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**Metaphor II:
Understanding Dramatic Form
In The Transportation Systems Of Metaphor**

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Introduction

This paper is a continuation of an investigation into the essence of metaphor. I will argue here that dramatic action seems to epitomize that essence and intensify it. Further, I will argue that the world of tragicomedy is an ancient, almost genetic metaphor for the course of human events and the way of the world. It is a form of perception, a way of knowing. The vitality of contemporary tragicomedy, and the analogy between dramatic action and the metaphors of physics show us how fundamental this view has come to be.

A metaphor goes beyond, carries beyond, identifies one thing in another, brings meaning to the unknown or unfamiliar by carrying another meaning from somewhere else and attaching that new meaning to it. In this way metaphor becomes embroiled in mystery, the primal mystery of identity, and in the very act of knowing. By being the trucker, the transferer, the enzymic force that brings meaning from one thing and somehow catalyzes something else to receive it, to accept it, to wear it like a garment, to digest it through the skin, metaphoring makes knowing possible. What might be less obvious is that it makes mystery accessible, and makes vision a prerequisite of life.

How? We say we "know" something when it enters our experience intimately, when we can "recognize" or "understand" it, when we can appreciate both its uniqueness and its connection to other things we know about. We can move around it, have an idea of where we are going in doing so, and appreciate it from different angles. Hence "under-standing"--appreciating something from its foundations up. And we can express that unique identity as a product of the connections we see. We call this "recognizing"--"re-cognizing," or, in other words, re-thinking, re-imag-ining, transferring meaning from one object to another. This is beyond-carrying, or (in Greek) meta-phoring.

This might suggest that only by "carrying beyond," as metaphor does, can we have any meaning at all. It is not a stretch to suggest that all conceptual systems, all knowings, have this property. It might not be surprising to assert that the sciences are entirely metaphorical constructions, whose visions, and the web of theoretical consistencies and empirical investigations that support them, are constantly being re-recognized, re-imagined, reshaped by the international trucking company we call the scientific community.

This view of the nature and power of metaphor gives us an immediate grasp of the power of fictions of all kinds. Metaphors testify to our power to imagine, to wind around what we did not previously know, to apprehend a construct previously unknown through meanings transported from what we do know. Knowing something (particularly something large and contextual, like a story) that we did not know before, it is possible that we might find ourselves with a vivid sense of what we still do not know. This may appear as the mystery of the unknown or simply as the conviction that there are other views, other contexts, other things to be known. When an identity (say, the fictive "construct" just evoked) is revealed, it affirms the universe of things unknown that lie beyond it. What is seen and understood, seems to carry with it somehow what is not yet seen or understood, or even what is apparently invisible or unknowable.

Dramatic fictions are particularly vivid in this respect, because they embody the imaginative reality they construct. By physicalizing a play in the theatre we set before ourselves in the baldest manner the fact that the elements of the dramatic fiction--the characters, the plot, the setting, and the action that they express--are only emblems. They stand for something else. And the more vividly they appear to be themselves, the more strongly they stand for something else, and ask us to "understand" that. To make a crude analogy, fictions (stories) are more like math--the storyteller helps us navigate in that unique symbolic world. The drama, by contrast, is more like physics. Most physicists believe that they are describing a world that is "out there," independent of our observations of it. Similarly, something about the drama is starkly "there," leaning on us to understand it as if it had a life beyond our conceptions of it. When an action is played out in front of us, embodied, we hang on the "virtual history" of the action, focusing on its effects and consequences. Most drama is like a hothouse, where every ray of sun, every particle of moisture or fertilizer has an intense effect. We see each drop and particle applied, and note each effect. In this intense scrutiny for

cause and effect, we see the shape and character of the action, we look hard at that action for what we know and understand about it, to see if the image of that action in our own minds makes sense of the events as they unfold. Do we understand what happens? Do we comprehend the changes that occur? What do we not know and not understand? What is unclear or strange? Our feelings are simultaneously involved in all these questions. Are they familiar or strange? Do we understand what has been seen and felt by the characters? Do we somehow understand their actions and reactions? Can we apprehend their choices, distinguish them from what they seem compelled to do, and understand their own reflections on their positions?

But couldn't we do all this with fiction? The crucial factor is this: drama's physicality reminds us in a brutally direct way that it stands for something else. We know it cannot be what it literally is. If the gun fires and someone falls, no one will be dead (as Pirandello challenged us to remember). A retelling feels like one remove. A reenactment feels like two removes. We have been transported to another plane, where a vision has remade the original event so it can be reproduced. In its immediacy, its presence, it reminds us with vivid urgency that it is not itself, but a vision of something, transported, to make us wonder, and reach to understand something out of the ordinary.

Thus the telling of a story describes what happens, and usually quotes the persons in the story. Sometimes the narrator may explain or illustrate the point of what we are given to see. But a performance, a drama, takes the story and distills the whole telling into an action that is played out in front of us. It is almost never self-explanatory. Thus the story is transfigured, or transported, metaphored into action. The burden is now on us to see the story in the action, to understand and respond to what we see *as if* it were real. This very large "*as if*" is of course the stuff of metaphor.

If we assume that whether or not we sought one, we had a vision of the world before we entered the theatre, what has happened when we encounter a strong drama is that what we saw, what we took for real has been replaced, or at least challenged, by another (larger, more ecstatic, more frightening) vision. Knowing so much, being able to envision so vividly what is not there, what is hidden, by means of what is there, what is seen and heard, puts us in direct contact with mystery. The unknown, in this framework, is a constant companion. Strong dramas are those which not only show us vividly the contours of the vision and

sensibility, the shape of the lives we already have, but also, by carrying these beyond their immediate factuality, show us connections and implications, layers of meaning and experience we had not yet apprehended. They may also unleash the ecstatic reaches of our feelings, dreams and sensations beyond the bearable moderations of the everyday. Whether revelations of brilliant new understandings, or of the darkness of a tragic abyss, the tension between what we can safely understand and what is dark, forbidden, or closed off to us, is as organic to the drama as death is to life.

This leads us to tragicomedy. In its ironic combination of success and failure, of destruction and creation, of chaos and order, it has particular appeal in our times not simply as a formal medium for drama (as the success of *Angels in America* might suggest), but also as an emblem for understanding reality. In this metaphor, nothing in the world is intrinsically good or bad, but alloyed, inherently ironic. Even the physical world as exemplified by quantum mechanics reflects these realities: matter and energy are both particles and waves, both knowable and unknowable, both here and nowhere in particular. Tragicomedy is the mode of our time, the fitting affirmative force for a century featuring two world wars, the invention and use of weapons of total annihilation, the advent of the possibility (if not the actuality) of manmade ecocatastrophe, a deadly worldwide epidemic propagated by sexual contact, and the achievement of near-global communications. Tragicomedy is a mode of knowing and of discovering darkness, of building and of mourning loss, of discovering that clarity and uncertainty are a part of each other, of recognizing that life is a stand, futile as it may be, against entropy, and that irony can be funny, bracing, encouraging, as well as killing.

To be very clear about what tragicomedy is, we need to describe its ancestry. It is by no means clear, considering the huge variety of Greek drama performed as "tragedy" and as "comedy," that tragicomedy, the alloyed form, is not the oldest and most fundamental one. But it helps to get a clear view of tragedy and comedy as paradigms. It seems to me they emerge most clearly not as blueprints for dramatic forms, but as sensibilities, as ways of knowing, on which dramatic forms may be based. In the world of tragedy, what is at stake is the largest of human concerns--understanding and obeying divine decree, protecting and maintaining city and family, doing justice. That life and death, right and wrong, and even the survival of civilization, are often at stake along with these huge matters is not a surprise. What happens in a tragic action is typically discovery by failure. That is, the largest and most powerful of us is stretched beyond his or her limits of understanding, vision and action, on

behalf of what is at stake. Because the hero fails, he or she sees what the limits are, and so do we. We experience the terror of the impending failure, and the exhilaration of the vision attained--we have been able not only to see what the limits are, but to catch a glimpse of what is beyond them. The tragic irony is that the largest and greatest of our efforts will fail, and destruction and chaos will follow.

In comedy, by contrast, what is at stake is strictly domestic. We see social tensions resolved, problems solved, and people reconciled. We muddle through, learn to correct our defects, and to live together. A comic action typically involved pairs of people, usually a young man and a young woman, making their way through the obstacles they find in the fabric of society to come together, usually with the blessings of the same society that has stood in their way. In the process we learn about that society--its manners, morals, customs and institutions, and we experience the elation of the happy couple. They are together, and they will continue to maintain the society and propagate the race. The ironies we find are those generated by the rigidities of customs and institutions, and by the foibles, blunders, and stupidities of the characters, who muddle through in spite of their deficiencies and flaws. What is excluded from our comic vision is precisely what is included in tragedy--those largest and most fearsome matters of ultimate good and bad, right and wrong, survival and the destruction of both individuals and the society, and the nature of things, both human and divine. Comedy, by contrast, is a strictly protected world.

In both tragedy and comedy, what is at stake for the audience, as well as for the central characters, is vision--a way of knowing, of seeing the world. Part of what happens in tragedy is that large, usually competing visions of the world are in conflict with each other. Sometimes one wins. Most often, both are destroyed in the clash and a third is distilled from the wreckage. This is not a Hegelian synthesis, but a vision that could only arise from a failed test, a sunken voyage. In order to have the life of this vision, something strong must die.

In comedy, the vision is of a way to thrive in society, a way to be reconciled with its large customs and institutions, and a way for those institutions to make room for individuals who before were ostracized, or threatened with isolation. The vision is one of enlarged capacity, flexibility, and reconciliation.

With tragicomedy comes impurity, and new dimensions in irony. In tragicomedy, love may cause death. The tragic has leaked through the wall protecting the strictly domestic world of comedy, and everything that was simple is now complex, everything that was clear is now multifold and relative, and everything that in the tragic or comic worlds alone we assumed to be true is now uncertain, equivocal.

Tragicomedy forces us to understand that nothing is unalloyed, and that nature itself is equivocal and ironic in its essence. I believe it is this disposition that animates Shakespeare's *King Lear*. King Lear sees a world that is ironically inhuman. The gods are oblivious to the actions of men and women, and do not share the moral imperatives or the assumptions of societal order that people carry with them. It is as if the gods were a kind of black hole, soaking up the moral energy of the universe, all sense of order and meaning, the fruit of all seeds, and sucking them into a place beyond meaning, beyond response of any kind. As Lear inveighs on the heath:

And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,
Crack Nature's moulds, all germains spill at once,
That makes ingrateful man. (III, ii, 6-9)

There is nothing in the maddening disconnections of quantum physics that would be unfamiliar to Lear. A black hole is exactly what he would expect to find in a universe set up by the gods he sees. It can be argued that he looks directly into such a black hole, and it is on the border, the event horizon, of the black hole that he teeters when he speaks to Cordelia, "bound upon a wheel of fire," as he wakes from his great rage (IV, vii, 46-7).

Just as Steven Hawking discovers, against all intuition, that black holes do indeed radiate, so does *King Lear* resonate, throwing off the ironies of the king's titanic attempt to preserve institutions in abandoning them, maintain order in abjuring all signs of it, and affirm meaning in embracing the absurdity of the universe which rains on him.

In a reversal of reversals, this meaningful abyss of Lear's is wholly dark. We "that are young will never see so much, nor live so long" (V, iii, 326-7). We cannot even begin to see what he saw, to appreciate what vision was lost, to fathom the magnitude of the "authority"

that was there and the emptiness it leaves as it exits the land of the living. To save us from this darkness, to prevent us from being nothing but victims of this vision of vision itself being entropied away to nothing, Shakespeare has cobbled up the remnants of a society and set of traditions which, in calling out evil and defeating it in combat, will reveal the core of that structure, that authority, which will sustain us and allow us somehow to live on. Albany and Edgar, two good men and true, are left to tell the tale. They dare to live in a time of darkness and assume the mantle of government.

This coming together in the service of society, this saving grace that succeeds, patches things up, and moves on, is profoundly comic. It is as profoundly comic as the destruction of everything that was dearest and most important, the shattering of the efforts, hopes and visions of the largest and most daring among us is profoundly tragic. In this play Shakespeare has stretched the tragedy to its darkest, most desperately frightening conclusion--the vision of the abyss where all value and order is lost. And at the same time he has stretched comedy to its furthest reach: what is necessary to recoup, to rejoin, to muddle through even in the face of such a loss.

This kind of marriage of tragedy and comedy, the tragicomic sensibility, is a key to the best drama of our times. Everything is alloyed, impure and complex. What is heartening and encouraging and sustaining, that which helps us build and grow, may also be deadly. And that which is most deeply chaotic and arbitrary, or determinedly evil and destructive, may also be the source from which order and goodness springs. Nature's ironies, when seen from the perspective of human history, seem abundant in this context. The huge mass extinctions of species 250 million and 65 million years ago are the distant preludes to our times. If the dramatic range and sensibilities of American dramatists during the last three decades shrunk dramatic means to encompass little more than the constricted genus of romantic realism, this is nothing compared to the annihilations of species, the wipeout of the world as it was known, the echoing remnants of which must somehow persist in the dark recesses of our most ancient genetic memories. Something that lived through those times and through the ice ages after them, became us.

"Genetic" is the word I want to use, because I think the nexus of tragicomic sensibilities *is* genetic. That is, I think it is so basic to our apperceptions of what drama is and how it works and what it is about, and so common to every culture in which drama appears, that I suspect it

has genetic components or roots. The process of metaphoring, of using dramatic action as the most active emblem of the process of knowing (of seeing what we understand get played out in the actions of persons), is most important here. It is that act of knowing, of physicalizing what we understand, of seeing it played, which gives us the impetus to understand mystery and to know more. It gives us the groundwork on which new knowledge is based. If we can *meta-phor* it, perhaps we can know it, "understand" it.

But how is it that the particular contours of the tragicomic deserve the epithet "genetic"?

In his *Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking invokes something called the Anthropic Principle to explain parts of his theoretical conclusions--for instance, that we must exist in three space dimensions and one time dimension. The Anthropic principle, stated in brief, is that we "see the universe the way it is because if it were different, we would not be here to observe it",¹ or in its more useable, "weak" form, we should "not be surprised" if we observe that our "locality in the universe satisfies the conditions that are necessary for...[our] existence."²

Now if the Anthropic Principle can help us understand why we see the physical universe as we do, it can also help us understand why the emotional and spiritual landscape we live in is the tragicomic one. In this way, we can understand tragicomedy as inevitable, or, as I have put it, "genetic"--that is, somehow deeply imbedded on our sensibilities and ways of seeing things. It is the "without which not"--that without which we could not be who we are. I submit our times ask us to see that it is worth while to give birth, as Beckett put it in *Waiting for Godot*, astride of a grave, to build in the face of entropic decay and destruction, to draw value from a teeming moral chaos or an utter absence of value, to feel pleasure and laugh in the face of pain. Tragicomedy is the fabric that shapes our sensibilities and tells us about reality. It is what helps us see, what helps us not "be surprised" when we observe that this principle sets the conditions by which we live.

¹ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (Toronto, New York, London, Sydney, Auckland, 1988) 183.

² Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* 124.

Tragicomedy is the central metaphoric structure of uncertainty. It takes advantage of the widest network of capacities to be more than one thing at once, to be profoundly so, and to remind us deeply, at nearly every turn, of the ironies it can encompass. Ironies are important to dramatic form because they are important to perception. We know, in the slapstick comedy, when we see the stuck-up snob approach the open manhole, that he is headed straight for it, and, because he has his nose in the air, he does not know that he is about to take a fall. This is simple stage irony--in the audience we know what the character does not. When he falls, the insult to his dignity will be funny. That irony structures our knowledge of what the situation is and means. We will relish the look of surprise on his face, the cry of pain and the crash we hear. Oddly enough, it will not hurt us. But if the snob were not so much a snob, if he or she were admirable, sympathetic, we would feel the sting. We would flinch, perhaps even call out as she approaches the hole without seeing it. Metaphorically, this is what tragicomic characters do. They teeter toward disaster, sometimes at full speed, with their warts and their awkwardnesses showing. Maybe, to extend this example, as she heads toward the manhole she has a child by one hand and a parent by the other. Perhaps they do not see the hole gaping in front of them because she is announcing some particularly good news about the family. In this way, typically, their social connections and convictions are also showing, so that when they fall, what is threatened with them is the manners, morals, customs and institutions of the society which they have tried to uphold.

In *Angels in America*, for instance, we watch Louis struggle to find out which ideas and principles he is going to uphold, and whether he is going to see himself as a leaf floating on the tides of history, or as an individual whose weaknesses lead him to agonizing choices. Either way he looks somewhat ridiculous, blind, foolish, pretentious and selfish, headed for a fall, but somehow also sweet, genuine, likeable, trying hard to understand and to live with his own flaws. In his struggle for value and principle we see those values and principles, and watch how elusive and difficult they are in the face of contemporary social complications. But we also see how important, how necessary they are, and how their *ananke* is somehow going to trap the characters in the end. This is the feel of tragicomedy. As Joe marches, however sighted or blind, into the exciting and affirming new world of his homosexuality, he has figuratively his wife (and the children they will never have) in one hand, and his mother in the other. Is he marching to glory or falling down a hole? In our quantumized world, it feels like he is doing both, at the same time.

The play begins with a funny funeral, with a kind of celebration of a life that is both heartening to us and frustrating. On the one hand, we see that people can find new shores, new visions, new ways of being. On the other hand, we are told that there are none left like the dearly departed, and that we will never understand what it was like to accomplish what she did: "She carried the old world on her back across the ocean...and she put it down...in Flatbush...You can never make that crossing that she made, for such Great Voyages in this world do not anymore exist," says the old rabbi.³ Thus the play begins with a strong echo of that bitter end of *King Lear*: "The oldest hath borne most; we that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long." Entropy is also alive and well in *Angels in America*. As if to confirm this, Kushner begins Part II with the harangue of the ancient Bolshevik, Prelapsarianov (whose name means, "before the fall") telling us that we cannot act without a great theory, and we do not have one any more, or anyone capable of formulating one. He calls us "Pygmy children of a gigantic race",⁴ and invites us to imagine what it was like to have a huge, powerful, beautiful vision of the world, in contrast to today's "market incentives" and "cheeseburgers." When we do find such a vision, even he, Prelapsarianov, will lug his ancient bones back to the barricades. Meanwhile, the world has clearly gone down hill.

In tragicomedy, there is a disproportion somewhere between what we think is at stake and what is actually threatened, or between the size or power of the hero and what he is faced with (Prior is a vivid example of this mismatch), or between the size of our response and the magnitude of the actual threat. We comprehend something of the world we are in, but, unlike the worlds of tragedy and comedy, we are uncertain about what things mean, about where they are going, or about what they may mean for us. We are also uncertain about what may be necessary to solve the problems. We strongly suspect that if old Prelapsarianov's great theoretician appeared, we would tell her or him to shut up, strongly suspecting that person to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

In a world where meanings are patently equivocal, and endemically ironical, uncertainty is a part of the structure, and a part of the metaphor. Uncertainty is also a

³ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (New York, 1993, Part I) 10.

⁴ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (New York, 1994, Part II) 14.

fundamental property of contemporary physics, telling us that if we know the position of a particle, we cannot know its velocity, or *vice versa*. We are stuck with statistical mechanics, and with fields, and with understanding these structures without being disturbed by our uncertainty about some kinds of detail, like the position and velocity of particles. How can something be a wave and a particle at the same time? How can something be matter and energy at the same time? We can be frustrated, or we can seek to see it differently, to see the sense it makes rather than the sense it does not make. To put this point another way, if we want to understand at all, we need metaphors that use contradiction as a stimulus to find a new way to see.

The black hole is a crucial idea here, for it contains the fundamental contradictions of tragicomedy. It sucks everything in past an event horizon, and thus, while it is an extraordinarily important occurrence, one can (just considering this fact) get no information about it. Even the information itself is sucked in. But then it turns out that black holes do radiate. They give off energy inversely proportional to their size. As the size gets smaller, the radiation exceeds the mass equivalent of the matter that is being sucked in, and the Black Hole gets both smaller and hotter. In fact, it gets white hot and probably explodes! But whether it is small and releases all its energy, or it is large and continues to suck matter and energy in, we know less after encountering it, not more. Entropy tells us that the energy that emerges from a black hole is not the same as it went in--and the information that got sucked in is irretrievably lost.⁵

Similarly, comedy has an event horizon. In its pure form comedy is concerned exclusively with domestic events. Rigidly excluded from influence are those matters that are most important to tragedy. The movement of comedy is (like the inside of a black hole) toward the center. Typically, two young people who wish to get together must overcome the obstacles society places in front of them. When the protagonists come together, they do so in a collision that sustains society through love, acceptance, and reproduction. However, inside a black hole, as things come together they get ripped apart. Neglecting the fact that we will never get news of the ripping, the idea, the mere anticipation, is very tragicomic. Getting close is deadly. The comic is transformed to the tragicomic--another transfiguration in the age of uncertainty.

⁵ Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose, "The Nature of Space and Time," *Scientific American* 275:1 (July 1996) 62.

Outside the black hole, matter or energy subtly drawn to it is in trouble. If it does not turn course in time, it will be sucked in. Such is the movement of tragedy. A choice is made, a course is set on the basis of a vision of right action, of what corresponds to the truth about the universe and the circumstances of mankind in it. If this course is true, all goes well. If it is even subtly bent in a wrong direction, it moves inexorably toward chaos, destruction and death, often accelerating at horrible speed, and spreading damage far beyond what happens to the perpetrator (the hero) him or herself. But the black hole shows us there is a transfiguration here, too. This is best seen by looking again at *King Lear*.

In *King Lear*, the king's foolishness sucks him into the abyss of his vision--a universe with no human connection or sympathy. At the same time, the whole nation is drawn into schism and war. As with the black hole, there are radiations that are the saving graces. Lear's vision itself escapes at the event horizon to survive beyond his disaster, while he and Cordelia are swept into the abyss. And Albany and Edgar, who are still anchored in an ancient vision of value that for Lear himself, in the eye of the storm, in the vortex of the black hole, has been lost--Albany and Edgar reassemble the means to survive and rebuild. But the entropy that is the loss of Lear and his vision makes this a maimed rite. Things will never again be what they were, as large and great as they were.

Looked at comically, this sounds like the perennial grouching of the older generation, mourning that fact that things ain't what they used to be. But when we look back carefully, the "good old days" do not seem to be so good. The old folks seem to be seeing entropy where there is only change, difference. These perceptions are the regenerative ironies of tragicomedy at work, seeing growth and improvement in spite of entropy, but maintaining a sense of humor about decay.

The acknowledgement of the horror of entropy, together with a certain buoyancy, a readiness to cherish life as it is and to acknowledge how we have reconciled ourselves, grown, learned, improved--this seems to be what Kushner strives for, somewhat unsuccessfully, at the end of his two-part play. The best example of the buoyant tragicomedy of entropy is Beckett's, and the clearest and most beautiful example is *Waiting for Godot*. Briefly, we see in *Godot* the

world wound down to something close to its last gasp (it gets closer, of course, in the later plays). There are only five, possibly six people in this world, one of whom never comes. There is one tree, with a single leaf. Life is reduced to the simplest possible orbit of repeating action--waiting for something (we're not sure what) to happen. The uncertainty principle has swollen to encompass everything, and significance is nil. We must play games to create meaning, to invent significance, while we wait for the next random event. Any signs of life are accompanied by decay, as we see with the second appearance of Pozzo and Lucky, and with the disappearance of the leaf from the tree. The ravages of entropy are everywhere. But even this black hole radiates. Didi and Gogo do invent a life together, each day, habitual but original, funny and endearing. They survive the beatings, giving birth astride of a grave, making do for the next day. Even suicide, though highly desirable under these agonizing conditions, is unacceptable, everything considered, and life, such as it is, goes on.

So here in *Godot* is the pull of the metaphor, tragicomic to its core, and necessarily dramatic. That is, Didi's and Gogo's whole world is nothing but what they *do*, the actions they perform. These events move from conflict to crisis to outcome, again and again, repeating, altered only by the effects of entropy. And they demand, by the richness of their irony, by the particular nature of their emptiness, vision and meaning. By confronting us with the actual, physical action, the drama demands we meta-phor, carry beyond, and in the genetic legacy of tragicomedy, see while entropy blinds us, and make meaning across our lives even to the farthest reaches of the universe.

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