

The List

Air pollution

██████-19

Topics that have received widespread or media attention

Every morning he wakes up to the ninety-nine-point-seven radio, and if it's playing something good—John Mellencamp or Tom Petty, maybe—he lets it sing while he brushes his teeth. Lately it's been the DJ's chipper voice letting him know all about Project 2025, though, which he turns off. "Nobody needs politics first thing in the morning," he says to himself in the mirror.

This morning, though, John Mellencamp wakes him up with the promise that oh yeah, life goes on. He hums along while he brushes his teeth.

He is still humming as he strides down the stairs. Liam yells, "Dad!" and Olivia says, "melting, freezing, evaporation, condensation, sublimation!"

"What?"

"She has a quiz on Thursday," Sarah says, emerging from the kitchen with his coffee.

"Yeah? Good girl, Ollie." He takes a sip of his coffee.

"Don't *call* me that," she pouts.

"Dad."

"Yes, Liam?"

"We're out of Lucky Charms."

"You don't need to be eating that junk."

Liam adopts an expression of profound sorrow. "Please?"

"Oh...ask your mother. She's in charge of the grocery list."

He pokes his head into the kitchen. "I need shaving cream, too, if you'll be at the store."

"OK." She's making Liam's lunch. "Have a nice day, honey."

He saunters down the front porch steps. The air has been hazy recently, but today it is crisp and cool, a perfect September morning. It is too nice to drive, he decides. He is a family doc in the office just down the street from his neighborhood; it is close enough to walk when he feels like it. The office's EV charging station has been acting up anyway. He must remember to tell the front desk.

He walks past the brick townhouses on his street and past the park where Liam has soccer practice. He dodges oily puddles through the construction site and strides past the tailor's and the dentist's to his own practice, just like always.

When he steps in the front door, though, he does a double take. "Martha, where's your mask?"

"Mask?" The receptionist lifts her hands to her bare cheeks. "Why would I need a mask? I'm not sick."

"It's company policy," he says, unsure if he is irritated or bewildered. "It's COVID season."

"COVID?"

"Yes, COVID. COVID-19? Coronavirus?"

Her gaze goes a little unfocused. "Oh, that," she says. "No, we don't need to worry about that. It's no longer company policy."

"What? Why not? Why now?"

She frowns a little, like she is trying to focus on a distant memory. "I don't know."

She looks troubled for a moment. Then her brow smooths. “It’s probably a new government initiative. Yes, I bet that’s it.”

He shakes his head as he unlocks his office door. “Politics,” he mutters. Well, he supposes, it will be nice to see his patients’ faces.

C ■■■ Emissions

■■■ Health

Ultra ■■■ Foods

“...no more see-oh-two going in the atmosphere, folks, that’s right, just gone overnight. The scientific community is dumbfounded. I gotta say, these government initiatives...”

He rolls over and turns off the radio. “And here I thought we’d gotten rid of media topics,” he grumbles. He sniffs. It smells like something is burning.

“Sublimation: the change of state from a solid to a gas without passing through the liquid state,”¹ Olivia recites as he walks down the stairs. “Freezing: the change of state...”

“Dad, do I have to eat this?” Liam says morosely, poking at his plate.

“Is that supposed to be an *omelet*?”

“I dunno. Can’t we buy Lucky Charms?”

He eats Olivia’s limp bacon on his way to the kitchen. Sarah is scrubbing the skillet. “What’s gotten into you?” he says, running his hand up her shoulder. “You know you can’t cook.”

“They had to eat *something*,” she says, wriggling away from him. “Cereal was...”

She mouths *too processed* and turns back to the sink.

He has to make his coffee himself this morning; the omelets have frazzled her, and she has not even started on the kids’ lunches. He lounges against the counter while the coffee pot hums. No air pollution, and no junk food. Coffee or no coffee, he likes these politics just fine, he decides.

He’s still savoring his last sips as he walks into his office, and he does not notice that the hallway décor has changed. In all the seven years he has been with the practice, the walls have hosted a line of health posters on the wall, detailing every health problem from diabetes to anorexia.

Today, the poster about depression is gone. In its place hangs an American flag.

B ■■■ k

F ■■■ e (F)

S ■■■ e

“There’s a man,” John Mellencamp sings, “with a cat, livin’ in a neighborhood...”

“Sarah!” the man yells, almost cracking his head against the bathroom counter. “Where’s my toothpaste!”

He wriggles out from the under-sink cabinet and paws through the drawers. “*Sarah!*”

There she is, finally. “It might be gone, honey. It might have had...you know...in it.”

¹ From Flexbooks.com.

"No, I don't know," he grumbles. "What on earth—oh, maybe...ugh." He can't even remember the word. "Well, find some toothpaste without...whatever it is, will you?"

"I'll look." She's halfway out the door again. "Oh, it smells like the eggs again..."

He shakes his head. It looks like she'll finally have to learn her way around the kitchen.

At least she's remembered to start his coffee this morning. He chews gum while he waits for the pot to finish. He listens to Olivia recite, "George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson..."

C■■■■ *Drinking Water*

■■■■ *men*

"Stocks are up, inflation is down, and profit is flowing into American pockets," the radio buzzes. "We'd like to remind you to be careful with your drinking water. And back to Mr. Springsteen, who'd like to remind you where he's from. Born in the USA..."

"Morning, Liam," the man says, ruffling his son's hair as he passes through the kitchen.

"Morning," Liam mumbles, poking at his plate. He had a slice of uncooked toast and a glass of water for breakfast.

The man pauses in front of the empty coffee pot. That doesn't feel quite right.

He shrugs off the feeling and pours himself a glass of water. Then he remembers the radio warning and pours it down the sink.

His eyes go wide, and he runs back to the table. "Liam, Liam!" he yells.

Liam's water glass is at his lips.

The man freezes. "Put it down," he says, the words so strangled, barely recognizable. "Liam..."

Liam starts to cry. He drops his glass into his lap, and the water spills all over him. "But I'm thirsty!"

He hugs his son too tight, rubs awkward, uncertain circles on his back. "You're okay," he says. "Shh, Liam, you're okay. I'll have some sparkling water delivered this afternoon, okay? We'll be okay."

"But I don't *want* sparkling water," Liam sniffs. "I want *regular* water..."

"Well...we can't have regular water," he says. "But I know what'll make you feel better. I—"

He stops himself. He was about to say, "I'll have your mother buy you Lucky Charms." Instead, he says, "I'll make your lunch. Go put on some dry pants."

E■■■■ V■■■■

V■■■■

He has never never seen so many illnesses in a single week. He has never worked so hard in his life. He envies the nurses (new nurses, young men—the e■■■■ly went soon after the ■■■men). Their jobs have gotten easier: no more needles or screaming kids.

He and Liam get the flu, then ■■■■■, then ■■■■■.

His walk to work feels longer every day, but what choice does he have? Not even he can afford a gas car right now.

The radio broadcasts the government initiatives now. The government wants everyone to celebrate before the offending terms vanish. He jolts awake as the DJ says, “We’ve got some big ones for you today, folks. First, *pronoun!*”

■ turns up the dial on ■ radio. ■ leans a little closer, so as not to miss anything.

“Equity!”

■ sits back a little. That will not affect ■, will it? These days, ■ is never sure.

“And last, but certainly not least, *injustice!* It’s gone, folks, just like that. Tune in tomorrow for more. And here’s John Mellencamp.”

John Mellencamp starts to sing about the fourth of July. The man listens, wondering if justice, too, counts are part of today’s initiative.

Then the man frowns. What was ■ just wondering about?