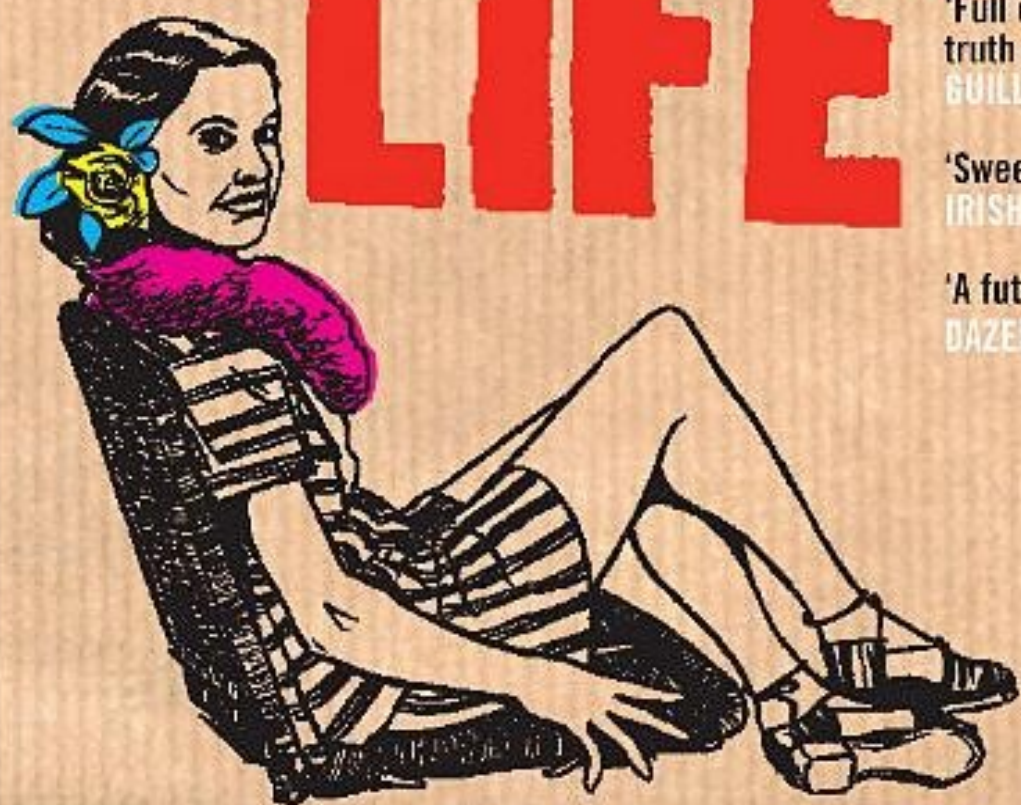




WILLY VLAUTIN

THE MOTEL LIFE



'Heartbreaking.'
THE TIMES

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truth and life.'
GUILLERMO ARRIAGA

'Sweet and aching.'
IRISH TIMES

'A future classic.'
DAZED & CONFUSED

THE MOTEL LIFE

a novel

WILLY VLAUTIN

ff

faber and faber

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1

THE NIGHT IT HAPPENED I was drunk, almost passed out, and I swear to God a bird came flying through my motel room window. It was maybe five degrees out and the bird, some sorta duck, was suddenly on my floor surrounded in glass. The window must have killed it. It would have scared me to death if I hadn't been so drunk. All I could do was get up, turn on the light, and throw it back out the window. It fell three stories and landed on the sidewalk below. I turned my electric blanket up to ten, got back in bed, and fell asleep.

A few hours later I woke again to my brother standing over me, crying uncontrollably. He had a key to my room. I could barely see straight and I knew then I was going to be sick. It was snowing outside and the wind would flurry snow through the broken window and into my room. The streets were empty, frozen with ice.

He stood at the foot of the bed dressed in underwear, a black coat, and a pair of old work shoes. You could see the straps where the prosthetic foot connected to the remaining part of his calf. The thing is, my brother would never even wear shorts. He was too nervous about it, how it happened, the way he looked with a fake shin, with a fake calf and foot. He thought of himself as a real failure with only one leg. A cripple. His skin was blue. He had half-frozen spit on his chin and snot leaking from his nose.

'Frank,' he muttered, 'Frank, my life, I've ruined it.'

'What?' I said and tried to wake.

'Something happened.'

'What?'

'I'm freezing my ass off. You break the window?'

'No, a duck smashed into it.'

'You kidding?'

'I wouldn't joke about something like that.'

'Where's the duck then?'

'I threw it back out the window.'

'Why would you do that?'

'It gave me the creeps.'

'I don't even want to tell you, Frank. I don't even want to say it. I don't even want to say what happened.'

'You drunk?'

'Sorta.'

'Where are your clothes?'

'They're gone.'

I took the top blanket off my bed and gave it to him. He wrapped it around himself then plugged the box heater and looked outside. He stuck his head out the broken window and looked down.

'I don't see a duck.'

'Someone probably stole it.'

He began crying again.

‘What?’ I said.

‘You know Polly Flynn, right?’

‘Sure.’ I leaned over and grabbed a shirt on the floor and threw up into it.

‘Jesus, you okay?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You want a glass of water?’

‘No, I think I feel a little better now.’ I lay back in bed and closed my eyes. The cold air felt good.

I was sweating, but my stomach began to settle.

‘I’m glad I don’t puke at the sight of puke.’

‘Me too,’ I said and tried to smile. ‘What happened?’

‘Tonight she got mad at me,’ he said in a voice as shaky as I’ve ever heard. ‘I don’t remember what I said, but she yelled at me so hard that I got up to get dressed but she got up first and took my pants and wouldn’t give them back. She ran outside and set fire to them with lighter fluid. I had my wallet and keys in my coat, but the main thing, the real thing, is that I left. Got in my car and started driving home. I was a little drunk, but Jesus, I was okay to drive, and I was just going down Fifth Street, and some kid runs out in the middle of the road on his bike and I hit him. It’s fucking four in the morning, there’s snow on the ground, there’s snow coming down. What’s a kid doing riding his bike around at that time of night in that sorta weather? There were no other cars behind me, no one around at all to help. I wasn’t even going twenty. There was no stop sign. I didn’t run anything. It wasn’t like that. He just came out of nowhere. I stopped as fast as I could. I got out to take a look, and there the kid’s there on the snow and asphalt with his head busted open and blood coming out of his mouth. Jesus, I didn’t know what to do. I went back into the car where I got a blanket in the back seat, and I covered him with it. Used part of it to put over his head where the bleeding was. I think he was dead right then. I checked his breathing and pulse, but there was nothing. No one was around. Just the little light coming down off the street lights. By that thrift store, by that old RESCO warehouse. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t leave the kid there so I put him in the back seat,’ cause I was gonna bring him to the hospital. Then when I picked him up I knew for sure he was dead. Part of the inside of his head had come out. I’d never seen anything like it. It was the most horrible thing I ever saw.

‘I began thinking of how I was drunk and how I’d go to jail. Jesus Christ. I put him in the back seat anyway, and I get in, and suddenly I see this taxi cab turn on his lights. He’d been in a vacant lot about a block away. Maybe he was sleeping, who knows. Maybe he saw the whole thing, but if he did he would have stopped, wouldn’t he? He would have helped me? But he just drove off in the opposite direction. So I start driving to Saint Mary’s, maybe ten minutes ago, but the kid’s dead. Ain’t much use in taking him in, is there? If I’d run a light or something, sure, but I didn’t. He hit me more than he hit him. I don’t know what the fuck to do. I had the right of way, I did, I swear I did.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ I said and sat up.

‘I’m the worst person in the goddamn world.’

I got out of bed and put on my pants and shoes.

I looked out the window. His car was down there like he said. The sky was half dark; there was new snow on the ground and some still falling. There were hardly any people on the street below. It was a hard thing to imagine a kid in the car like that.

Jerry Lee stood in front of the heater, the orange glow reflected on his body. He was shaking.

‘You’re not kidding?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘that’s the last thing in the world I’d kid about.’

‘Why don’t you get in bed? I got the electric blanket going.’

‘Let me just stand here for a second then I will.’

I looked outside again. I saw a truck delivering newspapers to the casinos, I saw two taxis drive by.

Jerry Lee moved to my bed. His boots hung off the side.

‘It’s goddamn cold out,’ he said.

I found my bathroom towel and covered the puke. Then I threw it all in a trash basket and stuck the trash basket in the hall. I got a glass of water from the sink, put on my parka, and sat in the recliner.

‘Frank,’ he said and began weeping, ‘I don’t understand how it could happen. You should have seen his face. He still looked alive when I went to him but, Jesus, he wasn’t. He’s so young. He probably ain’t even in high school yet. I just don’t understand why this is happening.’

He took the keys out of his coat pocket, and threw them at me. I set the keys on the floor.

‘I can barely stand up,’ I said.

‘What’d you drink?’

‘Doesn’t matter. What you said, it really happened? You swear on your life?’

‘It happened,’ he said and turned away and began crying harder.

I stood up and got my shampoo and soap. ‘I’m going to take a shower. I can barely stand now. My stomach hurts so bad. When I get back maybe I’ll feel better and then we’ll figure something out.’



I WALKED DOWN THE HALL and locked myself in the shower room. I sat there for a long time letting the hot water fall over me. I lay down and curled in a ball on the cool tile floor hoping it would ease the pain in my stomach and after a long while it did.

I walked back to my room wet and dried myself with a pair of jeans. I put on long underwear pants, a long-sleeved flannel shirt, shoes, and my parka. I stood in front of the heater.

‘Is that kid really in your car?’ I asked.

Jerry Lee had the covers up to his neck.

‘Yeah,’ he said and tears began again. I hadn’t seen him cry in years, maybe since we were kids. I don’t know why it happened, but it did.’

‘Why didn’t you call the police or an ambulance?’

‘Like I said, there was no one around, no phone booth, no store, nothing. I didn’t know what to do so I just put him in the car and started driving towards the hospital. But then I knew he was already dead.’

‘But you didn’t do anything wrong, really, that’s the main thing.’

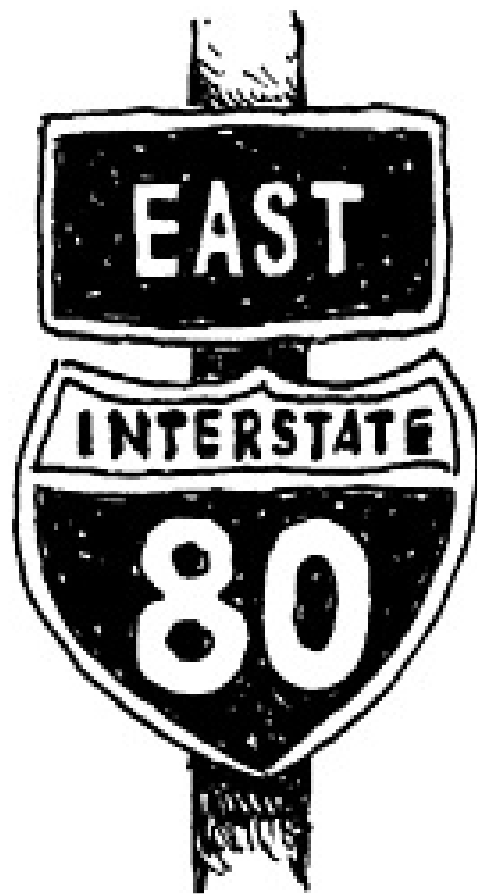
‘But I was drunk. I’d go to jail. They’d say I killed him.’

I went to my closet and gave Jerry Lee a pair of pants to wear. He dressed and we went down to the street below. I opened the car door, and in the dimness of the inside light I could see the kid. His face was covered in a blanket. Worn-out jeans and faded black tennis shoes. Pale white arms bent in wrong directions. It was a horrible thing to see. I shut the door and we walked around for a while and tried to figure out what to do.

It was almost dawn when we drove a block from Saint Mary’s Hospital and left the poor kid on the frozen grass in front of an office building. Jerry Lee carried him from the car telling him how sorry he was. Then we drove to the Cal Neva, parked in their lot, and started drinking. By nine, I was drunk again, and by ten we left the casino and walked to the bank.

We emptied both our accounts but I had only \$234 in savings, and Jerry Lee had less than a hundred. While we were in line I kept thinking about the kid. Maybe he had been sleeping in the war bed of his girlfriend an hour before he died. He might have snuck out her window when he knew he had to leave. Might have been laying there next to her, and she was naked and he’s about to fall asleep; maybe it was then that he made himself get up and get dressed. Maybe he heard her mom get up and use the toilet. Maybe he kissed her before he left. Maybe he got back in bed with her one last time before he made himself go for sure. I hope it was like that, and not the other way. That he was running from something, or that he had nowhere to go, or that he couldn’t go home ’cause things were so bad there.

Bad luck, it falls on people every day. It’s one of the only certain truths. It’s always on deck, it’s always just waiting. The worst thing, the thing that scares me the most is that you never know when it’s going to hit. But I knew then, that morning, when I saw the kid’s frozen arms in the back of the car that bad luck had found my brother and me. And us, we took the bad luck and strapped it around our feet like concrete. We did the worst imaginable thing you could do. We ran away. We just got in his beat-up 1974 Dodge Fury and left.



THE FIRST THING WE DID was get a full tank of gas, and then we went to the store. We bought a twelve pack of beer, a pint of Jim Beam, some ant-acid pills, a bottle of Pepto, three pre-made sandwiches, some cleaning products, a package of glazed donuts, and then we parked behind the Day's Inn on Seventh Street. We cleaned up the blood on the back seat with a roll of paper towels and a spray bottle of 409. We didn't go home and get our things. We didn't call anybody. I didn't call in at work.

'Where do you want to go?' I asked him as I pulled us out onto the road.

'To Montana,' Jerry Lee said and opened a beer.

'It's probably snowing up there.'

'At least it's out of state, less people than in California. We could take the car out in the middle of nowhere, in the woods. We could buy a bunch of gas and burn it. Stack it full of wood inside and set it on fire.'

'I guess,' I said but I wasn't really thinking. I knew I was about to be sick again. I pulled the car over to the side of the road and got out as fast as I could.

My brother rolled down the window after I was done and said, 'Jesus, Frank, you're a mess.'

'I can't help it,' I told him.

'You want me to drive?'

'Maybe,' I said and he got out of the car and I got in the passenger seat. Jerry Lee put us back on the road and got us on the highway. I opened a beer and turned on the radio and found the oldie country and western station.

'Head wherever you want,' I told him and closed my eyes. I leaned my face against the cold glass of the passenger side window.

'I'll just start east, then maybe take 95 up?'

'Okay,' I said.

We became quiet for a while, and I fell asleep for maybe an hour or so. When I woke I opened another beer and tried to eat a donut.

'You up?' my brother asked me and looked over.

'Yeah,' I told him.

'I'm sorry. I really am. I'm sorry for everything. I shouldn't have come by your room. I didn't know where else to go. I know I owe 300 bucks too. I just want to let you know that I'm damn sorry.'

'I don't care about the money.'

'I'm a goddamn horrible person.'

'No, you're not,' I said and looked out the window across the highway as we passed the town of Lovelock. They'd built a prison out there, and an Indian guy I'd worked with in the warehouses was supposedly there. That's what everyone said about him. Larry Jenkins is his name. It was just above freezing, but even still, in the distance I could make out people walking around in the yard, and I wondered if he was out there among them.

'You mind talking, Frank? When I'm alone with my thoughts all I think about is what happened.'

'What do you want to talk about?'

'Jesus, I don't care.'

'My stomach's getting worse,' I said.

'You should drink more milk.'

'I guess.'

'Or go see a doctor. They might have something you could take. You probably got an ulcer. You should stick to beer and drink Pepto with it.'

'That don't sound too good.'

'I've seen guys do it, but it looks pretty horrible to me too.'

'I read somewhere that the town of Lovelock is the home of some famous woman who was in Charlie Chaplin movies. She was Chaplin's girlfriend for a long time. He went through the women but he always liked her. He supported her, I think. For her whole life he did.'

'Did she move back to Lovelock?'

'No, she lived in San Francisco.'

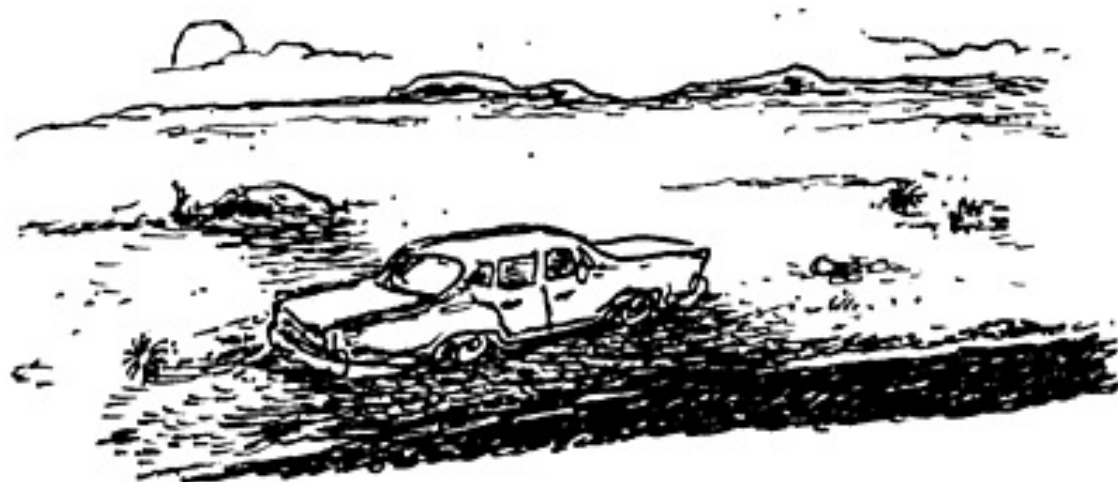
'She still alive?'

'No,' I said, 'she drank herself to death in the 1940s, I think.'

'That's not helping, I guess,' Jerry Lee said.

'What isn't?'

'You talking,' he said and laughed. He turned the stereo back up and so I stared out the window at the frozen desert and after a while fell asleep.



WE DROVE ALL THAT DAY without hardly stopping. We'd talk for a while, then we'd listen to the radio every now and again we'd stop at a gas station if one passed our way. Both our moods were pretty dark. We couldn't stop thinking about the kid. For a time we were on Highway 80, and then we turned north on Highway 95 and drove until it got dark. By then we were near the Oregon border, near the small town of McDermitt. Jerry Lee pulled off the highway onto a dirt road and drove a mile or so off it and shut off the car. I went to the trunk and took out these two old sleeping bags he kept in there and got back in the car. Jerry Lee moved to the back seat and we got into the bags and tried to knock off.

We were quiet for a long time. I had the radio going to help me sleep, but the night was hard, and after a time I could hear Jerry Lee crying. It was real quiet, the way he cried, like he was whimpering. Like a sick dog might, or maybe a dying old man. I didn't say anything to him 'cause I didn't know what to say.

But that night even when I did get to sleep, it wouldn't last. The wind began to blow and it started snowing in flurries. I got worried about getting stuck, about cars passing us, or the police noticing us and thinking we were stranded or broken down.

I got so nervous after a while that I woke Jerry Lee. I yelled at him, but he just lay there in the back like he was dead. Finally I sat up and leaned over the seat and shook him until he woke.

'What do you want?' he said in the darkness.

'I can't sleep.'

'Jesus, why not? It's too fucking cold out to do anything else.'

'We should get back on the road.'

'Let's wait 'til morning.'

'You think so?' I asked.

'I'm too tired to drive and you can't see worth a shit at night,' Jerry Lee said and coughed.

'What station you been listening to?'

'It's out of Redding, California,' I said. 'It's a talk show about business or something.'

'It sounds boring as hell.'

'I ain't really listening.'

He sat up. 'Put on that Willie Nelson tape, will you? I hate when they talk on the radio. I got that song "Railroad Lady" stuck in my head again.'

I sat up and turned on the inside light. I found the tape, put it in, and turned the light back off.

'You think there's wolves out here?'

'No,' I said. 'There's a few mountain lions, I bet, but all the ranchers, they shot the wolves years ago.'

'What about coyotes?'

'I bet there's some.'

'Maybe we'll see them.'

'I hope so,' I said.

'I think the only thing that will get me back to sleep is beer.'

I reached over to the floorboards and took a beer from the sack and handed it back to him.

‘I just started getting antsy,’ I said. ‘I felt like I had to wake you.’

‘It’s all right,’ he said and opened the can. ‘You know what I was thinking about just before I fell asleep?’

‘What’s that?’

‘How when you started writing those letters to the horse track in Del Mar, the track near San Diego. How you wrote them asking if you and I could have jobs down there. That we’d work for free they’d give us a room to live in. Dear Sir, we’re only fifteen and seventeen and we’ve never seen a horse outside a parking lot, a rodeo, or a TV, but if you let us stay in a stall we’ll work for free. You could feed us too if that’s all right, or we could just eat at the concession stand. If you chose the concession stand we’ll need a few bucks or some food vouchers or we can just eat the old hot dogs.’

Jerry Lee busted up laughing.

‘Shit,’ I said and sat up. ‘How did you remember that?’

‘Just came to me.’

‘I wrote those assholes every week. Them and Santa Anita, but I figured if Del Mar took us, then we could go to the beach. Maybe learn how to surf or scuba dive.’

‘Can you imagine if they would have written back? We’d be down in San Diego right now instead of out here in the boonies.’

‘I should have lied a bit more,’ I said, and in the darkness I was smiling. ‘I wrote them all year long. Maybe something like forty letters.’

‘The horse track, Jesus.’

‘It wasn’t that bad an idea,’ I said.

‘No, it was a good idea, it was a real great idea,’ he said. His voice still light and easy. ‘It was one of the best ideas I’ve ever heard.’



I WOKE THE NEXT MORNING and got sick out the driver's side window. The car was covered in snow and the wind was howling, blowing snow in flurries, and at times it was almost as bad as a white out.

'That ain't much of a wake-up call,' Jerry Lee said when he heard me.

'You got chains?' I asked him and laid back down on my sleeping bag.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Jesus, it's snowing. Holy hell. If I do they'd probably be in the trunk, but I don't drive when it snows so I don't know for sure.'

'I hate driving at all,' I said.

'When it starts falling,' Jerry Lee said, 'I walk. I don't trust people, you'd be crazy to. Most don't know how to drive, and then you add snow and it's a goddamn mess. If it snowed all the time, say like you're in Michigan or Alaska, then it'd be different. I guess I'd trust people then. But it doesn't. Ice is worse. I just stay home if there's ice. I won't even walk on the sidewalk.'

I started the Dodge and turned the heater on. I set my pants next to the floor vent, and put them on when they had warmed. Then I put on my shoes and my coat and got out and wiped the snow off the windows. We were parked on top of a hill overlooking a valley. I checked the trunk and there were no chains, nor a jack or even a tire iron. I walked down the road a while to see how it was, and the snow was deep, maybe a foot. I wasn't sure we could get back to the highway even if we had chains.

For a time I ate snow and looked down into a gully. The cool air and the snow helped calm my stomach, and all around me the snow was new and untouched, with no tracks coming or going. As I stared off I saw a deer appear maybe a half a mile away on the top of another ridge. I'd never seen one in the wild before. I've seen them dead on the highway, and on TV, but never like that.

As it got closer I could see it didn't have any horns and it was really quite small, maybe it was just a young one or baby. It began running down a gully about a hundred yards from where I was. It was quick and ran effortlessly, and just seeing it seemed to ease my mind in a way I didn't understand. I watched it for a long while until it turned up a hill and finally disappeared into the distance.

I walked back to the car and got in.

'The woods could be all right for us,' I told him. I found a pre-made turkey sandwich and began trying to eat it.

'I don't know,' he said from his sleeping bag. His voice was raw and cracked and I could tell he'd been crying again.

'Maybe we should move out to the woods. Rent a cabin or something. Nothing weird happens out here. Nothing like a kid getting hit by a car.'

Jerry Lee sat up. He found a beer at his feet and opened it. 'Jesus, I don't want to think about that not right now. Don't bring it up. And about the woods, there's nothing to do out here, and what's worse is all those kids that get their arms chopped off in farm machinery. They end up driving around town with their feet. Trees fall on people, chain saws and things like that. Horrible things happen in the woods, believe me. How about those families that get murdered out in the woods? Bears, rodents, snakes, and more bugs than anywhere else in the world, crazed Vietnam vets, hillbillies.'

'It ain't like that,' I said.

'Maybe, maybe not,' he said and coughed. 'You mind putting in that Willie Nelson tape?'

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