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THE UPS AND DOWNS OF BIKE TOURING WITH TYPE I DIABETES

CYCLING THE LAST FRONTIER AS TOLD
THROUGH BLOOD SUGAR GRAPHS

IF YOU LOOK AT THE EARLY TEXT MESSAGES EXCHANGED BETWEEN ERIK AND ME, THEY CONTAIN NOT WORDS SO MUCH AS SCREENSHOTS OF OUR BLOOD SUGAR GRAPHS TAKEN FROM OUR DEXCOM CONTINUOUS GLUCOSE MONITORS (CGM). OFTEN RESEMBLING ROLLER COASTERS, THESE GRAPHS MAY LOOK LIKE MORSE CODE TO THE UNINITIATED.



BUT THESE GRAPHS SAVE OUR LIVES EVERY DAY.

ON BIKE TRIPS, FOOD IS OUR FUEL. BUT TO TURN FOOD INTO FUEL, YOU NEED A WORKING PANCREAS. ERIK AND I KNOW EACH OTHER BECAUSE WE BOTH LACK ONE. IN OTHER WORDS, WE BOTH LIVE WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES (T1D). IT'S A CHRONIC CONDITION THAT CAUSES A PERSON'S PANCREAS TO STOP PRODUCING INSULIN, THE HORMONE THAT TURNS FOOD INTO ENERGY.

Our CGM graphs are used to monitor our blood sugar 24/7. Every 10 days, we insert a new sensor by pushing a fine needle into our skin. The sensor's transmitter relays blood sugar readings to our phones via Bluetooth every five minutes.

Because our pancreases are broken, we must do all the work for them by aiming to keep our CGM lines between 70 and 140 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL), a downright full-time job. We are constantly monitoring our numbers, making sure not to drop too low, which can be fatal in the short term, or too high, which can be fatal in the long term.

Blood sugar is affected by countless factors: stress, sugary foods, high altitudes, and heat bring it up; exercise, insulin, and water bring it down. But sometimes you do everything right, and you still have no idea why you're in the 300s. Erik uses an insulin pump and I use injections to administer synthetic insulin, a medication that keeps us alive but, if overused, can kill us.

Ninety years ago, a diagnosis of T1D was a death sentence. Today technology has taken us a long way. We live by these CGM graphs and feel naked without them. They give us peace of mind yet are also a constant reminder of how this disease is a never-ending catch-22.

But there's a bright side to this burden.

T1D is part of our identity. We wear these bionic-like devices on our skin like badges of honor. Like our loaded bicycles, these mysterious pods are the ultimate conversation starters. Every time someone asks me what the hell that is on my arm, I'm happy to educate. Our condition has made us realize that our health is not guaranteed and that we should do what makes us happy. In our minds, the definition of happiness is the bicycle. This disease is a pain, but it's also a huge reason why we cycled across America on the TransAmerica Trail last year and why we went on a 1,000-mile bike trip around Alaska this past summer.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO BIKE TOUR WITH
TYPE 1 DIABETES?

We cycle slowly uphill and effortlessly cruise down, but our blood sugar trends behave in the opposite way. When our blood sugar rises, it spikes fast. Bringing a high blood sugar down, however, is no piece of cake. And eating cake would make things worse.

If we want to correct our high blood sugar quickly, there are three things we do to expedite the process – take insulin, drink water, and exercise. That's one of the reasons we love bicycle touring. Cycling itself acts as a fast-acting medication for our high blood sugars, which is why we joke that cycling is the cure.

For the most part, T1D is an invisible disability. If you don't notice the insulin pump strapped to Erik's shorts or the CGM sensor on my arm, we look healthy. Our CGM graphs are also the hidden dictators of our schedule. If my blood sugar is skyrocketing, it's time to get back on the bike. If it's



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plummeting, it's time for second breakfast.

When our 100-pound bicycles are leaning against a supermarket wall, people come up to us all the time. "Oh, good. Live your dreams while you're young and healthy," they say.

They don't know that, while they're talking to us, I'm wondering when I'll be able to get back on my bike because that lunch we just had is spiking my blood sugar like crazy. They don't know that the other day Erik could have easily had a seizure from his 40 mg/dL blood sugar reading. Every single thing we do and eat has consequences.

We all have something. And turning that something into a motivator to live our dreams now is one of the best decisions we've ever made. 

Annalisa van den Bergh and Erik Douds are the creators of Miles of Portraits, a magazine and film about the people they meet as they (eventually) ride their bikes around the world. For more information, visit milesofportraits.com and find them on Instagram at @annalisavdbergh, @erikdouds, and @milesofportraits.

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To keep this straight line going, Erik makes himself some "trail cookie dough" — peanut butter, oats, and honey. Peanut butter is the perfect on-the-road snack. It's high in fat, which keeps our blood sugar up, and high in protein, which helps stabilize our sugar.



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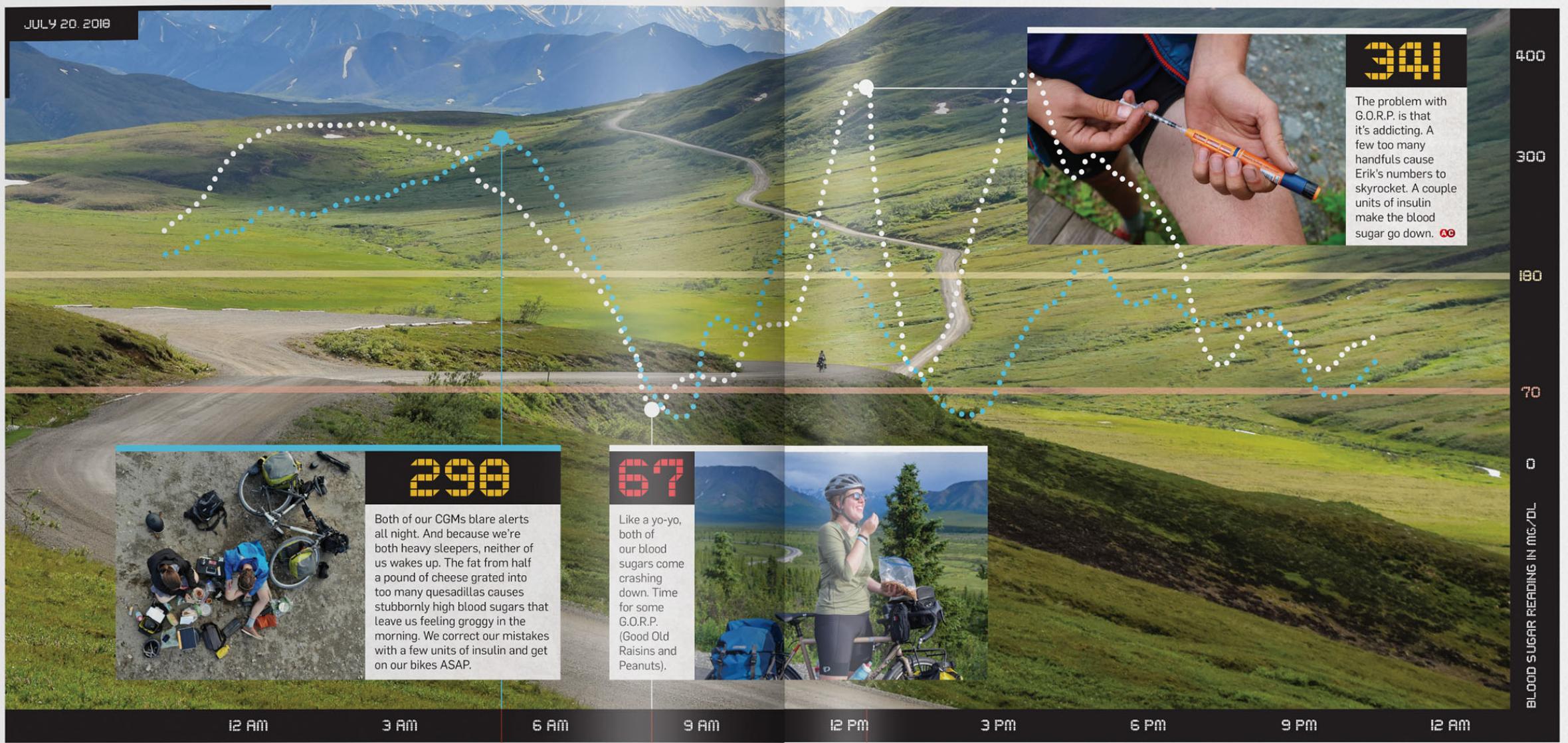
This is a perfect blood sugar number but not when you're about to hike four miles. We stash our bikes, have a snack, and hike down to the tundra to set up camp. We make sure to bring plenty of food in case our blood sugars drop low.

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