crown lawyers used the diaries to allege that Folbigg tended to "become stressed and lose her temper and control with each of her four children." She was accused of frustration, impatience and even cruelty with her children. The prosecutors suggested that more than 200 entries indicated that she didn't love and hadn't bonded with any of her children, and that motherhood left her so stressed and resentful that she was pushed to the darkest of acts.

June 3, 1990: This is the day that Patrick Allen David Folbigg was born. I had mixed feelings this day whether or not I was going to cope as a mother or whether I was going to get stressed out like I did last time. I often regret Caleb and Patrick, only because your life changes so much, and maybe I'm not a person that likes change, but we will see.

November 9, 1997: With Sarah, all I wanted was her to shut up and one day she did.

January 28, 1998: I feel like the worst mother on this earth, scared that [Laura] will leave me now, like Sarah did. I knew I was short tempered and cruel sometimes to her and she left, with a bit of help. I don't want that to ever happen again. I actually seem to have a bond with Laura. It can't happen again. I'm ashamed of myself. I can't tell Craig about it because he'll worry about leaving her with me.

The prosecutors argued that a grieving mother would not write these things. Even if the science surrounding the children's deaths was inconclusive, the diaries were presented as clear evidence that Folbigg was an unfit mother. How far was the leap from unfit to violent?

Folbigg wasn't the first woman convicted of killing her children under similar circumstances. Many of these cases were influenced by Roy Meadow, a British paediatrician who developed a theory that became known as 'Meadow's Law': one sudden infant death in a family is a tragedy, two deaths are suspicious, and three are murder unless proven otherwise. Charles Smith, a Canadian paediatric pathologist and a go-to prosecution expert in criminal trials of people accused of mistreating their children, used a similar approach. Meadow and Smith had inverted the common-law tradition of presumption of innocence.

Both men have since been discredited, and many of the people they helped convict were later exonerated, but the damage was extraordinary. Sally Clark was a British lawyer convicted of murdering her two infant sons in 1999. A later review found that Meadow had misrepresented statistical evidence at her trial, and a pathologist had withheld evidence that pointed towards natural death. Clark's release in 2003 prompted a review of hundreds of cases in the UK, and several other mothers had their convictions overturned.

But the assumption of guilt informed similar cases. On May 21, 2003, Folbigg was found guilty of three counts of murder, one count of manslaughter and one count of inflicting grievous bodily harm. The following October she was sentenced to 40 years in prison, with no chance of parole for 30 years, and was incarcerated at Sydney's Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre. She was 35 years old. On appeal, her sentence was reduced to 30 years with no chance of parole for 25 years.

FOLBIGG HADN'T LOST HER COMPASSION OR DECENCY, EVEN AS **She Struggled With Her Grim Reality**

Tracy Chapman, a childhood friend who had largely drifted out of Folbigg's life, was galvanised by her arrest. Chapman became convinced that Folbigg would be found not guilty. Shortly after the conviction, she reached out to Folbigg. She called the lawyers and read through transcripts, desperately trying to figure out how her friend could be exonerated.

She and Folbigg mostly communicated through long letters, in which Folbigg detailed her day-to-day life in prison. Most strikingly, Folbigg – whom Chapman describes as an animal lover with a terrific sense of humour – hadn't lost her compassion or decency, even as she struggled with her grim reality.

"She's got a strong moral compass," says Chapman. "And I supported

her to not allow the system to eat that up."

Other people also started to question Folbigg's guilt. One of the earliest dissenting voices came from Emma Cunliffe, an Australian working on her PhD in law at the University of British Columbia. She approached the Folbigg case through a feminist lens, part of an emerging consensus among some scholars that investigators and prosecutors were prone to discriminatory reasoning against women – particularly with mothers accused of harming or killing children.

As Cunliffe reviewed the trial records, she was disturbed that so many people involved in the case were certain of her guilt even though there was no evidence of homicide. She also found the use of Folbigg's diaries to be both highly prejudicial and misleading.

"The Crown's case was that the unexplained deaths of four children within the same family, coupled with the diary entries and evidence about Kathleen Folbigg's tendency to become frustrated, were sufficient to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Kathleen Folbigg had killed each of her children," Cunliffe wrote in the *Australian Feminist Law Journal* in 2007.

In 2011, an academic journal asked Stephen Cordner to review *Murder, Medicine and Motherhood,* Cunliffe's book about the case. Cordner, a forensic pathologist in Melbourne,

Immunologist Professor Carola Vinuesa helped uncover the truth behind the Folbigg case

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had been following a similar case from 2007 in Victoria.

Carol Matthey, a 27-year-old mother from Geelong, was charged with murdering her four children. The crown alleged that each one was deliberately suffocated and that Matthey had "little regard" for her children, using them as pawns in her relationship with her partner. Charges were ultimately dropped due to insufficient evidence.

As Cordner reviewed Cunliffe's findings, he was struck by the similarities to Matthey's case – and the sense that something was deeply off about Folbigg's conviction. He told the University of Newcastle Legal Centre, which had taken on Folbigg's case pro bono, that he wanted to look into the conviction. In his 100-page report, Cordner wrote that the pathology reports offered no evidence to support the conclusion that the children had been murdered.

He also pointed out that the prosecution had used Folbigg's diaries to portray her as a bitter mother who was prone to lashing out uncontrollably, but the children had no physical injuries. Laura's teeth, for example, should have left a mark on the inside of her mouth under the pressure of suffocation. How could a mother act so violently yet kill her children so gently?

As the years passed, more medical and legal experts raised doubts about Folbigg's conviction. The campaign to exonerate her took a crucial turn in 2018, when Carola Vinuesa entered the picture. David Wallace, the former John Curtin School of Medicine student who had become a commercial litigator, had been following the case with increasing unease about the lack of evidence to support the conviction. He called Vinuesa and asked: was it possible that whole-genome sequencing, the process of determining an individual's full DNA profile, might shed light on the deaths of the Folbigg children?

Vinuesa agreed to look into it. First, she had a colleague visit Folbigg in prison and do a cheek swab. When Vinuesa sequenced Folbigg's DNA, she discovered that she had an extremely rare mutation of the CALM2-G114R gene, associated with cardiac arrhythmias and cardiac death. Had Folbigg passed this potentially deadly mutation on to her children?

To get a fuller picture of the children's genetic history, she wanted to sequence Craig Folbigg's DNA. He refused to provide a sample, maintaining that his now ex-wife was guilty and declining to be part of efforts to free her.

Folbigg's lawyer presented the findings of Cunliffe, Cordner and Vinuesa to Mark Speakman, the New South Wales attorney general, and in August 2018, he announced an inquiry. The next year, Reginald Blanch, a former chief justice of the District Court, produced a report of more than 500 pages, poring over the details of Folbigg's life and the arguments and evidence presented at her trial. Folbigg's supporters were stunned by its conclusion: "I find no error or procedural irregularity in the trial process that causes me to have a reasonable doubt as to Ms Folbigg's guilt," Blanch wrote.

Folbigg, who had been in prison for 16 years at this point, had always maintained her innocence. It was unclear what, if anything, could clear her name. The report "looked like that was slamming the door," says Cordner.

THE MEDIA NOW PORTRAYED HER INCARCERATION AS **A GRIM MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE**

Pressing on, Vinuesa contacted renowned geneticist Peter Schwartz at the Auxological Institute in Milan, Italy. In a remarkable coincidence, he had recently written about a similar case involving two siblings who carried the same mutation as Kathleen Folbigg had, on one of the other CALM genes. One child had died, and the other went into cardiac arrest but survived.

Schwartz reached out to colleagues in Denmark. Mette Nyegaard, professor of biomedicine at Aarhus University, and Michael Toft Overgaard, professor of bioscience at Aalborg University, had made a similar discovery seven years earlier: members of a Swedish family with a history of sudden cardiac deaths carried an extremely rare mutation in another member of the CALM gene group associated with sudden death in childhood. Both cases bolstered the theory that the deaths of the Folbigg children were not necessarily the result of sinister acts.

Vinuesa realised that investigators had concluded that the Folbigg children must have been murdered because the odds of them dying of natural causes were astronomical. But when these deaths are linked with a genetic factor, the picture shifts dramatically. "Then it's a one-in-16 probability, not one in 73 million," Vinuesa says.

She set about gathering the DNA of Caleb, Patrick, Sarah and Laura, drawing from decades-old samples collected either when the children were born or during their autopsies. Her analysis found that the CALM2 mutation had been passed along to Sarah and Laura. Caleb and Patrick, meanwhile, shared another exceedingly rare mutation in a gene known as BSN, which has been linked to lethal epileptic seizures.

As word spread of the growing evidence that all four Folbigg children had died natural deaths, 90 eminent scientists from around the world, including Nobel Prize winners and the president of the Australian Academy of Science, signed a petition in 2021 demanding a new inquiry into Folbigg's conviction.

Meanwhile, Peter Yates, a former investment banker who served on the boards of some of the country's most important institutions, heard Vinuesa talk about the Folbigg case and was an immediate convert to the cause. He became what he calls "the de facto chairman of Team Folbigg," lobbying politicians and bringing in a public-relations firm to shift the public's perception of Folbigg from serial killer to wrongly incarcerated mother.

Media coverage reached a fever pitch. Headlines had once called Folbigg 'Australia's worst female serial killer'; now her incarceration was portrayed as a grim miscarriage of justice.

In May 2022, following enormous pressure from the public and the scientific community, Governor of New South Wales Margaret Beazley ordered a second inquiry on the advice of NSW Attorney General Michael Daley. Just over a year later, the head of the inquiry, retired judge Thomas Bathurst, concluded that there was reasonable doubt that Folbigg was guilty. The governor signed a full pardon for Folbigg and ordered that she be freed.

On June 5, 2023, Folbigg was released. She was 55 years old and had been incarcerated for 20 years.

She spent her first night of freedom at Chapman's farm in northern New

South Wales, eating pizza and drinking Kahlua and Coke. "We didn't actually say very much," says Chapman. "There was a kind of profoundness in the silence." For so many years, the friendship had been dominated by a single, exhausting goal: getting Folbigg out of prison. Now they could finally rest.

In November 2023, the final report of the second inquiry recommended that Folbigg's convictions be overturned, and the following month the NSW Court of Criminal Appeal formally quashed them.

For many of Folbigg's supporters, her wrongful conviction has raised questions about how many other innocent women might be languishing in prison due to faulty science and mischaracterisation of their actions.

"We've got a long way to go," says Cordner, who recently published a new book, Wrongful Convictions in Australia: Addressing Issues in the Criminal Justice System. Legal experts have called on the Australian government to appoint an independent body to review wrongful convictions – similar to ones in England and New Zealand.

"I hope that no one else will ever have to suffer what I've suffered," Folbigg, wiping away tears, told the media after her convictions were overturned.

"My children are here with me today, and they will be close to my heart for the rest of my life."

READER'S DIGEST



Challenge yourself by solving these puzzles and mind stretchers, then check your answers on page 110.

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ACROSS

- 9 Inverted slow-mover (5)
- 10 Hyped too high (9)
- **11** Carton containing other cartons (5)
- 12 Exciting experience (9)
- 13 Teetotal (3)
- **14** Flower associated with new beginnings and rebirth (5)
- **15** House of worship (9)
- 17 Explode (5)
- **19** No_____ without fire (5)

- **22** Construction sites with slipways (9)
- 24 Informal greeting (3,2)
- **26** Temporary home for critical-care patients (1-1,1)
- **27** Most employees think this of themselves (9)
- **29** From where minerals are extracted (5)
- **30** Lofty (9)
- 31 Military subdivisions (5)

Crossword

Test your general knowledge.

DOWN

- 1 Dates (7)
- 2 Backpackers' stopover (6)
- **3** Neither you nor me but the other guy (5,5)
- 4 Sudden attacks (6)
- 5 Portions (8)
- 6 Broad smile (4)
- 7 Conflict (8)
- 8 Hold fast (7)
- 16 Pleasant mood (4,6)
- **17** Beneficiary of a Biblical miracle (5,3)
- **18** Spanish word for bullfighter (8)
- **20** Making milder or less severe (7)
- **21** Hold (7)
- **23** The *Ice Age*'s ground sloth (6)
- **25** Advantageous to both sides (3-3)
- 28 Past tense of 'ride' (4)



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Sudoku

HOW TO PLAY: To win, you have to put a number from 1 to 9 in each outlined section so that:
Every horizontal row and vertical column contains all nine numerals (1-9) without repeating any of them;

• Each of the outlined sections has all nine numerals, none repeated.

IF YOU SOLVE IT WITHIN:

15 minutes, you're a true expert

30 minutes, you're no slouch

60 minutes or more, maybe numbers aren't your thing



"Write, Erase, Rewrite"

READER'S DIGEST



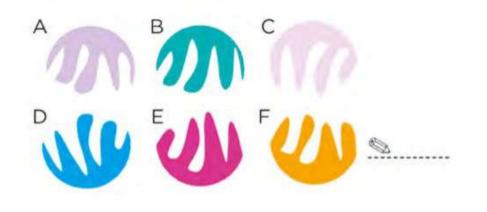
Spot The Difference

There are 12 differences. Can you find them?



Perfect Fit

Can you find the three perfect circles that can be made by matching these spindly shapes?





Test Your General Knowledge

1. What word describes a set of rules that a machine can follow to learn how to do a task? 1 point 2. What type of 'novel' food source did the European Union recently approve as safe to eat? 1 point **3.** What celebration device has been around since as early as 200 BCE in China, when it was accidentally discovered that the noise it makes scares off intruders? 1 point **4.** Guy Pearce played a drag queen in a 1994 Australian film journeying across the Australian Outback. What was the name of the film? 2 points **5.** The name of which primate meaning 'Man of the Forest' is derived from Malay? 2 points 6. Which space telescope was launched into low Earth orbit in 1990 and still remains in operation? 2 points 7. On which planet in our solar system would you find the Great Red Spot, a storm that has been raging for at

least 300 years and has a

diameter larger than Earth? *2 points* **8.** Per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are also known as 'forever chemicals', based on their tendency to hang around in the human body. They are sometimes used in the oil-resistant coating of what household items? *2 points*

9. Whose birthday is celebrated as a national public holiday in Malaysia in June? *1 point*



13. What Asian country named the Siamese fighting fish – also known as the betta – as its national aquatic animal in 2019 due to its cultural significance in the nation? 2 points **10.** What name is given to the small bones which form the spinal column? *1 point*

11. American psychologists G. Stanley Hall and Arthur Allin coined the terms 'knismesis' and 'gargalesis' in 1897. To which physical human experience do these words refer? *2 points*12. What New Zealand City is a UNESCO City of Literature? *1 point*

16-20 Gold medal 11-15 Silver medal 6-10 Bronze medal 0-5 Wooden spoon

Auswers: 1. Algorithm. 2. Insects, specifically house crickets and mealworm larvae. 3. Firecracker.
 4. The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. 5. Orangutang. 6. The Hubble Space Telescope.
 7. Jupiter. 8. Some non-stick pans. 9. The King's (Yang di-Pertuan Agong) birthday. 10. Vertebrae.
 11. Tickling. Knismesis is light tickling and gargalesis is intense, laughter-inducing tickling.
 12. Dunedin. 13. Thailand.

READER'S DIGEST



From Page 106

Crossword

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Sudoku

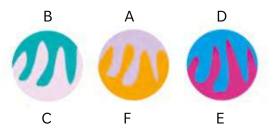
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Spot The Difference



Perfect Fit

Can you find the three perfect circles that can be made by matching these spindly shapes?



WORD POWER

House And Home

The design of buildings and cities affects us all in myriad ways. How well do you know construction terms?

BY Samantha Rideout

 blue space – A: high-income neighbourhood. B: undeveloped land. C: place with visible water.
 keystone – A: piece at the top of an arch. B: structure that reinforces a wall. C: paving design.

3. egress – A: exit. B: land lost to rising sea levels. C: prominent landmark.

4. minaret – A: cross-shaped church. B: outermost part of a Hindu temple. C: tall tower on a mosque.

5. blobitecture – building design that is A: inexpensive, with little regard for beauty. B: impossible to create in real life. C: round and organic-looking.

6. artery – A: major road or railway. B: site offering an essential service. C: hallway with rooms on either side.

7. eaves – A: abandoned settlement.
B: lower part of a roof that overhangs the walls. C: plaster ceiling.

8. gable – A: small shelter in a park or garden. B: triangular section of wall under two roof slopes.
C: farming community. **9. heat island** – A: naturally lit room. B: urban area that is hotter than its surroundings. C: well-insulated building in a cold climate.

10. arcade – A: place suitable for docking boats. B: balcony at a theatre. C: passageway between a series of arches and a wall.

11. brutalism – architecture that
A: incorporates regional materials.
B: is inspired by forms from the
animal kingdom. C: uses rough
materials and blocky shapes.

12. cantilevered – A: supported at only one end. B: capable of pivoting. C: designed for good musical acoustics.

13. party wall – Wall that A: is made of ceramic tiles. B: is shared by two adjoining properties. C: reduces traffic and other noise.

14. veneer – A: thin material covering another one. B: general colour scheme. C: accessibility feature.
15. genius loci – A: celebrated architect. B: spirit of a place.

C: central point.

READER'S DIGEST

Answers

1. blue space – C: place with visible water. Blue spaces, such as lakes and canals, are good for locals' mental health.

2. keystone – A: piece at the top of an arch. A keystone with a lion's-head carving locked the rest of the arch in place.

3. egress – A: exit. The fire marshal wasn't satisfied with the theatre's narrow egress.

4. minaret – C: tall tower on a mosque. A call to prayer sounded out from atop a nearby minaret.

5. blobitecture – C: building design that is round and organic-looking. The Galaxy Soho in Beijing, China, was designed by famous architect Zaha Hadid and is an iconic example of blobitecture.

6. artery – A: major road or railway. The city's main artery was closed for repairs, to the chagrin of commuters.

7. eaves – B: lower part of a roof that overhangs the walls. Standing under the eaves next to the old house somewhat sheltered us from the rain.

8. gable – B: triangular section of wall under two roof slopes. Daphne's room was in the gable, making it tricky to place furniture.

9. heat island – B: urban area that is hotter than its surroundings. Heat islands are partly caused by roads and buildings absorbing the sun's light.

10. arcade – C: passageway between a series of arches and a wall. Tourists strolled through the arcade enclosing the monastery's garden.

11. brutalism – C: architecture that uses rough materials and blocky shapes. Unlike his friends, Ross found brutalism more beautiful than depressing.

12. cantilevered – A: supported at only one end. Ablavi wondered about the stability of her cantilevered balcony.

13. party wall – Wall that B: is shared by two adjoining properties. Two buildings were made into one by knocking holes into the party wall.

14. veneer – A: thin material covering another one. The cottage had stone-veneer siding.

15. genius loci – B: spirit of a place. Chey's hometown had a lively genius loci, thanks to its pedestrian-only roads and appealing outdoor cafés.

VOCABULARY RATINGS 5–9: Fair 10–12: Good 13–15: Word Power Wizard





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