



Citation: M.G. Eliggi (2021) Embracing the Challenge. An Interview with Patrick Holloway. *Sijis* 11: pp. 231-240. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-12884

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Embracing the Challenge* An Interview with Patrick Holloway

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Back in 2019, celebrating ABEI's (Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses, Brasil) thirtieth anniversary I found myself in São Paulo, Brazil, ready to share the opening of the fourteenth Symposium of Irish Studies in South America: *The State of the Art: Local and Global Contexts in Dialogue*. This was meant to be a Joint Symposium, gathering efforts of the host association, ABEI, in collaboration with AEIS-Asociación de Estudios Irlandeses del Sur¹, Argentina. We had begun to consolidate the Latin American Irish Studies network that Professors Munira Mutran and Laura P.Z. Izarra, both from USP (Universidade de São Paulo), Brazil, had envisioned years before.

Our expectations were high, at that fourteenth Symposium, because the Programme was really impressive, carefully “crafted” by Mariana Bolfarine’s energy – ABEI president – and Laura Izarra’s expertise. It was as part of that Symposium that I came to know Patrick Holloway, novel Irish writer whose lecture “Writing the Rising: Yeats’ Poetry of a divided nation” I was going to chair.

It was a real delight to listen to him, and I was sorry to have pushed him towards the end of his presentation, showing him cards with 10’, 5’ signs so as to keep the schedule tight. He was

* The idea for the title came after re-reading Colum McCann’s *Letters to a Young Writer* (2017) where he uses the phrase “embrace the challenge”, which I have changed slightly.

¹ AEIS: this Association was only two years old at the time (2019) since its founding date, October 17 2017, during an *ad hoc* meeting at the National University of La Pampa, Argentina. Present at that meeting were the Ambassador of Ireland to Argentina, Justin Harman, an unconditional friend and promoter of the initiative, Professor Laura P.Z. Izarra (USP, Brazil, ABEI), hard-working and always enthusiastic scholar, friend and projects’ advisor in the field of Irish Studies, and several other representatives of Argentine universities, writers, researchers and members of the Irish-Argentine community, who, either in person or virtually, gave their support and best wishes to the newly created Association. Its name intended to include, from the start, several of the Spanish-speaking countries of South America, namely Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay, so as to promote the field and strengthen links among members.

kind, understanding and we proceeded to the round of questions and later coffee break. It was not until one evening, that same week sharing a group dinner at a marvellous Paulista restaurant that we engaged in a more relaxed dialogue about his writing career and his early works.

Patrick is 32-years old and was raised in Cork, Ireland. His work has been published by *The Stinging Fly*, *Carve*, *Overland*, *The Irish Times*, *The Illanot Review*, *Scoundrel Time*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Lonely Crowd*, *Write Bloody Publishing*, *New Voices Scotland*, *Papercuts*, among many others. His story, “Laughing and Turning Away” won second place in the Raymond Carver Short Story Contest. “The Lift, the Fox, and the Lilies” won the Overland Literary Journal contest and was also published by *The Irish Times*. His story “Counting Stairs” was highly commended for the Manchester Fiction Prize. He has been shortlisted for numerous other prizes including: Bath Short Story Prize, Moth Poetry Prize, Moth Short Story Prize, Bath Flash Fiction Prize, Dermot Healy Poetry Prize, Over The Edge New Writer of the Year Award (for both fiction and poetry) and the prestigious Alpine Fellowship for Fiction. *And All the Rest of Life Was Waiting*, his debut novel and a collection of short stories in process are part of his recent production. His greatest achievement are his baby girls, Aurora and Luna Faye.

MGE: Patrick, since we met in São Paulo for the Symposium, we exchanged a couple of mails, but then, all of a sudden 2020 began and soon we all felt that someone had snatched it from our hands. The world learned early in January 2020 about the first cases of the COVID-19 virus in Wuhan, China, and then February was chaos and... March saw great areas of the world locked-down and away from their previous “ordinary and free” lives. How did you take this “abrupt change”, considering you lived with your family in Porto Alegre and Brazil is one of the countries in Latin America with a huge population and high number of cases?

PH: Firstly, I just want to say how great it is to speak to you again, albeit virtually. It was such a pleasure to get to know you in USP, doesn't it almost feel like another era altogether? To answer your question, when the pandemic first hit I felt like most people I suppose, at the start maybe I was naive, or better, uneducated in the language of viruses and pandemics, so I thought it would pass. The ramifications of what we have all been living through is yet to be seen, I imagine there will be a wealth of literature written about it, to try and better understand how much it has changed us. My second daughter, Luna Faye, was born in April 2020 and it was really a frightening time to be going through something so major. Frightening on so many levels, not just about health but about what comes next. We were both working from home, isolated, with a two-year-old and a baby. It made us question pretty much everything and what we realised is how important human contact is. With family, with friends, and how much we took it for granted.

It was also very difficult to be away from my family and friends in Ireland, and I suppose in times of crises a longing for the familiar, for the comfortable comes to the surface. It definitely made me miss home. Especially when I looked at the news in Brazil and the disrespect and irresponsibility was always at the forefront, camouflaged by misogyny, arrogance and ignorance – and yes, I am talking about the president. It was hard to bring Luna Faye into a world that we couldn't really grasp anymore.

MGE: Yes, we must admit that the whole world was in a state of turmoil, but certain countries were more dramatically affected by political decisions than others. And those decisions in turn make people think about options when they have access to them. Ours is not an easy world.

Patrick, I know that apart from writing you also teach, how were your teaching activities affected by last year pandemic and its 2021 follow-up?

PH: Well, I run an English language school called Holloway's English Zone in Porto Alegre, Brazil. We used to have some students who lived in other states who had class online, but the majority of students had class face-to-face at the school. I closed the school down ten days before advised by the state and I suppose it was a mad rush to understand new platforms and technologies in order to give the same quality of classes online. I must say I was pleasantly surprised as I had always been a little critical and wary of online courses, believing the paragon of teaching had to be face-to-face. I'm not embarrassed to admit that I was wrong. Now, looking forward I think the ways we learn and teach will be a hybrid methodology that combines the best of both worlds.

MGE: I absolutely agree with you and remember back in 2008 taking up courses on blended learning and applying those strategies in our regular university courses as optional. But at that time virtual teaching and learning was not "as necessary" as it became last year. I must say, though, that changing from face-to-face to only virtual teaching is not only tiring for all the parts involved but also deprives education of its socializing nature. That's why I say blended or hybrid forms are a good option. So, you had to adapt your school and also adapt yourself to new forms of teaching and living I imagine...

PH: Yes, exactly. It was a time of growth and I really enjoyed finding out new ways to teach. With that came new ideas, too. As I migrated the school to an online modality, and after revenues stabilised, the question of moving to Ireland again surfaced – it had been dormant for a while, but was always there, ready to peek its little head up from the calming waters. Me and my wife have always believed that we could give our daughters a better quality of life in Ireland and seeing as the school could now be run from anywhere, we started looking into ways of moving back. We arrived here in Ireland at the start of March 2021 after an excessive amount of stress and hassle. Now, as we settle into life here, I have some free time to ruminate on our decade spent in Brazil and can honestly say, even though there were many aspects of life there which I found difficult to accept, we had a wonderful life there and I will always think of it with fondness.

MGE: Would you say, then, that this change that had always been at the back of your mind as a family was prompted by last year's experience or not? You turned from Irish emigrant to South America in the twenty-first century to Irish family in search of a promising future back in Ireland. This process is the opposite of the one the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Irish emigrants underwent when they moved to the Americas and other destinations for similar reasons, isn't it?

PH: Yes, that's a great point. Ireland is a very different country now than it was back in the twentieth century and I feel it has more to offer its citizens and is welcoming to people from abroad who can make Ireland their home. I first moved to Brazil for love, I had never really thought about living there to be honest, and even when I first went it was supposed to be temporary, so in a way I never made that huge decision to leave everything I knew behind – it just happened. Moving back to Ireland was a much more thought-out decision. And it definitely wasn't an easy one to make.

MGE: I see; however, circumstances as the ones you refer to many times hurry our decisions.

PH: When I became a father in 2018 it did change the way I saw the world and what I thought was important. And it is here that the reasons you mention for Irish immigrants in

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries come to the forefront. Back then, there was certainly a higher level of necessity, whereas for us we were lucky to have a stable, profitable life in Brazil. But looking forward we had to think of our girls and where they could best thrive, and as I mentioned, safety definitely was a key issue.

MGE: Thanks, Patrick, to allow us to know a little bit about your life. I believe that it always sheds light at the moment of reading literary works to know something about the writer, before or after reading those works. Even though writers create worlds and characters they do not come out of a vacuum, which does not mean that we have to take all of a writer's production as self-referential, either. But it definitely helps. Let's move, now, to your work as a writer. You wrote poems, short stories and a novel. When has your writing career begun and how? Which genre do you find particularly close to your voice?

PH: Honestly, that is a really difficult question to answer – especially the first part. When did my writing career begin, well honestly I don't know if it has. As an aspiring writer, I suffer quite heavily and quite often from imposter syndrome, and can consider all my publications to date, pure luck. On other days I recognise the merit and the hard work and see myself as a writer. I feel being back in Ireland now, with an agent and a novel and short story collection, things might move a little quicker.

I started writing more poetry and then short stories. I feel now, at this moment, more comfortable writing fiction, but I would say it is poetic in its own right. The novel was a huge challenge, just the determination and discipline in sitting down every day to write the same narrative was intense. Also, the longer narrative has so many links, so many nuances that need to work together to create something of stature, something that works on many levels. But, when finished, it was probably the most satisfying feeling ever. I am already working on a new novel and have recently won a mentorship in Ireland to help work on it, I have also applied for a writer's bursary, which, if I am lucky enough to receive, would give me the time to work on it completely.

MGE: Well, from what you say and from what I could read, written by you, I see your poems intimately connected with personal feelings and emotions, I don't know if "recollected in tranquillity" or flowing directly from your inner "you". And your fiction, I'm referring to the stories, to life in general but with definite strokes of the personal, of the life you lived or are living and the places you've had come to know. I read your winning short story "The Lift and the Fox and the Lilies" (2019) published by Hennessy New Irish Writing. I found it both full of affect and also interesting in your choice of point of view, that of a child. The way a child perceives what goes on in the world around him/her is not that of adults. I see this boy you created experiencing disorientation as a result of trauma. The way in which the events are presented adds to this lack of clarity of mind, not knowing exactly what is going on, or better, trying not to bring that knowledge into the conscious mind.

PH: Yes, it is fundamentally a story about loss but also about memory. I feel that in times of loss, or trauma of any kind, memory becomes a very fickle thing. At the best of times, memories can be manipulated, can be unreliable and can be misleading. As well as being incredibly subjective. The boy in the story is unreliable to an extent but through his unreliability he presents the reader with what it is to remember and how we remember.

He is thrown into a situation that not even adults are prepared for, and in the midst of the chaos, he is somewhat forgotten and left to wander on his own. He, like maybe the reader

at the start, is disorientated and unsure of the environment around him. It is somewhat alien. I wanted him to be able to explore on his own in order for him to remember certain events in his life. The most important being “The Fox and The Lilies”.

MGE: The description of the fox and the situation in which father and child meet him is at the same time heart-breaking and ominous, foreshadowing the final outcome. There is also an additional element of guilt in that scene previous to the car accident, as the father was complaining that the boy was always misbehaving or being selfish, which adds tension to the passage.

PH: Yes, exactly. The Fox does work as a symbol of foreshadowing and also so the boy can reflect on his only experience with death. The scene with the fox is tense and yet there is a tenderness in the father’s sacrifice. Of course, the fox, in the boy’s mind is tangled up with his father who is about to pass away. The memory of the fox questions the morality of death, or better still, the morality of keeping someone alive. The idea actually came when I was a teenager, although I did not know it then. My aunty was dying and I remember how tenuous she was, how each breath took so long to take. And I remember the lengths to keep her alive, which to me then, and now, seemed speciously worthwhile. I remember thinking, if a dog was in this position it would be put down, it would be humane. There was something about death then, that seemed humane, and that living became not an opposite of humane, but something juxtaposed. The boy then tries to understand what is happening to his father by remembering how his father, in a way, did the humane and perhaps moral thing, by putting the fox out of its misery, to use a colloquial expression. This then is furthered by the taking of flowers from the ground. Again, it is through remembering what his father says about flowers that upsets him when his Aunty takes fresh flowers to his father’s bed. The boy is limited in the way he can see what is happening and by the way he will end up remembering what happened, but even still, there is an inquisitiveness in him that seeks to understand the great scheme of living and of dying.

MGE: There is also parallelism between the death of the fox and that of the boy’s father. But as I see it, the boy only records and recalls what had happened to the fox and unconsciously seems to avoid the fact that his father is also dying. The wheezing sound appearing in both scenes – on the road and also at the hospital – adds to building this correspondence. Does this make sense?

PH: Yes, it does. The parallelism is evident and the boy’s memory fails him somewhat in the events of the father’s death. I don’t know if he is avoiding it or if this is a way to face the impending death. I think we all deal with things by “avoiding” but that in itself is a mechanism of dealing. So the boy remembers his father’s death as The Fox, The Lift, and The Lilies. He cannot exactly remember what and how his father died, he cannot remember climbing onto his father’s body, to maybe ground him to this terrain. But at the end of the day, I wonder if it matters? Is the way he remembers the father’s death not more real, does it not explore the confusion, emptiness and vulnerability that we all feel in times of loss and mourning?

MGE: Indeed! You capture all these feelings and you show how the associations operate in the child’s mind at the mere sight of the lilies, what brings about another fascinating detail about the transmission of knowledge from father to son, and the miracle of generating natural life.

PH: Exactly. The memories and lessons of the father are already a tribute to him, and through remembering them the boy is eternalising his father.

MGE: Great, great story, congratulations, really! I was thinking... how long have you been living in Brazil? Because in another story, "Laughing and Turning Away" which won Second Prize in the Raymond Carver Contest (2017), you make use of Portuguese words as part of the story written in English. Why would you choose such a strategy? It reminds me of Chicana writers using the same strategy but I believe in your case the purpose may be different... I would like you to comment on that...

PH: I was living in Brazil for 9 years and this story was born really, in the first year of living there. I had so many observations on chauvinism, misogyny and violence in those first months but could never really put pen to paper. I think it took me a long time to understand the depths of these and how complex these issues were. I suppose when I was robbed at knife-point the story started to solidify.

About the usage of Portuguese words in the story: firstly, I wrote a lot of poetry that dealt with and embodied interlingualism. I feel language is such a paramount aspect of identity that it is hard not to play within languages when bilingual or polylingual, or not to feel different when speaking different languages. Funny you mention Chicana writers, for my PhD thesis I studied and used them as a reference. I think the book was called *Interlingualism: the Language of Chicanas/las*.

In the context of this story, we have a young Brazilian woman who is studying abroad in the U.S. I decided to use the Portuguese words as these words connect her to her culture, and therefore to her identity. She is evidently going through a crisis of identity, whether it be sexual or not, and the usage of these words ground her in a language that is wholly hers and yet one she is moving away from. The Portuguese language, for her, is representative of who she is, yet she is still trying to discover who that *she* is. It was definitely not a way to isolate non-Portuguese speaking readers, but I feel each insertion of a Portuguese word does not take away from the context of what is happening.

MGE: Well, yes, I agree about the strong and almost inseparable connection between language and identity, we are the language we speak, so to say. Your character evokes her native land while living abroad and the words you chose do not merely add "local colour" but they are charged with meaning(s) that take readers to the culture of her country and point to the topic of sexual abuse and violent behaviour towards others which tends to be naturalized as time passes instead of rejected. The young woman you mentioned began experiencing this kind of street abuse at the age of 14 and by the time she was 18 she had already learned not to tell when new violent or abusive episodes took place because she knew that was the state of affairs, she was no longer burra, she simply knew nothing could be done, or very little. And this cultural violence does not make distinctions between women and men or between social classes, it shows in the story as a deeply rooted practice.

PH: Yes, wonderfully put. The violence and misogyny within the story are reflective of things I saw in Brazil. I definitely think that this cultural violence, or even the threat of it, is something that affects everyone, however the day-to-day occurrences of sexism, misogyny and abuse, I think affect women much more so. Whether it be the seemingly innocent wolf-whistling, the "flirtatious" abusive slap on the ass, they are all examples of something that is common, and in its own right deeply worrying, but on a larger scale, it reflects a fundamental flaw in the way groups in the same society co-exist. The fact that it happens and is overlooked is a real sign of people's position towards this kind of violence.

*MGE: The movements *Ele Não* in Brazil as well as *Ni una menos* in Argentina are doing a lot to change this situation but still a lot of work is still needed and it must begin at home, early at school, if not, it will be impossible to change minds.*

PH: Yes, I agree. I think there are so many ways that children pick up on what is right or wrong, or in this case, what is seen as normal. It starts at home, then school, then community. It's not just one aspect of society that can influence change.

MGE: Of course not, it's a very difficult subject altogether. Now, I'd like to ask you about the novel you told me during the Symposium you had just finished writing and that was why you were in search of an agent. What is the novel about and have you found a suitable agent for it?

PH: Oh the novel. It's been a long journey. When I got second place in the Raymond Carver contest an agency in New York got in touch with me asking if I had a novel ready, I told a white lie and said yes, and maybe rushed a novel I hadn't set out to write. In the end they really enjoyed it but felt it needed tweaking in many parts, and when I set out to do it I realised that it wasn't the book I wanted to write. I took a break for a year and then went back to it at the start of 2020.

I find it so hard to say what it is about, but it is a family drama. It's written from two perspectives, Rosie and Frankie, who are brother and sister. Rosie's narrative opens with the news her father has died and it follows her trying to find her brother Frankie, who the last time they spoke had been in rehab. Frankie's narrative is told from when he was a boy and it is a flurry of thoughts that show a complicated childhood plagued by deception and loss.

It really deals with memory, too, and trauma in a way. But deep down it is a story of love between siblings, the power of family bonds and hope for a future.

MGE: I do want to read it, especially since family issues are always close to my heart, not just on a personal level but also because at a social one I believe that family as a unit (no matter how it is composed) is a crucial element in the social structure. It can be a place of growth and contention or an absolute impediment for the development of its members.

So, this novel saw a metamorphosis between 2019 and 2020. How did you re-structure the novel and how did you manage to keep all threads in order to make it interesting and not a messy text?

PH: The novel changed so much, so it made it even more difficult to keep everything tied together without it being limited or heavy handed. The differing narratives helped in this but also presented problems in their own right – it was difficult to know when to reveal information in the narratives, and in whose narrative. The most difficult challenge was to maintain the suspense of finding Frankie without it becoming a suspense novel – which I had made the mistake of trying to do the first time round. I wrote chapter summaries to reflect on before starting a new chapter, which helped especially in the later stages.

MGE: That's a great idea to organize how you are advancing or not and if the reader will be able to follow your line of reasoning. I was thinking that many other Irish writers have also written about families in Ireland and the complexities of family life, not adopting precisely an idyllic perspective. There is always a traumatic experience underlying the texts. I'm thinking of Colm Tóibín, Anne Enright, Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, Nuala O'Connor, for instance. Would that be part of a universal preoccupation or an Irish obsession?

PH: Yes, you're right. I mean I think Anne Enright at the moment is the holy grail of writers, in my opinion, and *The Green Road* is such an exemplary piece of writing in family dynamics, as is *The Gathering*. Donal Ryan's *Strange Flowers* is also a wonderfully told tale of a rural Irish family. I think Ireland's history is quite traumatic on many levels, and certainly countless families had their own traumas that they tried to overcome and keep hidden. It's these stories that really do interest me and the complexities of human relationships – especially family dynamics – and connection that I continue to try and understand and deconstruct in my writing.

MGE: I must agree with you in that this subtext of trauma is present in great part of Irish literature and I found that novels and short stories present family relationships as difficult mostly and full of secrets, lies, things which are left unsaid, people that had to be suppressed or forgotten.

Going back to the collection of short stories you mentioned earlier. Do the stories deal also with aspects of family life? I was wondering if the stories already have elements derived from last year's pandemic as regards topics, characters, etc.

PH: At the moment it is a partial collection. The two stories we spoke about today are both in it. I really want to find the time to edit the stories that are already there and I think there is space for another 3 or 4 stories. Or maybe new stories will come and will tie into the overall arc of the book, and others will be taken out. There is one pandemic story in there, actually there were two and my agent recommended changing one of them to not be about the pandemic. We spoke about that a lot – how much people would actually want to read stories about the pandemic and how sick to death we would all be by the time the books came out. The one story that is about the pandemic is about a man who has been very much isolated long before the pandemic, due to anxiety and depression, and the pandemic actually helps him in finding a way out of the rut he has found himself in.

MGE: Perhaps your agent is right, but in your case you could see the positive side of a negative situation, something that in fact happened in real life along the course of the past year. And it is really important to highlight those moments in which hope prevails and serves as a survival kit.

PH: Exactly. And I think a lot of my stories might not be exactly happy in their tone and themes, but I think there is always hope within them, a look forward to the future and what it can bring.

MGE: How are the ideas for a short story, in general, come to your mind? What things around you motivate your writing?

PH: About how a short story appears – I wish I had a simple answer, if I did I'd write a collection a month. Sometimes it's the first line, for example "Laughing and Turning Away" started that way, I thought the word "first" in the sentence did so much work for the tone of the story and the rest came easily. My latest short story, that is actually going to be my next novel, was well thought out. I had an idea about a woman with Alzheimer's who was brought up in Ireland and Irish was her first language. As she worsens she stops speaking English and only speaks Irish – her son has moved back to take care of her and starts Irish classes as a way to connect to her again. It's very much about language and identity.

MGE: And family ties as well. It keeps coming back to your writing. It is as if the woman wants to go back to her roots and seeks refuge in the language of her past...and the son on his part wants

to find the common ground that would or could help him be closer to her. Do you have a deadline to hand in your manuscript?

PH: Yes, again it is a family story. It is about leaving family and coming back to them, and what time and distance can do to the relationships. It is really about connection again, how to connect, why we need to connect, and the importance of connection. In this novel, trauma, distance and language alter how these connections and relationships grow, or cease, for some time. I have no deadline but I might give myself one so I have something to work towards.

MGE: Well, yes, many times we need a limit to help us organize our thoughts and how to give them a given phrasing in your case. Patrick, my next and almost last question has to do, again, with the choice of an agent to represent you and to promote your work but also as an advisor, I'm asking out of total ignorance about the commercial circuits.

PH: Actually, agents are very difficult to get. It is a huge achievement for any writer and it was a dream to find Eleanor Birne. As I said, I had nearly signed with other agencies back in 2018 and I'm very happy I was mature enough to see that I, more importantly my writing, wasn't in a place I wanted it to be. With Eleanor, I approached her as she represents an Irish writer I admire greatly, Louise Kennedy, whose collection, *The End of the World Is a Cul de Sac*, is out now and is being treated as an instant classic. So I sent Eleanor an email and she asked for some stories and the first 50 pages of my novel. From there we exchanged emails and had some Zoom meetings before she signed me. Now we are in the frustrating period of waiting to hear back from publishers. It's a long, complicated and arduous process, so I'm honoured to have her by my side for this.

MGE: Though waiting may be frustrating quite often, I'm very glad to hear you say your agent provides you with the necessary support. I think that it could be a huge mistake to make the wrong choice just for the sake of seeing the work published when perhaps the eye of a qualified and serious agent will position you on solid ground even though it could take longer to make things happen.

PH: Exactly, I have maybe made that mistake with individual stories and poems, and maybe I rushed my book of bilingual poetry *When Now Era Antes* that was published in Brazil. I think time with a text is very important, and when I was younger, I was very impatient to get rid of what I'd written so I could write something new. Now, I enjoy reflecting on my writing for longer and making sure it is something I am proud of before sending it anywhere.

MGE: Reflection comes as you grow older. Also, as you mature as person and as writer, I believe. Patrick, I really want to thank you for this conversation we had and for the possibility to interview you not only talking about your work as a writer and professor but also about your life and life in general. I wish you a wonderful future; your career is in its beginnings as you said but it has all the necessary ingredients to make it a long and successful one. Good luck with your present and future projects and I'll be looking forward to reading And All the Rest of Life Was Waiting soon.

PH: It was a pleasure. Hopefully, we'll be able to see each other one day soon.

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