

Daily Pilot

FRIDAY, AUGUST 18, 2023 // dailypilot.com



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

THE SMITH FAMILY, Theresa, George and Taylor, from left, were reunited with their dog, Pepper, after Los Angeles Animal Control discovered she was chipped and returned her in July after she was missing for seven years.

Dog who vanished in 2016 reunites with her family

BY LILLY NGUYEN

The story began about seven years ago, Theresa Smith said, and feels wilder every time she tells it to her friends, family and now the media.

For several years the Smiths had a Boston terrier named Pepper, who traveled back and forth between the Smiths' home in Newport Beach and Theresa Smith's parents in Costa Mesa.

Her parents cared deeply for the pup, who had been a member of the family for about 7½ years. So, it was simply a routine outing for Pepper when her family dropped her off in Costa Mesa in October 2016. But then, Theresa's parents stepped out to attend church during Pepper's visit.

When the couple returned they discovered that not only had their house been burglarized, but Pepper had disappeared.

Theresa Smith said the family was convinced Pepper had been stolen, as her habit was to always return home, even if she had escaped for a stroll around the neighborhood. When she didn't, the family went into overdrive: posting on NextDoor, putting up posters and fliers asking people to reach out if they saw or had

Pepper, a Boston terrier, is close to 15 years old now.

See **Reunites**, page A5



See **Reunites**, page A5

Skimboarding contest returning to Laguna

BY ANDREW TURNER

A Laguna Beach tradition closing in on nearly half a century of fun in the sun is set to return to South Laguna the last weekend of this month.

The Vic, an annual skimboarding competition, will be contested for the 46th time when the

competitors wade out into the water at Aliso Beach on Aug. 26 and 27.

Put on by Laguna Canyon business Victoria Skimboards, the contest draws a decorated field of international entries.

"We've got a lot of history at this contest as we go into our 46th year," Tex Haines, owner of

Victoria Skimboards, said in a statement. "The pro prize purse is crowd-funded from local donors and sponsors and is currently over \$7,000. Last year, it got up to \$12,000, and we expect to have a similar or larger purse this year. We're very proud of that."

The men's professional division will count as the fifth event of the season on the United Skim Tour, which will also stop in Newport Beach for the Exile Oktoberfest from Sept. 16 and 17.

Points accrued across the top four placings for a men's professional skimboarder count toward

See **Contest**, page A5

Neighbors rally as Reagan statue defaced at sculptor's home

BY SUSAN HOFFMAN

The vandalism last weekend of a sculpture of Republican Party icon Ronald Reagan that's long greeted passersby of artist Miriam Baker's home on Balboa Island's South Bayfront has generated outcry from her neighbors and friends.

Baker first learned of the incident from her nephew, who at about 9 a.m. Sunday discovered the artwork, which stands next to

some potted geraniums on her front patio, had been defaced by someone using what appeared to have been foam insulation.

"It's incomprehensible that there is a person that nasty around that would do it out of meanness and small mindedness," said Baker, who added she didn't think the vandalism was done for political reasons.

"I think it was one person, not

See **Statue**, page A3



Susan Hoffman

AN ARRAY of some 120 sculptures are on display inside artist Miriam Baker's Balboa Island Bayfront home and studio.



Miriam Baker

THE SCULPTURE of President Ronald Reagan displayed on the front patio of Miriam Baker's South Bayfront Balboa Island home was vandalized last weekend with what appeared to be foam insulation.

Thieves target Gucci location at SCP

Costa Mesa mall is the latest target of "flash mob" thieves, who took \$100K in high-end handbags, police say.

BY SARA CARDINE

South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa is the latest target of a string of "flash mob" thefts, after a group of suspects entered a Gucci store Wednesday night, grabbed \$100,000 in high-end handbags and fled to vehicles waiting outside.

Costa Mesa Police Department spokesman Sgt. Jose Morales said officers were dispatched to the retail complex, located at 3333 Bristol St., at 7:18 p.m. and responded to the scene within a matter of minutes but were unable to locate the suspects.

Witnesses described seeing anywhere from five to 10 individuals, dressed in hooded sweatshirts and wearing masks to obscure their faces, enter the store and select a number of bags before fleeing on foot toward an exit where multiple vehicles were waiting.

"They just went in, grabbed what they could and ran out," Morales said Thursday. "There were no weapons and no injuries. Nothing was broken."

The Gucci store is currently operating in a temporary location near Bloomingdale's, as its permanent location is under construction. The new location, near the department store's entrance from the main shopping

See **Thieves**, page A5

ALSO FROM THE DAILY PILOT:



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

HUNTINGTON BEACH 11-YEAR-OLD 'FIFI' GARCIA HAVING SUMMER TO REMEMBER PAGE A2

YOUTH SPORTS

'Fifi' Garcia is having a summer to remember

BY MATT SZABO

Rob Rennie has been around plenty of top-level talent in his time coaching club soccer for the SoCal Blues.

The Blues had two alumni — midfielder Ashley Sanchez and forward Trinity Rodman — on this year's United States women's World Cup squad, as well as Team USA assistant coach Twila Kaufman Kilgore, who became the interim head coach on Thursday.

Rennie has no problem talking about one of his current players in the same breath. Sure, she's just 11, but the talent is obvious to anyone who watches Huntington Beach's Fei Fabiola "Fifi" Garcia on the pitch.

"She has a lot of similar characteristics of these professional players, potentially, if she can keep her strength," Rennie said. "She's a gifted athlete, and on top of that, she's genius ... in the way that she understands the game. There's certain players you don't really have to coach. You kind of want to let them do their own thing because they know the answers and they improvise. She's one of those players."

Fifi recently helped her Blues 2012 Lime squad win the prestigious Surf Cup tournament in San Diego. She had one goal and three assists in a 6-0 win over HB Slammers in the semifinals. She added a beautiful strike against Surf in the final to help her team to a 2-0 win, avenging a State Cup loss earlier this year.

That previous loss against Surf, which came with Fifi nursing a broken toe, still stings a bit. Losing is not the norm at all for the 11-year-old, who is seemingly turning everything she touches to gold.

She helped her Blues team win back-to-back national tournaments in futsal, the fast-paced soccer-adjacent indoor sport. Last month, Fifi's team won the IIU crown in Kansas at the at the U.S. Youth Futsal National Championships. The following week, it captured gold again in Las Vegas at the U.S. Futsal National Championship in mid-July.

"It was really special, especially to be able to do it with my teammates," Fifi said. "They're the same girls that are on my soccer team, and they're on my futsal team. It's like we have even more of a connection."

Earlier this summer, she also won a 400 meters championship in track at the AAU West Coast Nationals in Reno, with her time of 1 minute, 5.30 seconds besting the other 11-year-old girls in the field. And on the softball field, as a second baseman and center fielder, Fifi helped her Corona Angels team make the semifinals of the Alliance Fastpitch National Championships, eventually placing third.

This whirlwind happened before Fifi starts sixth grade at Saints Simon & Jude Catholic School in Huntington Beach.

"It was four or five weeks of just championships,



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

FEI FABIOLA "Fifi" Garcia, an 11-year-old Huntington Beach resident, recently won the IIU Futsal National Championship in Kansas, the Vegas Nationals in Futsal and a gold medal in the 400 meters at the West Coast Nationals. She excels at multiple sports, her coaches say.



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

FIFI PETS a tortoise at her Huntington Beach home.

championships, championships," said Fifi's dad, Hodari Garcia, a former four-sport athlete at Edison High before graduating in 1998. "And winning almost everything."

Fifi's mother, Janice, went to Fountain Valley High. The family is unsure if she will go to her neighborhood school in Edison — which three older brothers also attended — or possibly attend a private school in the Trinity League.

Though her first love is soccer, her future path is largely up to her. She also plays up on her school's girls' volleyball and basketball teams.

"She wants to play multiple sports in high school," Hodari Garcia said. "I don't know if she'll do it in college. It would be a tragedy if she can run a 1:05 as an 11-year-old, maybe by the time she's at Edison or Mater Dei she can run a 53 or something ... and you don't run. And you're so good at softball, but you don't play it. It's tough. It's going to be up to her, what she wants to do."

Scoey Peters, the head

coach of the Long Beach Sprinters youth track program, has already worked with Fifi for years.

"When I met her, she was already an aggressively competitive child," Peters said.

Though she has maturing to do when she reaches her high school years and beyond, there are some intangibles that she already possesses.

"Fifi is always going to compete at the top," Peters said. "That's kind of her DNA, her mind set. She's always going to be just a tough competitor. That's just her. As a coach, that's something you get as a benefit, that she's going to be a competitor."

After this summer of so many highlights, she is ready for the next challenge, though she admits juggling all of the sports can be a challenge.

"It's really difficult," Fifi said. "I have to fit in softball during the week, usually by just practicing at home ... It's a really tight schedule."

Especially at this age, her family wants her to enjoy as much as she can for as



Courtesy of Janice Garcia

FIFI SITS with a bevy of individual and team awards earned in her youth sports career. The 11-year-old athlete has more than 4,000 followers to her Instagram account.

long as she can. But that speed, agility and creativity are perhaps the most obvious on the pitch.

She also has her own Instagram account with more than 4,000 followers.

"It's going to be interesting watching," said Rennie, who is originally from

England and played professional soccer there.

"There's so many things that can happen, and it's going to come down to her passion, but she is definitely a gifted player. She's one of those players that you go to these tournaments and the bloke at the

entrance, they say, 'It's \$20.' You say, 'Is Fifi playing today?' And they say, 'Yeah, Fifi's in.'

"Then it's, 'OK, here's your \$20.' She's worth the admission fee."

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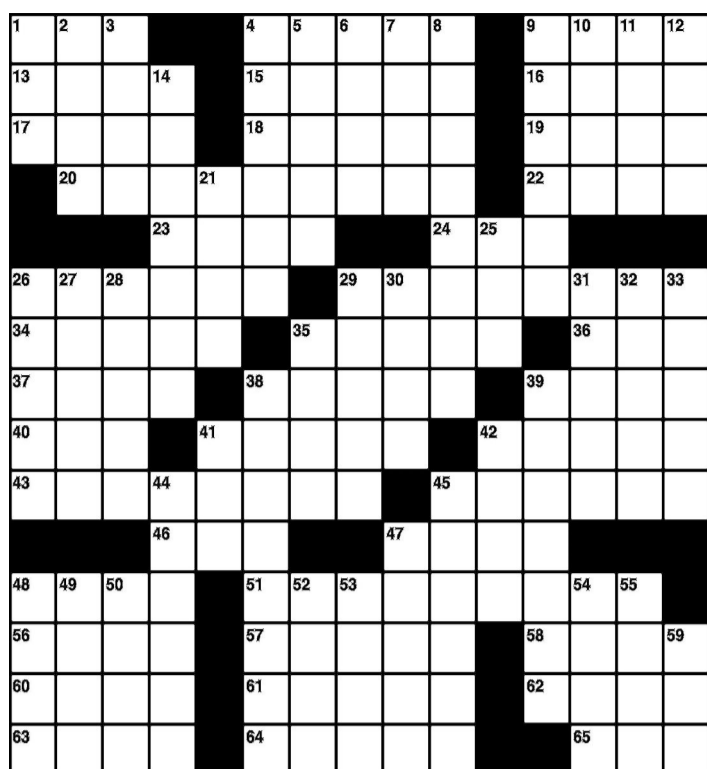
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THE DAILY COMMUTER PUZZLE

By Jacqueline E. Matthews

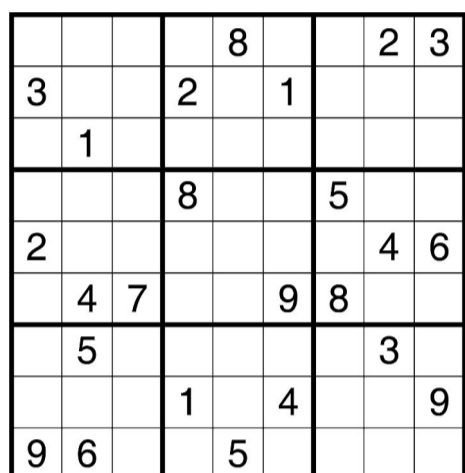


- ACROSS**
 1 "That's all _ wrote!"
 4 Battling
 9 Sign of past surgery
 13 Santa's load
 15 Embarrassment
 16 _-nots; the disadvantaged
 17 Days of _; olden times
 18 Preferences
 19 Banister
 20 Everlasting
 22 1 of 7 deadly sins
 23 Yearn
 24 Skiff crew leader's directive
 26 Slap cuffs on
 29 Run-of-the-mill
 34 Diving birds
 35 TV's Mandel
 36 Feathery scarf
 37 Lie next to
 38 Rustic home
 39 Aretha's music
 40 Prefix for fit or fire
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 46 However
 47 Tadpole's home
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 62 Gambling mecca
 63 Hankerings
 64 Kind of code
 65 Use a Singer
- DOWN**
 1 Animal enclosure
 2 Earring type

SUDOKU

By the Mephram Group

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 box (in bold borders) contains every digit, 1 to 9. For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, visit sudoku.org.uk.



For answers to the crossword and Sudoku puzzles, see page A5.

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| 3 Brontë's "Jane _" force | 25 Word attached to any or some |
| 4 Inclined | 26 Hertz competitor |
| 5 "To _ own self be true" | 27 Songbird |
| 6 Vigil before a funeral | 28 Awaken |
| 7 Prayer closing | 29 Like a designated driver |
| 8 Hold back by | 30 Bed size |
| | 31 Dwelling |
| | 32 Cosmetic kit item |
| | 33 Valleys |
| | 35 Healthy |
| | 38 Self-; egotistical |
| | 39 Foxhole digger |
| | 41 Rush |
| | 42 Fender bender result |
| | 44 Wildcats |
| | 45 June & others |
| | 47 Nuisances |
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| | 50 Plow pullers |
| | 52 Fly high |
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| | 54 Bladed tools |
| | 55 Pathway |
| | 59 Do some yard work |

- 25 Word attached to any or some
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 27 Songbird
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 30 Bed size
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 32 Cosmetic kit item
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 47 Nuisances
 48 Uncertain
 49 _ model; one to imitate
 50 Plow pullers
 52 Fly high
 53 _ as a boil
 54 Bladed tools
 55 Pathway
 59 Do some yard work

Tribune Media Services



Susan Hoffman

MIRIAM BAKER with her recreation of former President Ronald Reagan, a bronze sculpture that stands on her Balboa Island Bayfront patio and was recently vandalized.

STATUE

Continued from page A1

kids, who came prepared with the intent to deface art," she said.

Baker is a respected sculptor whose work can be found in collections in the National Portrait Gallery, Stanford University, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and other institutions across the country. Her studio encompasses the lower level of her two-story home, and much of her work can be seen through its front window.

Baker explained that the sculpture of the waving former president that stands on her front patio was created from the same mold as the original she was commissioned to create in 2011 in honor of Reagan's centennial birthday. That civic project cost about \$30,000 for the materials and foundry; Baker received about \$50,000, which was raised through private donations. The original was placed in Bonita Canyon Sports Park and was relocated to Civic

Center Park in 2017.

After word of the weekend's act of vandalism spread, neighbors came together to offer support and assistance with the cleanup to the Baker family. On the Nextdoor social media site the report of the incident generated 400 comments expressing sadness, anger and compassion about the expense and ordeal that the artist had to experience restoring it. Most people who posted comments said they thought kids were behind the vandalism while some brought up the possibility it was a political comment.

"I think that there's been some vandalism in and around the island and sometimes it's been kids just being mischievous," said neighbor Lee Pearl. "Recently we had a couple of kids go into a nearby house under construction and sprayed the interior with spray paint."

Gwen Cruttenden was walking with a friend from out of town when she saw the damage to the statue. "I always like to show the sculptures that my neigh-

bor created," Cruttenden said. "I was shocked. Here is her work that took her a long time to do and is pretty uncool to destroy someone's art piece on their own property."

Balboa Island resident Suzana Williams was decried the incident "I think this occurrence boils down to one thing, respect. Respect for our neighbor's property, respect for our beautiful island and this wonderful place we live. This defamation just shows utter lack of common decency."

The artist herself said she has no idea who might have been behind defacing the sculpture.

"It's really weird, the statue has been there a long time, 11 years without a problem," Baker said. "They must have used a whole can [of foam, because] it was sprayed all over. There's nothing that dissolves it, I had our handyman physically chisel it off, and he still has to come back to remove the sand on top."

Susan Hoffman is a contributor to the Daily Pilot.



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CHP investigating death of motorcyclist, 24, on 55

BY SARA CARDINE

A 24-year-old woman was killed Saturday afternoon when the motorcycle she was riding collided with two cars driving northbound on the 55 Freeway in Costa Mesa, the California Highway Patrol reported.

Officer Anselmo Templado said the Orange County Communications Center notified the Santa Ana CHP Station at 2:19 p.m. regarding a traffic

crash with an ambulance on route to a portion of the freeway under the I-405 northbound HOV flyover.

Investigators believe the motorcyclist was riding in between two lanes when she struck two vehicles, a tan Toyota Camry and a white Ford Ranger, Templado said Tuesday.

The Orange County Fire Authority and Costa Mesa Fire & Rescue responded to the scene,

where the woman was pronounced dead at the scene at 2:42 p.m.

Orange County Sheriff's spokesman Sgt. Mike Woodruff said the coroner's office identified the motorcyclist as Alondra Cobian, 24, of Anaheim.

While the cause of the crash is still being investigated, CHP indicated speed may have been a factor.

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CHAMPION YAHIR VALENCIA of Mexico completes a difficult maneuver in the men's pro division final of the Vic World Skimboarding Championships at Aliso Beach on Aug. 30, 2022. The Vic, an annual competition, will be contested for the 46th time at Aliso Beach on Aug. 26 and 27.



Don Leach
Staff Photographer

CONTEST

Continued from page A1

their ranking on tour. Laguna Beach native Dane Cameron, 19, ranked third on the tour, will be among the hometown favorites. He said a win in the local event would make him "most excited."

Cameron has been skimboarding for 11 years, the last three as a professional on the tour. A win in the 8-and-under division of the Vic in his youth led to him taking the plunge and committing to the sport.

"Usually at the Vic, you're looking for a barrel ride, but less tricks because the Vic usually has the biggest waves for the

UST," Cameron said of the ideal scoring maneuver. "They're looking for you to ride the biggest wave and do the biggest turn most of the time and get a big barrel ride."

The competitors are keeping an eye on the path of Tropical Storm Hilary, which reportedly intensified to a Category 2 hurricane on Thursday.

"The thing is the forecasts have been changing up a lot, whether it's going to directly hit us," Cameron, a Laguna Beach High graduate, said. "If it is super bad, that could make the waves pretty bad for the contest, but it also has a chance to make it really good. Nobody really knows until it gets close enough to forecast it a lit-

tle better. There's a ton of different possibilities."

Brazil's Lucas Fink (Rio de Janeiro), the defending champion of the United Skim Tour, and Mexico's Gerardo Valencia (Barra de Navidad), who topped the tour in 2021, are also expected to compete.

Yahir Valencia, the brother of Gerardo, currently leads the United Skim Tour standings, followed by Fink.

Amber Torrealba of Palm Bay (Fla.), a three-time winner of the Vic, including back-to-back titles in 2018 and 2019, highlights the entries in the women's professional division.

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THIEVES

Continued from page A1

area, is situated near an exit leading out to a parking garage, Morales said.

Representatives of South Coast Plaza acknowledged the incident was under investigation by police but did not comment on whether enhanced security measures had been implemented at the shopping complex in response to the thefts.

Wednesday's incident was the latest in a series of so-called flash mob robberies at Southland retail centers, including a Nordstrom at Westfield Topanga Mall and a Yves Saint Laurent store in Americana at Brand in Glendale, according to City News service. Losses from those incidents have been placed at \$300,000 each.

Another theft was reported Tuesday night at high-end denim store Ksubi in Hancock Park. Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass announced in a news conference Thursday the creation of an interagency Organized Retail Crimes Task Force, which will focus on the organized retail crimes in the county.

Orange County Supervisor Katrina Foley said Thursday she planned to work with Costa Mesa po-

lice and the district attorney's office to find an effective way to hold criminals accountable for such acts.

"We must not allow this alarming pattern of well-organized commercial burglaries plaguing businesses to continue," she said in a statement. "With the sharp rise of burglaries across Orange County and the surrounding re-

gion, Orange County will continue to support and invest in law enforcement to keep our communities safe."

Anyone with information regarding Wednesday's incident is encouraged to contact CMPD Det. Matt Richie at (714) 754-5120.

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Don Leach | Staff Photographer

GEORGE AND Theresa Smith, from left, were reunited with their dog, Pepper, after an unexpected call from Los Angeles Animal Control. Pepper disappeared in October 2016.

REUNITES

Continued from page A1

their dog.

"We had hundreds of people commenting. 'Oh, I think I saw this one walking around in the neighborhood,'" Theresa recalled.

"I could not believe — until the point when we lost her — that people were so obsessed with animals," she said with a laugh, during an interview this week. "We had people saying, 'I think I saw an animal that got run over.' 'Oh my God, I saw this one walking in the street.' 'I saw this one in the park.'"

"Every day, people were so worried and cared." But the family had no luck with their outreach efforts. Pepper seemed to be gone forever.

"We checked and called Animal Control daily for months and months and nothing. We just thought maybe she died, but I think she ... was stolen," Theresa said.

Finally, a call came in late last month with some good news.

"The Los Angeles County Animal Control called us, almost seven years later, to say, 'I think we have your

dog," she said. "I just thought, 'There's no way. She must already be dead.' But, they had a dog that was microchipped and sent us a picture, and it was our dog. When they sent us the picture, we just knew right away it was her. Just the way she looked — years and years later, she didn't really change her fur."

Smith said Pepper mostly retained her dark fur and didn't seem to gray out. Most importantly, they could tell it was her by how crooked her tail was.

Taylor Smith, who had been 15 or 16 at the time Pepper first went missing, said she was with her mother when the call came in.

"We were so excited. We were gonna pick her up as soon as possible. Next day, my mom drove to L.A. and picked her up," said Taylor, now 23.

"We got her back. She was roaming the streets in Los Angeles and they went and got her, contacted us, and now we have her back. She's almost 15 years old now and she spent almost half of her life with a complete stranger. It's crazy. She's blind, deaf and has bone cancer, but we got her back," Theresa said. "We

feel God got her back to us so that she could live the last part of her life with us."

Taylor said she noticed Pepper already seemed to know her way to the door and recognized the family by scent. The two agreed that Pepper is still by and large the same. She still shakes her legs when she gets scratched in certain places, and she's still as excitable as she was before she left. She's as smart as they remember her being, too.

"Dogs never forget the smell of anything. I wasn't sure if that was the case and then when my daughter came home, [Pepper] started wiggling her tail. She was so excited. We knew right away from the smell she recognized us," Theresa said. "I get asked a lot, 'Isn't this the dog you used to have seven years ago?'"

"She came home!"
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Los Angeles Times

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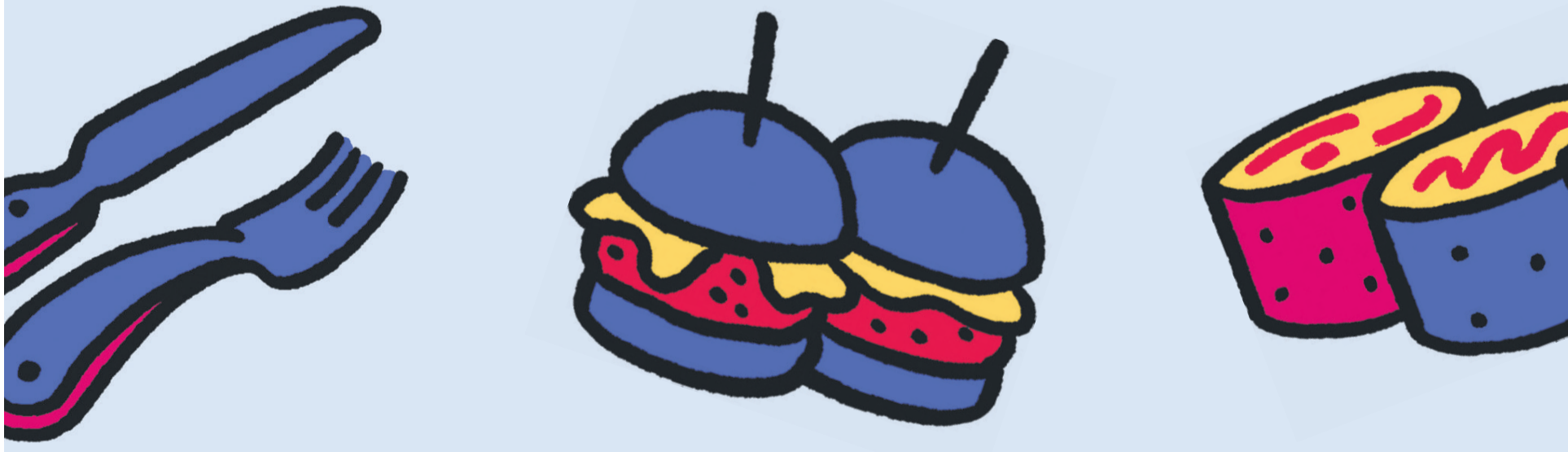
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