Gothic (Dis)Embodiments: Kureishi's *The Body* and Richard T. Kelly's *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest*

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Abstract
This essay examines the longstanding fantasy of body swapping, or in more contemporary terms, acquiring a new, younger body to replace the older, sick one through medical technologies. This ancient dream has clear Gothic overtones and can be inscribed in a line of continuity with other versions of Faustian pacts, such as Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). I analyse Hanif Kureishi's *The Body* (2002) and Richard T. Kelly's *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest* (2011) as present-day instances of this age-old aspiration, re-envisioning Stevenson's body swapping Gothic fantasy with the tools of modern-day medicine, updating the fantasies for radically extended youth and longer life spans which recent developments in the biosciences suggest might gradually become true. A horror of the aged body permeates both novels, which crucially deal with older men who wish to recover their lost youth and vigour, while the Gothic motifs of the *Doppelgänger* and devilish pacts constitute recurring features.

Keywords: *body-swapping, Gothic (dis)embodiments, posthuman body, uncanny, immortality body transplant*

The longstanding fantasy of body-swapping, or in more contemporary terms, acquiring a new, younger body to replace the older, sick one through medical technologies, has been an enduring Gothic trope. This ancient dream of body-swapping can be inscribed in a line of continuity with other versions of Faustian pacts, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), H.G. Wells's "The Story of the Late Mr Elvesham" (1896) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). I propose to analyse Hanif Kureishi's *The Body* (2002) and Richard T. Kelly's *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest* (2011) as present-day instances of this age-old aspiration, re-envisioning Stevenson's body-swapping Gothic fantasy with the tools of modern-day medicine, updating the fantasies for radically extended youth and longer life spans

which recent developments in the biosciences suggest might gradually become true. Indeed, as Spooner (2006: 8) observes, contemporary Gothic addresses topics which are as relevant to our culture and concerns as they were to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, in the present case the "preoccupation with bodies that are modified, grotesque or diseased". The body-swapping fantasy, a quintessentially Gothic trope, is a pertinent example of this contemporary preoccupation and has received copious attention in fiction, film, and other media[1].

The uncanny bodies in these texts raise fundamental questions about the deep-seated desire for physical youth and immortality, as well as the nature and potential for evolution of a stable concept of identity under radically changed circumstances. Kureishi's *The Body* specifically addresses a number of ways in which this dream on the part of the protagonist, an elderly writer, might become fulfilled in the not so distant future with the implementation of such techniques as whole-body or brain transplants[2]. Richard T. Kelly's *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest*, in turn, similarly plays on the fantasy for a more youthful and vigorous body on the part of an ageing cosmetic surgeon, cleverly weaving motifs central to the Gothic genre, such as shadows, mirrors, hauntings, ghost-like apparitions, with Forrest inhabiting a succession of bodies until he finds one that is a perfect 'fit'. A horror of the aged body permeates Kureishi's and Kelly's texts, which crucially deal with older men who wish to recover their lost zest for life, while the Gothic motifs of the *Doppelgänger* and devilish pacts constitute recurring features. According to Chris Baldick's apt definition, a text in the Gothic mode should contain a "fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration" (Baldick 2009: xix), a description that appositely fits Kureishi's

[1] To be sure, judging by the long list of films and series where it occurs, the fantasy of body-swapping is extremely popular, in particular due to the potential for humorous satire and the often parodic treatment that arises from gender role switches, while critical light is shed on the prevalence of stereotypical attitudes that by dint of the role switch are questioned and often changed.

[2] Some of these techniques have already been performed in animals. In the 1970s American surgeon Robert White transplanted the heads of monkeys into the bodies of other monkeys, an experiment he repeated in 2001.

and Kelly's novels, which centrally incorporate and play with these Gothic elements.

1. "Shopping for bodies"[3]

Cultural anthropologist Becker (1997: ix) writes that the "idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity". Kureishi's *The Body* provides a detailed examination of the fear of death and physical decay. In Kureishi's novel an elderly writer, Adam, is offered the chance to trade his body for a younger one, to which his brain will be transplanted, an operation that has already been performed on some people but is being kept as a secret.

The story revolves around questions of self-identity, how that identity shifts over time while retaining a core of stability, and how we try to make sense of ourselves and of our inscription in the world. Like Robert in *The Possessions of Dr Forrest*, Adam is also, meaningfully, described in terms reminiscent of Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. He is said to be "at least three different people" (Kureishi 2002: 4) and to have "crazinesses, bewildering moods and 'internal disappearances' I am not even aware of" (4-5). As Adam puts it: "I can go into the shower as one man and emerge as another, worse one. My pupils enlarge, I move around obsessively, I yell and stamp my feet" (5), a depiction evocative of Mr Hyde. Robert, in turn, is confronted by Dijana Vukovara with the telling question: "Have you been One, or Many? Not, indeed, a succession of selves?" (269).

Even after years of self-analysis and therapy and despite his writing, through which, as he explains, "I think about the world, about what matters to me and to others" (94), Adam feels he has not been able to change his inner core. As the narrator puts it: "Nothing has cured me of myself, of the self I cling to [...] I would probably say that my problems are myself; my life is my dilemmas" (5). Considering the possibility of acquiring a new body, Kureishi himself explains in an interview that he grew very interested in the "philosophical questions about identity: 'Who would you be? What makes you who you are?'" since "your identity, your face, your body

[3] The citation is from Kureishi (2002: 24).

– it's a map of your experience. [...] A human being is composed entirely of memory, physical appearance, and what one believes others will make of one's physical appearance" (Mead 2004), themes that are repeatedly addressed.

The Body takes the technique of preserving a brain in a cryogenic chamber one step further by imagining a brain transplant into a new body. The novel envisages the appearance of a whole new society made up of people like Adam, people who have acquired new bodies but kept their brain, called Newbodies. As one of the characters explains: "There'll be a new class, an elite, a superclass of superbodies. Then there'll be shops where you go to buy the body you want" (97)[4]. Adam, in turn, muses: "If the idea of death itself is dying, all the meanings, the values of Western civilization since the Greeks, have changed. We seem to have replaced ethics with aesthetics" (97). Adam considers his new life and body as an experiment and his plan is to enjoy his new body for six months and then go back to his old one. Feeling like a prisoner in his old body he is at first ecstatic to experience the pleasure his new one gives him. Eventually, however, Adam comes to see himself as a mutant, a freak, who only forgets his condition when he is with "real people, those with death in them" (102), out of sync with other people, both those close to his body age but also those near his brain age. Adam's new body, however, is considered as a prize commodity and in great demand, since others want to purchase it for their loved ones. Unable to return to his old body, which by now he is looking forward to doing, and forced to run away and go into permanent hiding, Adam describes himself as a "stranger on the earth, a nobody with nothing, belonging nowhere, a body alone, condemned to begin again, in the nightmare of eternal life" (126). Interestingly, a similar fate[5] befalls Robert Forrest. Despite having at long last found a body to inhabit that appears to be a perfect fit, Forrest is forced to keep fleeing. He cannot stand his

[4] Bauman (1992: 53) calls immortality the "great de-equalizer", arguing that the "political economy of immortality [...] proves to be just another policy of stratification; perhaps the most effective of such policies".

[5] Another similarity between the two narratives is that both Adam and Robert, wearing new bodies, go back to their wife and girlfriend, respectively, for a short period of time.

own unspeakable betrayal of one of his best friends, Lochran, caused by Forrest's moving into the body of Lochran's son. As Robert confesses: "I am alive, and afraid, and in that fear I will live on until the life is torn from me [...] I have abandoned all hope. And yet, still, I exist" (Kelly 2011: 349). Like Adam, Robert never loses the strong desire to live, despite all the trials and tribulations he has to endure.

2. "One need not be a chamber to be haunted"[6]

The Possessions of Doctor Forrest describes the descent into madness and dissolution of Doctor Forrest, a plastic surgeon, in the throes of a middle life crisis. After his girlfriend Malena leaves him for a younger man, depressed by the perception of his gradual and unstoppable process of ageing, Forrest dreams of recovering his lost youth and vigour. It is a fantasy that, in quintessentially Gothic mode, is granted to him as the result of a Faustian pact with an emissary from the devil in the shape of a woman, resulting in unforeseen, horrendous consequences. When Robert Forrest goes missing his close friends Steve Harford, a psychiatrist, and Grey Lochran, a paediatric surgeon, who had grown up together in Scotland, embark on a quest for Robert with unpredictable, soul-searching outcomes that will change their lives forever.

The story is narrated in the form of journals or diaries by seven different characters, with Lochran and Harford as the main narratorial voices: this is reminiscent of the narrative structure of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)[7]. It culminates with "The Confessions of Dr Forrest", paralleling Dr Jekyll's confessions in Stevenson's novel.

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[6] The citation comes from Dickinson (1961: 333).

[7] In an interview with Glennis Byron (2011), Richard T. Kelly explains that he is "especially fond of the notion of the gothic novel as a collation of different documents, epistolary/recorded/diaristic e.g. *Dracula*'s many formats, the varied narratives of *Jekyll and Hyde*. And I love that 'confessional' mode that seems a particular hallmark of the Scottish gothic – *Jekyll and Hyde* again, and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, where the anti-hero surfaces late in the text to reveal the true face of the evil that's gone before".

Kelly's novel powerfully articulates, in characteristically Gothic mode, many repressed desires widespread in our contemporary society with its emphasis on the immediate gratification of all manner of cravings and pleasures. It combines an ancient but increasingly stronger and more visible preoccupation with a longer life span and even immortality, which Dr Forrest is willing to attain at all costs. *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest* takes Gothic horror into unsuspected, unspeakable dimensions as Robert Forrest lured by a mysterious, seductive woman who promises him a kind of immortality, agrees to inhabit another body, to provide some relief from his ageing one.

The tremendously unsettling feeling of unease and foreboding experienced by Lochran and Hartford when confronted with some of the bodies that Robert Forrest takes possession of is a paradigmatic instance of what Freud ([1919] 1985: 340) describes as "uncanny" and defines as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar". Other prominent instances of what may cause a feeling of uncanniness also include the repetition of the same, the theme of the double and the return of the dead. According to Freud, that which provokes uncanny feelings is "in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud [1919] 1985: 363-4). The idea that the protagonist's mind is trapped inside the wrong body, which in its growing old is experienced as betraying him, is dramatised in both Kureishi's and Kelly's novels, and can be seen as an instance of the surfacing of the uncanny. Indeed, amongst the many figurations of the uncanny, Royle (2003: 2) notes how it can be "construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself *as* a foreign body".

Burwood (2008) argues that ageing, amongst a number of other circumstances, can lead to a dissociation between mind and body, as well as to the perception of one's body as uncanny. This feeling of estrangement from one's body occurs, as Burwood puts it, "*because I realize I am my body* [...]. The origin of dissociation and its peculiar form of self-alienation lies in this recognition and its combination with a sense of 'otherness'" (2008: 274; emphasis in the original). Indeed, Forrest's appropriation of other bodies is another extreme example of the uncanniness of something that "ought to

have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" in Freud's words ([1919] 1985: 345).

3. Uncanny bodies

Kureishi's and Kelly's novels place great emphasis on the body and on the inescapability from it, as well as on the riddle of identity, in particular when a brain is transferred to a different body. As Adam in Kureishi's novel explains when he wakes up in another man's body: "I had always taken it for granted that I was a person, which was a good thing to be. But now I was being reminded that first and foremost I was a body, which wanted things" (Kureishi 2002: 31-2). Indeed, the conscious ego, as Freud argues ([1923] 1984: 366), is "first and foremost a body-ego". Adam himself, in his new guise as Leo, remembers Freud's analogy. As Adam/Leo ponders: "It's as if I have a ghost or shadow-soul inside me. I can feel things, perhaps memories, of the man who was here first. Perhaps the physical body has a soul. There's a phrase of Freud's that might apply here: the bodily ego, he calls it" (45). Indeed, Freud ([1923] 1984: 364) states that the "ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface" while "a person's own body, and above all its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring". As neuroscientists have been stressing, without the body the brain cannot function properly (see Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1992; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Rowland 2010; Ramachandran 2011; Clark 2011). Neurologist António Damásio (1994), in his famous refutation of the Cartesian body/brain dualism, emphasises the role of the body and emotions in the reasoning process, thus crucially reinserting the body in the thinking mechanism. According to Damásio,

> the neural basis of the self [...] resides with the continuous reactivation of at least two sets of representations. One set concerns representations of key events in an individual's autobiography, on the basis of which a notion of identity can be reconstructed repeatedly [...] In brief, the endless reactivation of updated images about our identity (a combination of memories of the past and of the planned future) constitutes a sizable part of the state of self. (1994: 238-9)

Damásio further argues that our experiences "tend to have a consistent perspective" which he sees as "rooted in a relatively

stable, endlessly repeated biological state" whose source is "the predominantly invariant structure and operation of the organism, and the slowly evolving elements of autobiographical data" (1994: 238)[8]. From this perspective, then, who is Adam (a question he recurrently asks)? How does his new body envelope affect his sense of being Adam? Will his formal body's memories conjoin with its new brain to produce a wholly new personality? Although contrary to any medical data and scientific evidence, on occasion Robert Forrest experiences "remnants of the host consciousness" (Kell 2011: 281), in this case MacCabe's, and when housed in Carver's body he also realises that "some mental vestiges of the host were returning to me, in now-familiar fashion" (295). These questions remain, of necessity, mostly unanswered, but they are increasingly part of a growing repository and repertoire of questions that will insistently arise as new medical possibilities in the area of brain transplants come up. In related vein, the same conundrum applies to Robert Forrest. How far do Robert's successive new bodies, including female ones, influence and determine who he is? Moving from body to body, where does his self reside? Who is he? Is he still Robert Forrest or an unnamable, unspeakable entity? As Dijana Vukovara remarks, "you *are* your body, Robert. Nothing else. There is no person apart from a body" (263; emphasis in the original). Although Damásio has not discussed the scenarios raised in these novels, it is possible to deduce that he would labour under no doubt that both Adam and Robert would no longer be those entities, the persons they were and that their circle of family and friends knew before their physical metamorphoses. For Damásio,

> neural circuits represent the organism continuously, as it is perturbed by stimuli from the physical and sociocultural environments, and as it acts on those environments. If the basic topic of those representations were not an organism anchored in the body, we might have some form of mind but I doubt that it would be the mind we do have. (1994: 226)

[8] See Lakoff and Johnson 1999. For Rowland (2010: 3), in related vein, the new science of the mind is "inspired by, and organized around, not the brain but some combination of the ideas that mental processes are (1) *embodied*, (2) *embedded*, (3) *enacted*, and (4) *extended*".

Hayles's insistence on "putting embodiment back into the picture" (1999: xiv) follows the same train of thought. As she asserts, "embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it". The body you inhabit, then, is a crucial player in shaping your identity and thoughts. Kureishi's and Kelly's narratives vividly illustrate this state of affairs, dramatising the difficulties, physical and ethical, that brain and body transplants will inevitably raise.

As Burwood (2009: 122) remarks, philosophers in general have not been "particularly attentive to how one's body as a whole enters into and shapes our sense of self: how, for example, the replacement of exterior parts such as the hands or the face challenges our sense of who we are". If, as Cockburn (1985: 492) has argued, "there is a sense, or a number of senses, in which a person is localized or concentrated in the face", then does someone who has had a face transplant still feel like herself/himself? Given that science and medicine have been making great strides in terms of transplanting parts of the body, including successful facial transplants[9], Cockburn's question is more than merely speculative. While body-swapping remains a fictional scenario in 2012, scientific research does point to the possibility of brain or head transplants and even mind-uploading in the not so distant future.

Ironically, Robert Forrest's profession as a plastic surgeon exacerbates the perception of his loss of youthful looks, both to himself and to his patients. It also makes him aware of the futility of the whole enterprise in terms of turning back the clock. As Jean Baudrillard (1994) states:

> In the facial traits, in sex, in illnesses, in death, identity is constantly "altered". There is nothing you can do about it: that's destiny. But it is precisely that which must be exorcized at any cost through an identification with the body, through an individual appropriation of the body, of your desire, of your look, of your image: plastic surgery all over the place. If the body is no longer a place of otherness [*altérité*], a dual relationship, but is rather a locus of identification, we then must reconcile to it, we must repair it, perfect it, make it an ideal object.

[9] The first full face transplant was performed in 2010 in Spain.

Robert's successive relocations into different bodies in a never-ending search for youthful good looks acutely dramatise the importance of bodily appearance in contemporary culture, even though the body may have been altered beyond recognition, becoming a simulacrum of itself. Plastic surgery may provide some relief and foster an increased sense of self-esteem but more cosmetic interventions will always be needed to keep up appearances and eventually the benefits afforded by the surgery will cease. Since, in contrast with fantasies of virtual, bodiless reality and life lived in virtual environments, a body is an unavoidable necessity in real life, escape from an old body into a new "facility" (Kureishi 2002: 26) may be the only solution which, however, medical science cannot as yet provide. A society of Newbodies will indeed appear, in all likelihood, profoundly uncanny. However, gradually acquiring new bodies might become a generalised practice, like cosmetic surgery, or like choosing a special outfit for a party: shopping for bodies, as for clothes, might one day become as trivial as choosing a fashion accessory. The Gothic overtones and uncanny potentialities of this futuristic scenario are unmistakable.

4. Riveted to the body: fantasies of physical escape

The Gothic preoccupation with imprisonment and hauntings is a crucial *leitmotif* in the novels under examination, in particular the sense of being a prisoner inside your own, decaying body, the uncanny horror at being unable to abandon one's physical case. As Baldick (2009: back matter) proposes, the "existential fears of Gothic may concern our inability to escape our dying bodies". Indeed, in his "Confessions" at the end of the novel, Robert Forrest explains that he felt "cursed with old Calvin's sense of the body as the prison-house of the soul" (251). According to Bloom (2010: 182) "nowadays, it is our rebellious bodies [...] that scare us the most [...] The body is split open and anatomized; our interiors have become the new architectural spaces of fear".

The drive to leave the ageing body behind to search for a new one by all possible means is an impulse at work in these narratives. This relates to what Emmanuel Lévinas (2003: 55) describes in his extended meditation on the embodied condition and its vicissitudes as the need to break away from the human condition of being "riveted

to the body" and the "need to get out of oneself", suggesting that there is a central discontent in the human state of being embodied. As Lévinas ponders: "[is] the need for escape not the exclusive matter of a finite being? […] Would an infinite being have the need to take leave of itself?" and he further muses: "Is this infinite being not precisely the ideal of self-sufficiency and the promise of eternal contentment?" (2003: 56). Indeed, fantasies of greater longevity, body-swapping and even immortality are inescapably related to the question of death, finitude and whether death divests life of meaning. The Lévinassian concept of escape from the riveted self can be productively linked to an urge to escape from the restrictive body that no longer fulfils its desired functions and towards a freedom that is not curtailed by the unavoidable existence of death, all of which can be seen at work in Kureishi's and Kelly's novels. Lévinas's perceives escape as the "need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*" (2003: 55; emphasis in the original). As Bergo (2011) observes in analogous vein, Lévinas's

> early project approached transcendence in light of humans' irreducible urge to get past the limits of their physical and social situations. His transcendence is less transcendence-in-the-world than transcendence through and because of sensibility. This approach to transcendence as evasion poses the question of mortality, finite being, and so, infinity.

The necessity to "transcend the limits of our finite being" (Lévinas 2003: 53), the "need for escape" is, according to Lévinas (2003: 60), the "fundamental event of our being". He sees "limitation" (2003: 70) as the "mark of the existence of the existent", the "weight of the being that is crushed by itself", as Eden, Adam and Robert are caged inside and chained to their elderly bodies. According to Cohen (2005: 113), Lévinas, like Heidegger, reflects on the anxiety of the "individual who recognizes his own finitude, the solitary and individualizing being-towards-death of each human being"[10],

[10] Bergo (2011) argues that in Lévinas's view the "deep motivation of need is to get out of the being that we ourselves are – our situation and our embodiment [...] Levinas's counter-ontology moves Heidegger's Being toward the unified duality of sentient self and intentional 'I', here and now, not projected toward its ultimate disappearance in death".

leading to a fantasy of escaping, or at least delaying death through such medical procedures as the body or brain-swapping speculated upon in Kureishi's and Kelly's novels.

5. Conclusion

The persistence of the ancient dream of body-swapping, with its clear Gothic overtones, highlights the enduring appeal of the fantasy of new embodiments that would grant a new lease of life. In the novels analysed in this essay the Gothic merges seamlessly with medical techniques drawn from contemporary science and utopian visions of posthuman bodies that improve on the old ones. The Gothic is updated for our contemporary times, steeped as they are in a genetic and scientific imaginary. It is no coincidence that the protagonists of all these texts revolving around body-swapping are elderly men feeling the weight of an ageing body and yearning for a new one. Adam and Robert Forrest are inscribed in a long lineage of similar fictional characters such as Mr Elvesham in H.G. Wells's "The Story of the Late Mr Elvesham", Dr Jekyll in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Billy Pilgrim, a Professor of Biophysics at King's College, London, featuring in C.P. Snow's *New Lives for Old* (1933).

The fundamental discontent with the human condition that Lévinas diagnosed has found expression in contemporary times in the yearning to at least partially escape from the body either through physical improvements such as prosthetic devices, plastic surgery, genetic engineering, cloning techniques, nanotechnology and others or, more radically, literally to escape into a new body while keeping your own brain, as in Kureishi's and Kelly's texts. The modified bodies in these tales raise crucial questions about the deep-rooted yearning for physical youth and an immortal existence, as well as the consequences those physical alterations would cause to a stable concept of identity, given the non-coincidence of body parts. Baudrillard (2000: 3) talks about immortality as "our ultimate fantasy, a fantasy that is also at work in all of our modern sciences and technologies [...] in the deep freeze or cryonic suspension and in cloning in all its manifestations".

Despite cyberfiction's yearnings for the transcendence and obsolescence of the body, with only the brain interacting in virtual

reality, the characters in these tales crave the concreteness of the flesh, of the youthful, healthy body, contrasting with their elderly ones, thus not only bringing up to date but also projecting into the future visions of posthuman alternatives. With their emphasis on the need for embodiment, they conform more to Hayles's vision of a future where humans have retained their bodies, albeit enhanced by electronic prosthetic devices, than her nightmare of a "culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being" (Hayles 1997: 266). The fantasy of exchanging their aged physical cases for younger ones suggests, in Kureishi's novel, the possibilities that the medical sciences might hold to fulfil that dream. In Kelly's novel, the Faustian pact that enables Forrest to jump from body to body, irrespective of sex, despite sharing a similar dream of a prolonged life span, takes on an unmistakeably uncanny, Gothic tone that taps into the contemporary emphatic pursuit of youth and immortality. This engagement with the contemporary medical and scientific imaginary, with the body as a quintessential site and ground of being but also of deep anxieties and fears, stretches the frontiers of the Gothic which, by dint of these updated thematic concerns, readily expand into the territories traditionally occupied by utopias, dystopias and science fiction, thus signalling the unabated vigour and pertinence of the genre.

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