

**Experimental Writing:
Jaspreet Singh in Conversation**
Robyn Read and Owen Percy

Jaspreet Singh grew up in India and Kashmir and moved to Montreal in 1990. He received his PhD in Chemical Engineering from McGill University and worked as a research scientist and a teacher before moving to writing full time. He has published fiction in *Walrus*, *The Fiddlehead*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Zoetrope*, and several anthologies of new writing. *Seventeen Tomatoes: Tales from Kashmir*, his first collection of short fiction, won the 2004 Quebec McAuslan First Book Award. *The Montreal Gazette* called Singh's debut "a haunting fairy tale" while the *Calgary Herald* reported that *Seventeen Tomatoes* "captures the two sides of Kashmir brilliantly." *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper, noted that Singh's stories were "steeped in mournful affection for a war-scarred land and its peoples." Singh recently finished writing *Speak, Oppenheimer*, a play for Montreal's Infinite Theatre, which imagines conversations between three nuclear physicists and raises questions of nuclear proliferation and apocalypse in a post 9/11 world. His new novel is titled *Chef: The Book of Early Sorrows*. At the time of this interview he was finishing his term as the 2006–2007 Markin-Flanagan Canadian Writer-in-Residence at the University of Calgary. He invited *ARIEL* into his home in Calgary's Kensington neighbourhood on May 28, 2007.

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We were wondering if you could speak a bit about what brought you to write Seventeen Tomatoes, a collection of creative fiction, after completing your doctoral work in chemical engineering.

Even before I became an engineer I wanted to become a writer. You see the book simply imposed itself on me. It became absolutely necessary to write it down. In Montreal I used to think a lot about Kashmir:

why this most beautiful part of the world was slipping into more and more violence? What was the gravitational field like at the border? There were a million men posted at the India-Pakistan border in battle-ready positions, and there was fear of nuclear annihilation, and I thought there were stories that had to be told. Bertolt Brecht once asked himself: will poems be composed, will stories get written during the dark times? Of course, he answered, there will be poetry and there will be stories, but these fictions will be about the dark times.

We would like to talk about your own professional trajectory from chemical engineer—a profession imbued with “fact” which uses a language of fixed or concrete equations leaving less room for what we have come to call “subjectivity”—to writer—a profession that always operates within a series of fluid, mutable and subjective systems of reading, writing, and analysis. Is writing your rebellion against science? Or, conversely, is writing a kind of science for you?

Well, to me, writing is a great laboratory. One has access to unconstrained budget! I would like to differ with your characterization of science. The process of doing science doesn't eliminate subjectivity. In fact, when one is doing work in the sciences, just like in the arts, the creative processes are more or less similar. Of course one reports scientific results differently, in a rigorous mathematical language. But . . . it can be very nourishing for me to read a scientific text when I'm working on a story. It can actually stimulate me in the same way that when I used to work as a scientist I would read fiction or poetry, or I would watch films which were very stimulating. I'm actually interested in what connects these disciplines. I'm not saying that they are identical—they *are* different—but I believe that one can certainly nourish the other.

The question, in retrospect, was directed more at the material one deals with in each discipline. The tools of each profession. If you are using a chemical compound that you know is comprised of a certain amount of substance X and a certain amount of substance Y, you know what result you will get when you add it to substance Z. In writing, the currency of a certain word or language in general seems less predictable.

Well, it seems to me what you're talking about are tests in science, not experiments. When you perform experiments, you are in the realm of the ambiguous, the unanswered. To conduct a good experiment one must first learn to pose the right question(s). A *test*, on the other hand, is more or less like following a set cooking recipe. A test involves answering a ready-made question, and sometimes one knows the answer well in advance. Writing a short story is very different from conducting a test, but is not very different from conducting a good experiment. The most important part of conducting an experiment is *how* to pose the right question. I think that's what each writer is always trying to do.

Did considering how to pose the right question lead to your decision to focalize your stories through the perspective of a child protagonist?

When I started formulating the book I had not thought of the child's point of view. I was writing a very different book, a very heavy book. There was no room for lightness. In the beginning my stories actually read like newspaper reports, so they were soaked with heaviness. But then the story "Seventeen Tomatoes" happened. It was a great accident—I wrote that story in two days and that story changed the writer and the book he was writing! The child's point of view opened up many possibilities, made the borders more porous—not just the border between India and Pakistan, but borders between men and men, and men and women, and women and women, those between children and adults, so on and so forth. It made lyricism and innocence and humor possible. The child's point of view handed the book its lightness, if I may, in the times of heaviness. "Seventeen Tomatoes" became the central story for the entire book. Susan Sontag says: "We know we must pick one story, well one central story; we have to be selective. The art of the writer is to find as much as one can in that story. With this story you can tell many stories, that there will be a necessity in it" (214). The child's point of view allowed me to tell many stories. The question that arises when writing about a region where there has been almost ceaseless conflict is "How does one step outside of language imposed by politicians and Generals and media?" or "How does one write about the everyday—that despite this violence, life goes on?" The child's point of view allowed me to attempt these things.

The choice seems, in some ways, akin to your use of scientific tropes: by this we mean that in showing the world through the eyes of a child, you end up explaining his or her environment in very tangible terms, using clear, concrete images that could be conceived by either adult or child. Tomatoes, for example, are described as “reddish-green fruits the size of Ping-Pong balls” (14). Do you consider there to be a correlation, between the use of the scientific trope and the child protagonist?

I’m assuming that by “scientific trope” you mean something very concrete—an object which is meant to symbolize. Sometimes scientists do things very indirectly. I don’t know if science is always so concrete and always so direct. The child’s point of view is as much the artist’s trope as much it is the scientist’s trope (if I may). Artists try to achieve accuracy and precision, just like scientists attempt to do so. An artist’s gaze and a scientist’s gaze is really the gaze of a child. The first draft of the story “Seventeen Tomatoes” says: “The girl entered the tent with a very large number of tomatoes.” The second draft says: “The girl entered the tent with seventeen tomatoes.” This kind of precision works well (don’t you think so?), and not just because the boys will grow up to become scientists. They are in a sort of a dialogue of precision with the world right from the beginning.

What—if we may ask a very simple question—was your objective with Seventeen Tomatoes? Is it meant to serve some journalistic purpose? Is it a love letter to Kashmir? A lens through which the world or the West may view Kashmir? An exposé of sorts? Pure narrative?

It is all the things you suggest, and neither. Kashmir was going through a dark time; the whole world was going through a dark time. And I was going through my own dark time, so the first objective was: Is it possible to combine my sadness and Kashmir’s sadness and the world’s sadness? The second objective was: “Is it possible to write funny stories set in the dark times?”

You suggested earlier that writing had imposed itself on you. Do you feel that these two things—writing imposing itself on you and the objective you had—are at all related? Did you feel that you were working towards some end? Or were you just working?

Each one of these stories—and I should say that they are not autobiographical—each one of these stories began as a deeply felt moment. As Orhan Pamuk says: “A writer must learn to tell one’s own story as if it were someone else’s story, and to tell someone else’s story as if it were one’s own” (n. pag.). I think a similar sort of thing was going on in that sense. Each one of these stories has a deeply felt moment, or certain things that I wanted to process for myself. From myself I would move to the world around me and then to Kashmir. And all the troubles of Kashmir would slowly enter the story. For example, the story “Captain Faiz” is clearly a Kashmir story, but it originated out of my inability to process (while living in Canada) the horrible images of Guantanamo Bay prison camp and the Abu Ghraib torture cells. I would look at these horrendous images and think about similar prison camps and torture cells all over the world, also the ones in Kashmir—which rarely appear on the front pages of papers in North America.

In addition to your employment of the scientific metaphor to, as you mentioned earlier, allude to something in an indirect fashion, the subjects of your stories are often described as being under scientific scrutiny. For example, in the story “Hair,” hair is depicted as a specimen kept in a vial. The story also describes a “war within us” “that no microscope can see” (26). It seems almost as though you are introducing your reader to scientific applications and apparatus in order to, in some ways, reveal their inadequacy. Is this your intention, in order to draw attention to the problems—those concerning politics, religion, race—to which there are no definitive solutions?

Scientists are very aware of the limitations of their instruments. The first thing they ask when encountering a measuring device is the point beyond which the measurements cease to be precise and accurate. If you are a genuine scientist, this is the first question you ask. You ask all the assumptions, and you are aware that science can only pose certain questions. This, interestingly, is what brings me to writing. Writing is not a rebellion against science. It is an acknowledgement that science cannot pose certain questions. I really like Nabokov’s advice to “write with the precision of the poet and the passion of the scientist” (6). Writing for me is not itself a science, it is more a way of simply being in the world.

Having said that—of course there are characters who have a positivist or an ironic or romantic faith in science and technology. Nehru, whom I quote as the epigraph to *Seventeen Tomatoes*, for example had an enormous faith in science and technology. In his political addresses he would often say that the big hydroelectric dams were the new temples of modern India, solutions to all the problems of India. And now we find out that the big dams cause more problems than they have solved. I try to pose these questions in certain stories. I've also tried to bring in the sciences to interrogate Indian myths and mythology. For instance, in the story "Nooria" the students are given this home assignment by their teacher to find out the exact length of Draupadi's sari. Draupadi, of course, is a key figure in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The children watch the TV serial *Mahabharata* in order to respond to their teacher's multiple-choice question: Length of Draupadi's sari: One meter or zero meters or one hundred meters or infinity? The multiple-choice (math and myth) question also allowed me to talk indirectly about the rise of religious extremism in India. BJP, the extremist party in power¹ around the time I wrote my book was busy changing textbooks all over India, imposing its version of brahmanical Hinduism over the entire country. Imagine the 'Christian Right' and the 'creationists' rewriting the texts on botany and zoology in North America. People like Gandhi got 'purged' out of the textbooks. Islam was represented as evil and violent, and Muslims as outsiders, as non-Indians. History of India was going through a major revision. So the stories, in a way, and may be more so for Western readers, contain these signifiers that are perhaps not so visible. But the Indian reader is likely to recognize certain aspects that are drawn from contemporary politics.

The poet around whom both men gravitate in the story "Captain Faiz"—Agha Shahid Ali—seems to have been a great inspiration to Seventeen Tomatoes. Particularly, his collection The Country Without a Post Office which concerns itself largely—it would seem—with the poet's disconnection from Kashmir. Other than a few visits, Ali's Kashmir is painted from memory. We were wondering if you could speak about the creative politics of diasporic writing: you were living in Montreal when you wrote Seventeen Tomatoes—a book entirely set in Kashmir. Could the book come into being

only with a significant distance or disconnection from your homeland? We know that you are a fan of Derek Walcott, and we see some W.G. Sebald on your bookshelf. How does memory and nostalgia for the idea of a homeland factor into your writing?

The disconnections and the big discontinuities in one's life do affect the way one writes but not only that, the place in which one writes as well. I always think of Edward Said who said "Exile is strangely compelling to think about, but terrible to experience. The essential sadness of exile can never be surmounted. The unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (173). Obviously my "exile" has been self-imposed, but it has been tremendously significant. I think that Canada made me a writer. If I had not moved here I would not have become a writer. The distance from India, and not feeling entirely at home in Canada made me a writer. The poet Aga Shahid Ali, too, lived far away from Kashmir—in Amherst, Massachusetts.² His poetry haunts two major figures in my book. In "Captain Faiz" the Indian Colonel finds Shahid's book of poems in the pocket of his Pakistani Prisoner-of-War. The two men eventually start talking poetry and discover their deep admiration for Shahid. For these two men Shahid's poetry has become a place to live. For Shahid, too, poetry (or writing) had become a place to live. He wrote about Kashmir living in Amherst, Massachusetts. He died in December 2001 of brain cancer.

In my study there hangs an old photo by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Bresson visited Kashmir in 1948, and he shot pictures using his "decisive moment" style, a new way of seeing—among the most memorable ones are ordinary people outside a mosque, the Bhand Pathers (the local clowns), a solitary man in Shalimar gardens, but the one that has always compelled me the most (and the one that hangs in my study)—this is becoming a Sebaldian discourse right now!—is the one that contains five or six women in Islamic dress. We see only their backs. The women are at once looking up and down at the valley. The immense Kashmiri sky and poplars and willows and plane trees and apple orchards and the ocean-like lake and the timber framed Kashmiri houses. Perhaps there are more than six women in the photo. The tall woman is hiding the short one, and they are all standing on a sheer cliff. The one in the middle is survey-

ing the distant mountains. Her feet are bare, arms uplifted, palms open in prayer, a ribbon of a cloud is passing by and it is unclear if the cloud is touching her palm or the mountain. Dark clouds threaten and embrace the high mountain. What is the prayer about? I ask myself. Sometimes I try to conjure up the faces of the women in the photo. But no matter how hard I try I fail. Only their backs are visible and they are standing on a bluff. One woman's sideways glance is not enough to construct their faces. So I focus on her bare feet, and the lonely shoe in the bottom left corner of the photo. One small push, and the shoe would fall in the valley. *Seventeen Tomatoes* grew out of this precarious equilibrium. This kind of distance. This kind of vertigo. I think that you have posed a very important question, and clearly I can only respond to it indirectly!

And with another allusion to Sebald's book Vertigo! Let's talk about genre then: why does Seventeen Tomatoes take the form of a short story collection?

I wrote my first story, and then out of that story grew another, and then another, and then the Kashmir focus, and then the child's point of view, and then I started thinking about a linked collection, so I changed some of the stories—added some and eliminated some . . . so as a writer, this is how everything grew. Out of necessity, one thing leads to another, but you don't have a very clear plan in the beginning. I was trained as an Engineer—I didn't even know if I could write something different from an equation. I wanted to prove it to myself—to say “Yes, I, too, can write a short story.” So that's how it all began for me. I wrote the collection heavily under the influence of the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and the Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. Both privilege the quotidian and minimalism. I believe that a linked short story collection is the closest that comes to minimalist cinema. Minimalist cinema involves the viewer intimately by leaving large gaps in the narrative. The gaps (or silences) speak very, very eloquently and stay with the viewer a long time after “THE END.”

You thank David Drummond for the image that he contributed to Seventeen Tomatoes: a cover that depicts “no sari, no veil, no spice, no gun” (153).

Instead, the cover has a picture of a cricket ball, cricket being a game that the Chief in your story "Border Cricket" says "will give the valley a human face" (28). Can you tell us a bit about the role that cricket plays not only in your collection, but in Kashmir?

David Drummond is a splendid cover designer. I think the cover is better than most of the stories! [laughter] But David knows next to nothing about cricket. He grew up in Canada, of course he knows more about ice hockey and baseball than cricket. I can't thank him enough for coming up with the idea to place a cricket ball on the cover. But he called me and asked "Can we paint a cricket ball red?" He was thinking that a cricket ball was like a baseball—white—and that if we painted it red it would make a stronger connection to the tomatoes. So I got to tell him, "David, cricket balls *are* red!" Cricket remains one of the most heavily politicized games in all ex-colonies, as illustrated by the current controversy surrounding the sudden death of Pakistan's coach at the World Cup tournament in Jamaica³ which some are suspecting was murder. Was it really a murder? No one knows, but everyone wants to know—it remains a mystery. In the West Indies they are actually re-printing my story "Border Cricket" in *The World Cup Cricket Anthology*, and the editors asked me to write a brief contextual introduction to the story:

THE ORIGIN OF "BORDER CRICKET"

It has been said before. Cricket is an Indian and Pakistani sport, accidentally discovered by the English. What if India and Pakistan happened to play a One-Day match in Kashmir? India and Pakistan have played cricket matches for almost 54 years now. The first match took place in 1952, five years after Partition. However, Kashmir, has never been a site, not even for a friendly match between the two countries. Kashmir's name evokes bombs, wars, mayhem of all sorts but not a match where two sides actually accept wins and losses.

But Kashmir has hosted cricket matches. On 13th October, 1983, the India West-Indies One-Day International was held in Srinagar, the capital city.

The Kashmiris did not know much about the West Indies, but they did not care. What mattered was the hope they could make the Indians lose. And so a large majority supported the West-Indian team. Men

in pherans waved green flags, and hurled apples, apricots, tomatoes at the Indian players and shouted anti-India slogans. To me, a boy of 14, their disruptions appeared absolutely surreal. When the match ended I stepped out of the stadium. The whole place looked needlessly beautiful. The chenar trees had recently changed color. I spent a long time surveying the wind blown leaves and then felt very sad.

Later the radio announcer kept telling us that the West-Indies innings was cut short by a leaf storm and bad light. Eventually after 22 overs the umpires compared the scores, and made the dreaded announcement. West Indies had won by 28 runs!

“Border Cricket” grew out of this moment, shared with the Kashmiris in the stadium, yet deeply private, a distant music of sorts. In the story cricket is an opportunity to question contemporary Kashmir and examine possibilities of peace. It took me ten months to come up with the ending: “And it seemed as though in a little while a new match would begin. ‘Hurrah!’ we said.”

In addition to the sport of cricket, “Border Cricket” makes references to the media, which seem to be prevalent throughout your work. The media, particularly the radio, make its presence known in both the home and outside of the home in the stories in your collection. In addition, you write newscasts as though they are dialogue: to what extent would you consider the media itself to be a character in your stories?

I think that’s an excellent reading of my stories. Media is a character in the stories, and a very powerful character indeed. My grandfather (who was a Chemistry teacher in the Indian Punjab) always turned to BBC radio for Indian news. And to Soviet radio for American news. Always turning to the Other. As a child I found this turning to the Other very very odd. But, as an adult, I, too, have become my grandfather (if I may). I turn to Indian sites or European sites, and even Canadian sites to find out what’s really happening in the US (and what exactly is the US doing to the rest of the world), and only then do I read *The New York Times*, etc. Needless to say, it is a very different version of reality . . . People on the Indian subcontinent have an inbuilt skepticism of media, so while the media is in fact a very significant social character, at the same time

people take it with a grain of salt. Unfortunately this kind of skepticism does not exist in North America, at least not on the same scale. That's why it has taken such a long time to figure out the 'truth'. We live in the age of embedded journalists and it still took people in the United States such a long time to figure out what the Bush administration was up to.

Speaking of the Other, and of critical approaches to media, as a writer do you read postcolonial theory or literary criticism? Do the musings of a Said, a Bhabha or a Spivak influence your writing?

The answer is, of course yes, but I must say that some of the postcolonial theorists, when I try to approach their texts, prove to be as difficult to read as say, a text on quantum physics. Edward Said—whom I quoted earlier—to me, makes enormous sense and he has influenced me very, very deeply. His naming of the phenomenon of Orientalism has been so monumental. Orientalism to this day plagues our everyday discourse and keeps returning in new forms, its latest avatar being “the clash of civilizations”—as dubious and false as the fantastic tale called the “weapons of mass destruction.” Susan Sontag has affected me on a similarly deep level. But . . . the three thinkers that make most sense to me are Said, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agambem.

You recently gave a public lecture on Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul: Memories and the City—aside from your love of Pamuk's writing, what drew you to this topic?

Here, a long response to your question: during my early days in Montreal—when I was a student at McGill—my friend and I would walk to the new and used bookstores in the city and pull out books from the shelves and talk about stories and their writers. Sometimes we would share our own dreams to become writers. “If I write a book,” I said to my friend, “and if the book is any good it will be shelved next to Isaac Bashevis Singer.” “But you can always change your name,” he said. So we discussed the possibilities of calling ourselves Joyen to be placed next to Joyce, or Rush-off to become Salman Rushdie's neighbor. Winsonne would earn a place next to Jeanette Winterson. A name like Chanakya Ackroyd would place us next to Chinua Achebe. And at that point I

told my friend that I had made up my mind, my final decision. I was going to change my name in such a way that I be placed next to Orhan Pamuk. Pamuk's books were not available at the Footnotes bookstore, where we were having the conversation. In fact those days his books were not available in North America at all. During a trip to London (England) I had discovered a book by him at a bookstore by the Thames. It was love at first sight, and love at first word. The book was called *New Life*. I read *New Life* on the return flight and reread it in Montreal in between my Engineering experiments at McGill. Sometimes I would walk with the book to the mountain and read it there sitting under a maple tree. So that is how I came to love Pamuk. I read as much of him as I could. His books began persuading me to pay attention to things, which were absent, which were elsewhere, swaying slightly in a barely perceptible breeze, the cities I had left behind, and the cities I had yet to visit. Now, coincidentally enough, in a book by Edward Said I had read about Erich Auerbach. Auerbach had escaped Nazi Germany to Istanbul during WWII. During his years of exile in Istanbul he had created a groundbreaking book of literary criticism called *Mimesis*, at a time when the Nazis were devoting their energies to destroying the western civilization. So when I came across Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, I was doubly intrigued. The faculty of Humanities at the University of Calgary organizes an annual Nobel lecture on the most recent Nobel Laureate. I was invited to deliver the lecture from the point of view of a writer looking at another writer's work. The university bookstore displayed my book next to Pamuk's for two full weeks! So, in yet another Sebaldian turn, Pamuk and I ended up crossing paths once again.

We can't get away from Sebald! Earlier you mentioned Benjamin, who is obviously another melancholic figure. Your lecture was entitled "Orhan Pamuk and the Melancholies of Istanbul." Can you elaborate further on the acts of reading and writing melancholy?

With Pamuk—as with Sebald—it is as much a melancholy of place as of self. Melancholy = *Hüzün*. In Turkish language, I have been told, *hüzün* is the word that best describes the sadness of a place. The root of the word is Arabic; in the Koran the word appears five times and it

describes Mohammed's pain upon the loss of his wife and his uncle. Pamuk reminds us of, but disassociates the word from its Koranic and Sufianic origins, suggesting that a new meaning has already emerged, one that can now be described as a collective melancholy: "It is not a single individual who is melancholic, rather the city's landscape generates the feeling of melancholy as a collective emotion" (90). And this was something that was at once foreign yet familiar to me. It led me to ask these questions which turned into my lecture:

Is there melancholy in Canadian cities? Is *hüzün* possible in a city like Calgary? What are the collective emotions or moods experienced by Montrealers, Torontonians, and Edmontonians? What does one feel when wilderness is transformed to a strip mall? Recently I watched the film *Radiant City*, which saddened me immensely. What does it mean to live in a cookie-cutter house with a double fronted garage, or to be trapped for four or five hours daily inside a car, unable to interact with neighbors or walk around in streets with no trees and perpetual construction? In the city of highways how does one become a *flâneur*? How does one relate to other people?

Could you tell us about your new book?

It is called *CHEF*, and it has a subtitle as well (because I absolutely like books with subtitles): *The Book of Early Sorrows*. The novel involves Kashmir (once again). But the book really grew out of my inability to process the legalization of torture by the Bush administration, and the images of torture camps and gulags that the US has created recently. I wanted to write a different kind of anti-war book. After Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, I mean how does one actually write an anti-war book? My protagonist is not a soldier; he is a man with an inbuilt need to take care of others. He's a chef and he works for a General in the Indian army. *CHEF* allowed me to explore the left out spaces, the absent areas in books set during times of war. The protagonist, recently diagnosed with a brain cancer, returns to Kashmir after a gap of fourteen years to cook his last meal at the Governor's residence. He heads out on a long train and bus journey from Delhi to Kashmir during which he looks back over his days of apprenticeship and the life of ordi-

nary soldiers on the Siachen glacier (“the coldest battlefield”), war with Pakistan, occupation of Kashmir by India, ‘enemy Muslims’, and his unresolved relationship with the past, with lost time, with wasted time (shall I say).

Thank you for your time.

Notes

- 1 The Bharatiya Janatha Party—a Hindu nationalist right-wing organization—led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in power in India from 1998–2004.
- 2 Ali worked as a Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst where he was also Director of the MFA Program for Poets and Writers until his death.
- 3 Pakistan head coach and former English national player Bob Woolmer was found dead in his Kingston hotel room on March 18, 2007. Earlier that day Pakistan had been eliminated from advancing at the tournament by the Irish team in what was considered a huge upset. His autopsy was ruled inconclusive and police treated the death as “suspicious,” then later announce that he was murdered. Pathologists suggest that he was poisoned and then strangled to death. Detectives from Scotland Yard travel to Jamaica to help in the investigation. A UK Home Office pathologist determines that Woolmer was not poisoned and has urged Jamaican authorities to change the cause of death to “natural causes.” As of June 01, 2007, no such announcement had been made by the Jamaican police force.

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