

The Hopeless Romantic

Anthony J. Langford

On the edge of the Blue Mountains, spouting out from the long ream of cliffs, hidden amongst the eucalyptus trees of the Australian bush, lie holiday houses, thinly dispersed like sea spray. Most are owned by the well-to-do or passed down through the generations. They are often rented out as weekenders and the like, blissfully out of reach of the piercing chaos of crowded Sydney life, hence its appeal. It's less than a two-hour drive. The mountains and valley wedged between them were created over millions of years. The name Blue Mountains stems from the blue haze emanating from the eucalyptus.

It is here, I have escaped to.



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1. There's something going on here.

This is ridiculous.

I've been through all the avoidance tactics I can muster, which is no easy feat when you're in the midst of a conversation. Especially when nerves are at play. Especially when I'm attempting, even falsifying my attributes. I'm putting my best foot forward, as it were, in the supreme effort to impress. Not exactly full of shit, but certainly giving it a good polish.

She is beautiful, yes, but not in a glamorous, flooding the internet kind of way. Nor in a, 'I know I'm hot', pouty, selfie connoisseur type of way either. In fact she's very naturalistic. No make-up. And I really mean none and not in the blokey, she doesn't wear make-up, when in fact she's adopted the organic look that subtly highlights certain aspects that men can't discern, way.

Okay, look. Maybe she does have a bit. After all, I am a bloke. And we're both in the throes of a verbal exchange. And I'm not exactly right up in her face. I'm at a respectful distance and too focused on my performance to analyse minute details but her smile lines are prominent and she has that well-worn look that you'd expect from a face that smiles a lot. I'd say she's mid-thirties but I've got no other information to go on. I've only known her for... what is it... twenty minutes?

'Do you want to try some of this bad cake?' she asks.

I need to tread warily. She may have made it. 'I'm sure it's not bad.'

'Oh, it could be.'

What am I supposed to do with that? She's given me no clues. If I agree with her that it's bad, then we're together on the same page; a slight notch in my quest to woo her. Woo being a stupid word, consisting of only three letters to describe a thousand penetrating and heartfelt emotions. If ever there was a word that completely subverts the entire process, it's *woo*.

'Sure.'

She deftly removes a slice, as it's already cut and places it on my plate. Her fingers are slender. Like the rest of her physique. She passes me the plate.

I take it, careful not to place my fingers too close to hers. If I subtly brushed her skin

that would be cheesy and pathetic. It wouldn't even pass the editor's scissors these days in a soppy, romantic movie. 'I've given you the smallest slice.'

It certainly is the smallest piece, by a long shot. 'Maybe that's not a bad thing.'

She laughs. She laughs easily. I like that. Makes me feel... entertaining. I do like to make people laugh. I do it at every opportunity. In fact my brain is working all the time to wrench whatever humour I can find in a moment and serve up a quality line. I'm not trying to be clever. A person who laughs is an individual at their best.

Through the open doors comes the unmistakable song of a kookaburra. It's both blissful and accusatory. Why do I get insecure when I hear a kookaburra laugh? Is it really laughing at me? Or was it all that conditioning as a child? Thanks for the folklore Grandparents! It only reaffirms the absurdity of the situation I'm captured in, like the poor proverbial fly. I can't roll over and die. I've got to push on. I've got to fight!

'Did you make it?' I ask after the first mouthful, heading her off at the pass, in case she asks and I say it tastes like kitty litter, when she's spent hours making it.

'I bought it at the bakery. They normally do better than this.'

I nod. Relieved. 'It's fine. Neither here nor there.' There I go. Fence sitting. Maybe her cousin runs the bakery, I don't know!

'It's bad,' she says.

I laugh. She laughs. This is good.

'It's fine,' I say. 'I'm actually on a diet.'

'Really? Why? You don't need to lose any.'

I am naturally thin all over but I did have a beer belly, which I was quite ashamed of. Thank God it's gone or she wouldn't have looked at me twice. And she is looking at me, isn't she? I'm not mistaking it. There's something going on here.

'I am kind of on a health kick. Cutting out all sugar. Breads. Carbs. Not completely, but you know...'

She holds up her cup of tea. 'I have it a bit.' She had put milk and sugar in hers. I like mine black.

'It's okay. I like half a teaspoon in my coffee. It was more the sugary drinks and all that crap. I've cut all that out.' Which is kind of a lie as despite doing what I said, I still like to chomp on a few lollies at night.

'Health kick as in gym? Sports?'

I put the plate down, having only had one and a half bites. Too difficult to eat and talk, much less maintain an aura of coolness, which I'm desperately trying to achieve, much

less flirt.

'Do you see this body pulling weights? I'd prefer pulling teeth. I can't stand gyms. All that posturing.' Oh shit. Is she a gym jiver? 'It's fine for other people, just not for me. I do a bit of walking. I enjoy that.'

'I don't go to the gym either.'

'Thank God.'

'Ha ha. I swim a lot. That's why I live near the beach.'

I scratch my head metaphorically. 'You don't live here?'

'This is my parent's place.'

'Oh.'

'It's their holiday house.'

'I see.'

'I come up here on weekends sometimes.'

'So you live in Sydney too?' This is good news.

'Uh huh.'

'Whereabouts?' Idiot. Stalker! 'I mean...'

'Bondi.'

'Right. Nice.'

'Not really.'

'No? How come?'

'It's changed. It's overcrowded now. A lot of apartment buildings going up.'

'It's everywhere,' I say. 'You should see it where I live. Cranes in the sky like metallic mushrooms. I live on the seventh floor. Half of my view is cranes. I'm serious. There's so many I've started giving them names. Harold. Rumi.'

'Ha ha.'

'Bondi though. I wouldn't have thought...?'

'A lot of backpackers. My whole apartment complex is all backpackers. It's small. Only six units. But it's so noisy. It's like New Year's Eve every night.'

'Oh the partying. Yeah. I'm too old for that shit. How do you stand it?'

Her eyes open wider. She has large expressionistic eyes. I could write a poem about them. Blue? Blueish green. Subtle. 'You can smell the meth cooking,' she says.

'No way. Serious?' I can tell from her expression that she is.

'Sometimes.'

'I couldn't stand it.'

'Yeah it's not ideal.'

'It only works if you're living that way too. Are you tempted to join them? You might be able to score some cheap drugs.'

'Ha ha, no.'

'Can't you move?'

'It looks out over the water. I like the view.'

'Just not the smell.'

'It's pretty crazy.'

'Just open your windows and you can get high for free.'

She laughs again.

I'm on fire. 'Rent the window space out cheap for desperate addicts.'

She continues laughing. Her whole face is aglow. She has a lot of teeth. No more than anyone else but the top ones are pronounced. She shifts in her seat every time she laughs. I'm on the edge of my seat. Literally on the edge. Another inch forward and my butt would be dive bombing to the floor. I don't know about you but I find it quite strange to fully make myself at home when I'm at a stranger's house. Perhaps I'm being defensive, but reclining is actually uncomfortable. Not that I don't feel comfortable with her. That's the key. I feel somewhat at peace with her. Whole. Holistic. It's not that she's unattractive. Quite the opposite. Usually attractive women make me too self-conscious, even if I'm deliberately trying to be blasé, it's still a forced reaction. I think many men react this way. Is it because I'm older than her? I guess about ten years. Or is there something else about her? I think it's her entire demeanour. The way she carries herself. The way she's dressed. Jeans and a loose brown top. Suggestive of a hippy mentality but no overt hair in sight. A sophisticated hippy perhaps. She's simply chilled. Happy in her own skin. No sign of ego. And responding warmly to me. Is that all it is? Warm and friendly? After all, this is a business arrangement, no? In theory, I am her customer. Not in theory. In actuality. I'm renting the cabin. I'm the customer. That's it. And that's all. Mere politeness. I'm over thinking it. Over analysing.

Hang on a second Mr. Cold Reality. You can't over analyse chemistry. It's either there or it isn't. And there's something here. Oh, there's something most definitely here.

We continue making small talk, which isn't really small. It's introductory. The 'getting to know about each other' talk. While it may not be an intellectual, exploring one another's inner workings like a surgeon making origami out of a glob of complex

capillaries, it is an important exchange. The entire basis of a potential relationship, whether it be merely friendship or not, is based upon those earliest minutes. To implement a cliché, it sets the foundations. I've got to get it right. This time.

I enquire about her work. She teaches English at a University. It's one of the top institutions. I'm not of an academic mindset but I've always enjoyed English. Reading and writing are some of my favourite pastimes. It was my strength back in school. Just not all the other subjects.

She sounds good at what she does. I must appear interested. I am interested. I'm not faking it. Any degree of falseness will undermine any hope for a genuine connection. I know for me it does. And she's an earthy type. I wonder if she has a hairy pussy? Making a comeback I hair. Hear. Generational shift. I don't mind. As long as it's not like a mutated fern. A dislodged sliver at the back of the throat can totally ruin a romantic moment.

I don't mean to sound facetious. I don't care about her personal habits. I like her. I really do. She seems totally in tune with the universe. I bet she can see through bullshit like a plumber discerns why a tap is leaking. Then examines the situation to see how he can extend the situation to make some coin. I was ripped off by a plumber. Hasn't everyone been ripped off by a dodgy tradie at some point?

Christ! I'm ruining my own analogy. I get caught up in my own inner dialogue at times. It's like a handbrake. And now because I've not been fully focused, I've allowed the conversational dance to lapse. There's a lull followed by an elongated pause. The death knell! Fuck.

I look around the spacious lounge/living area. The walls are adorned with art, mostly from international travel by the looks of things. There are many paintings, landscapes, an old farm house and an African style rug draped across the wall. How do they keep those things hanging up? There's also a large mirror with ornate carvings woven into its wooden frame. There's a substantial multi coloured hat plastered to another wall. It's huge, like a sombrero. It could almost double for an umbrella. Without the handle stick. It's a little too flat to be a hat but I don't ask her about it. I sense that these objects have been gathered over a long period. A reflection of places and time. I should have realised that this isn't her house. There's a sense of decades. Yet there's no real sign of anyone living here, like you'd expect in a functioning home. A pair of shoes near a door. A jacket on the back of a chair. A current newspaper or magazine. A dirty plate. A lackadaisical remote.

'What do you do for work?' Oh she broke the ice. I'd frozen up. What did I do for work? I'm far too old to stammer like a schoolboy or be stricken with a case of silence as though a vow from a nun. Besides, the nuns I've met are anything but silent. You take away one obvious factor or physical expression and it leaves you with an excess compensation in the other.

I tell her the truth. I'm a television editor. It sounds exciting, but like most jobs, loses its thrill after a certain time. It has its drawbacks.

Like what?

The never-ending shift work. A lifetime of. Still, I enjoy it or why else would I do it? Well there's the money for one. However, I also work in a nursing home. One day a week. I do it to enrich the soul as it were. The TV work, while rewarding in its own right, is a little soul-less, especially after twenty years. I don't shower residents or change beds, I entertain them. Or at least try to. It's genuinely rewarding but not in the financial sense, hence why I still work in TV.

I sigh. For someone who is loath to talk about himself, I've just told her a great deal. Fortunately she doesn't appear bored. Or is a very competent actor.

It's only polite to enquire more about her. This is really going somewhere. I feel like a gold panner spying a change in colour amongst the tired, monochromatic silt. She stands. What is she up to? Oh, don't tell me that. Is she suggesting what I think she's suggesting? She is. It's time to go. My cup is empty and so is hers. My cake is only half eaten. That's okay. It really was dry and bland after all.

We're parallel and heading towards the back doors, the way I came in. The proximity of her makes me feel like we're old friends. But we're not. It's with regret that I have to go but I suppose there's a time limit on first meetings, especially within the confines of someone's home. Was it half an hour? Longer? I was lost in there. Caught up in the dance. The to and fro. Not without promise. If I had to rate it, I'd give it an eight.

We're walking down the driveway towards the front gate. There are towering pine trees to the right. She's directing me to a break in the trees. It's a path. I did notice it when I first pulled in. Her house, sorry her parent's house, is half a dozen kilometres out of town. It sits on the edge of rich bushland that borders the cliffs and deep million year old valleys of the Blue Mountains. She tells me how long it takes to get to the lookout. If I leave now I could get there and back before sunset. I really have no desire to take a ninety-minute walk. Yet I find myself responding with enthusiasm, as though pleasing her is all that matters. Which is exactly what I'm doing. The last thing she says to me,

is that if I'm lucky, I'll see a rock wallaby. Mmm. Lucky. I'm no stranger to the bush. I suppose she assumes I'm a city slicker. We never got too deep into my background. And why would we? There's only so much territory to cover over a cuppa and we covered quite a bit.

I make a minor quip about getting lost in an airport carpark not long ago so it's highly likely I'll disappear here. I may have been brought up in the country but my sense of direction was never honed to any degree of success. Disappear is exactly what she's done. Retreated with stealth. I don't know if she even heard me carrying on about the carpark, trying to make a joke. I was busy scrutinising the way ahead. And now she's gone. Within a minute I realise I'm navigating an unfamiliar dirt track when all I wanted was a view of the bush through the window of my hired abode with my arse stretched out on the couch with a book. That's why I came here in the first place.



(Photograph Anthony J. Langford)

The exercise will do me good.

Yes, it's good for you. Don't whinge.

So why do I feel like a panicky schoolgirl going to an excursion at Hanging Rock? Ah but those girls were happy and didn't know what they were getting into. I feel like I've been sent to the gallows, the winding scenic route. She wanted to get rid of me. There was a shift in the dynamics and I didn't notice it. I was too friendly. Too eager. She detected it. And put it to bed.

Mister! Reign that negativity in! She was fully engaging with me. That wasn't some hopeful fantasy. There was a chemistry there. I'm here for the weekend. Let's see what happens. Anything is possible. She's alone. She didn't bring her boyfriend with her. Or husband. Damn, I forgot to check her fingers for a ring.

If she is in a relationship, why would she be here by herself? Perhaps they had a fight. Perhaps she has a partner but merely wanted to escape the bedlam of city life. Same as me. The endless streams of people. Busy but not engaged. Not with each other. Only their phones. The pearl lines of cars, intact but separate. Going ever so slowly, caught in the web of Sydney's incessant traffic treadmill. Inevitably someone makes a risky dash, believing that they don't have to wait, that they can force an opportunity because only *they've* seen one. When you do the right thing, you suffer for it. Increasing your frustration. Decreasing your positivity. Tainting your world view. The politics of working life. If only everyone could adopt your attitude. Generous and kind. I'll scratch your back. You scratch mine. The entire system flows and creates an ever churning wheel of progress and contentment. As we all have to spend the bulk of our lives within the production line, so let's make it as pleasant as we can for everyone.

If not for the, shall we say, intruding wedge of the arseholes whom, while in the minority, make their presence known more keenly than the other, disrupting the wheel, forcing us into conflict and misery. It's not always prominent, though they do come to the forefront more often than we'd like. Enough to impede our journey. And piss us off. It's these people, male, female, young, old, who are spread across the surface of existence at every turn, like faecal bacteria, preventing unmitigated enjoyment and creating an unnecessary stink. Perhaps you're one of them. Perhaps I am. Or perhaps we all take turns like a flash sketch out of a satirical flip-o-rama. Because by God you've got to laugh. And if you don't, you might just go more than a little loopy. For Christ's sake, I really do need to step back from the world more regularly.

This track is a worry. It's barely been used. Not for a long while at any rate. It's covered over by moulding layers of dead leaves and interspersed with jutting, overgrown brush. Some lovely ferns buried in there but mostly native shrubs.

Banksia's. Wattle. There could easily be a snake in this sort of environment. I wouldn't even notice it until potentially too late. They love the remaining pockets of sunshine as the day's end draws near. I hate snakes. I saw far too many of them as a kid. I grew up near the river. There were several occasions when I saw them slithering in the grasses. Once, on a track through the trees to the water, not too dissimilar to this one, I almost stepped on a fat tiger snake. It was lying directly across the path, expertly camouflaged on a thin carpet of dead leaves and dirt. I was literally one step away from it before I saw it, my knee paused in mid-air. And I froze. The quintessential response but there it was. I backed up pretty quickly and abandoned the idea for a swim.

On another occasion, there was one hanging on the school fence. I can't remember who killed it. It was possibly roadkill. I do recall coming back with a friend in the late afternoon and it was still hanging there, slowly squirming away, even though its head was only joined to its body by a thread.

I begin whistling. Footsteps alone may not make enough noise to frighten a snake away. I'm not in a whistling mood exactly so I begin singing.

'I'm walking along. Singing a stupid song. So, you'll leave me alone. You slippery snakes. It's not too late, for you to piss off out of the gate... and leave me alone. You slimy fuckers.'

I must be more cognisant of my surroundings too, instead of only the ground. I have to come back this way, I'm assuming. There's only been the one track. Didn't she say something along those lines? My head. Too concerned with the interaction and not the plan of action. God I'm an idiot sometimes.

No matter. Better to know where I'm at. Can't take the Australian bush for granted. Any wild area. I've got to stay frosty. People get lost up here all the time. They're usually found but not before they've spent an agonising night or two in it. Some don't make it back at all. The nights out here can get cold, even in Spring. I don't have enough clothing. I've a right mind to turn back and fuck the experience and fuck her. She was simply trying to palm me off.

'Don't talk to the hand. Talk to the land.'

I sensed a shift at the end of the discussion. Discernible. Tangible. But significant? Did I say something wrong? Did I look at her in a funny way? Not to my knowledge. I was very careful. I hardly looked at her at all. I'm very conscious of that sort of thing. Eye contact is necessary but you don't want to overdo it. Not on a first meeting. I looked at that damned cake more than her. When was the change? I can't think of anything

specific. It was gradual. It must have been. I didn't notice it.

She *was* flirting with me. That was unmistakable. At some point, she changed her mind. Reached a conclusion of sorts. I don't know. I'm confused. Women are confusing. Love is confusing. Lust is... well. Lust is a trick. An enticement to get you into parenthood, like honey to a bee. Though bees make the honey, don't they? Do they eat it too? Baffling. The whole thing is a quagmire, a confounding mess. I always seem to be on the outer, looking in. I get close but not right alongside. Give me a taste but not the meal. Left hungrier than I was to begin with. Perhaps I need to change my philosophy. Make it more of a case of spit and not swallow. Self-preservation. And to hell with the protein.

2. One step forward. Many steps back, in time.

The trees to my left have thinned. And there's that old hut. She mentioned that.

Or what's left of it. Three stone walls, no roof. No doors. No windows. No wood. Not even a memory. Lives lived and forgotten. A worker's cottage. A convict cottage. A pioneering family. I don't know. It's a shame that their experiences are lost. Lives a lot harder and no doubt shorter than mine. Shorter than most people today. We don't acknowledge that. The immense hard work. The continual, necessary commitment to basic survival. No. We don't choose to remember them at all. Far too self-absorbed with our own *important* lives.

I keep moving. I've got more immediate things to concern myself with. Like snakes. 'I'm working on the railroad! And walking along this track! If I get lost in the bush, I probably won't make it back.'

There's little wind but there's birds in the distance and the occasional rustling nearby. Something foraging for food, or disturbed by my presence. And definitely my singing. Long black hair. Her beautiful smile. Always laughing. *Claire*. Oh God, Claire. I haven't thought of her for twenty years. What happened to her? Gorgeous. Beaming face. Big hips. Hair down to her wonderfully shaped arse. Always in jeans. Her dark eyes looking into mine. Head to the side. She's right in front of me. Hair cascading like

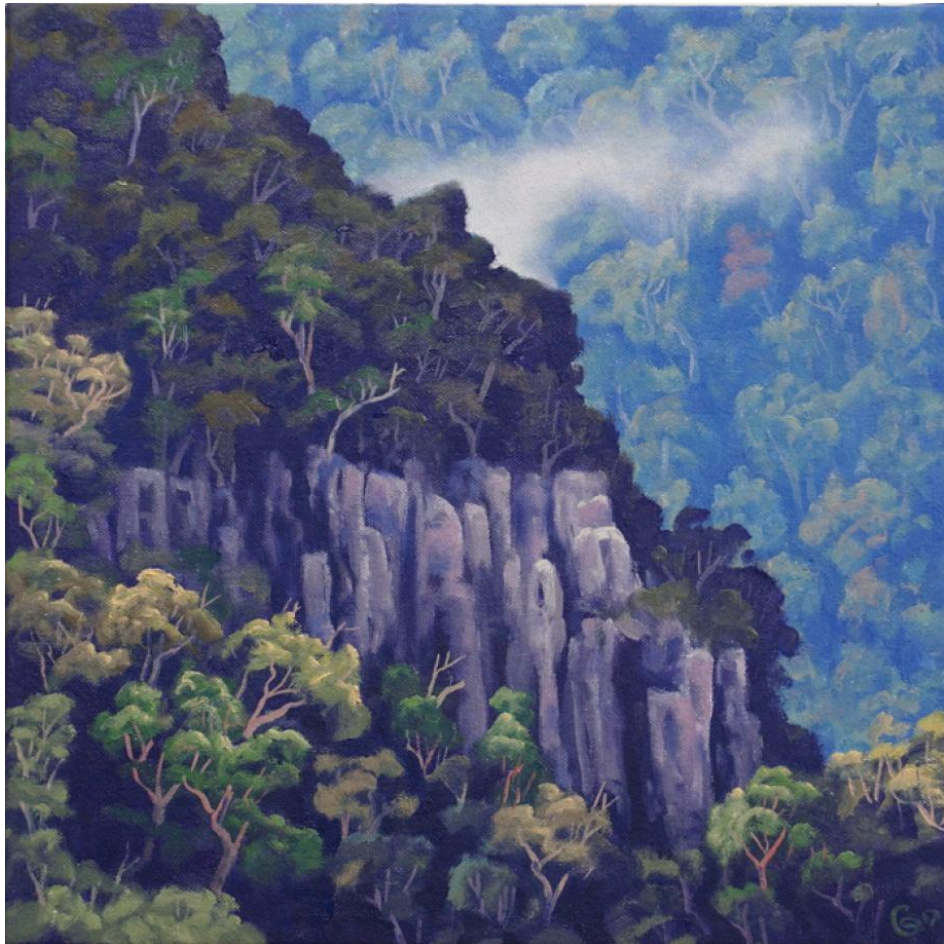
black fire. Luminous. What a woman. Chuckling. A crazy laugh. A bit mad. A lot mad. I could see it in her eyes. I can see it now that I think about it. I'm not so sure I even knew it then. I didn't have the life experience. Or perhaps I didn't want to know. She was a lot of fun, despite the hyperactivity. I've no doubt she would have suffered issues later on. You can get away with a lot when you're young. And perhaps we're all just a little ignorant of our true states. Too busy socialising and exploring, like birds out of the nest, to worry about what we are.

She was magnetic. *Alive*. I wanted her. I used to visit her at her unit. I'm sure she shared it with someone else but I don't remember others ever being there. We'd hang out. Laugh. She'd come to my place occasionally. We'd hang out. We'd play pool. Drink beers. Not regularly but every few months we'd hang out like that. Like a couple of old pals. Lifelong friends. Lovers, without the sex. I recall those photos of her on the beach. Fully clothed. Lying back on the sand, elbow propping her up. Her hair falling around her. I remember those pictures. I have them somewhere. Some other guy was there too. Work associate. That's right. It was a lunch break. Where are those photos? Where are you Claire?

She's still the same age of course. She always will be. Not worn down by time. The girl I wanted. And couldn't have. For whatever reason, I cannot recall. I never made a move on her. I think she had a boyfriend, but that came later on. She had been single. I longed after her. Oh, how I fantasied of being in a relationship with her. How much of our lives are spent living in fantasy? The more distant, the stronger the drive. The urge to dream. And therein sows the seeds of illusion. I believed there was a chance. Convinced myself, more likely. I recall hugging her on the couch. My place. Late. We were drunk. She was manic. She was laughing. And then crying. I was swept up in her madness. It was her world. I was a mere occupant. An observer who became a participant. The chameleon. Trying to fit in. Yet I made myself at home. Wanting her to want me. Tell her what she wanted to hear. Behaved how I thought she'd want me to be. A boyfriend to be.

I've always been that way. The Chameleon. Jesus. I'm still like that. Putting on a show. A performance. Giving them what I think *they* want. Perhaps I was wrong to do that. Or was it? People do like me. Is it due to that reason? Reflecting what they want to see. I created facsimiles of them. No margin for doubt then. No work required. Easier to understand. Same tastes, desires, interests and physicality's. Like the many couples who look the same. Dress the same. Share far too many of the same interests. Gym

junkies. Fashion chasers. Barista hoppers. Exposed at the *right* restaurants and cafes. Beach combers. Video gamers. Swimmers. Joggers. Travellers. Are we all merely seeking extensions of ourselves? Hoping to be accepted for who we are. What better way than to find a doppelganger. Well, at least, they appear the same from the outset. Don't opposites attract? Perhaps it's just an expression. Merely an object of curiosity. Ooo, what a gas. Like the girl to the bad boy. Fun at first. Exciting. Even dangerous. Until he shoves her hard against the wall. Bad boys are a hit, when it comes to women. They flail at plenty else. In the end. In the meantime, the nice guy brings up the rear. Trailing behind. The languisher. That's my problem. I'm too amiable. Too fucking *pleasing*. It's not like I haven't had success, if that's the right term. I had Diane. And going way back, drunken nightclub one-night stands. Arrogance and alcohol. The unsullied hunger of youth. Yet it's the unrequited ones that you always remember. Claire. Where did you end up? Are you even alive? If only I could have kissed you. Just the once.



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The track splits. Shit. That's just great. This is what I was worried about. She didn't mention this. She said return trip. I was visualising stairs and signs. This is no tourist area. I'm literally in the middle of nowhere. I look around me. Three sixty. It's the same as those couples. Safety in blandness. There's nothing to indicate a change in topography. Anywhere! So which path to take? Sounds a bit proverbial. A bit philosophical. Except this is physical. And potentially life changing. And not in a good way.

The one to the left is slightly more worn. This has to be it. Do I take it? I'm in the midst of it now. How long have I been walking? Difficult to measure in time. Misplaced in my thoughts. I could turn back. And what if I see her again? She will ask me about it. Quiz me on this supposed marvellous view. Ask for details. Like that fucking cake. Will I really see her again? After all, it's easy to get to my little cabin from the property. In fact, I have to go out of my way to get to her house.

Which is not her house. Their house.

That's ridiculous. Of course I'll see her again. I've got her number. She texted me the address. She told me to come up to the house to say hi if I felt like it. I did go up but I didn't feel like it. I was actually very sleepy. I could have easily fallen asleep. I was planning on reading my book on that enticing little couch. Perhaps even partaking in a nanna nap. God, I didn't even get to *sit* on that couch. We've yet to be acquainted. I only wanted to say hi to her because I knew it was too early for sleep and I thought it would wake me up somewhat. It would be polite and civilised and something I planned to get over with quickly. How did I know that she'd be vibrant and beautiful? Actually not that beautiful, but... just... I don't know... my type I guess. *Tits and butt*.

No. Earthy. There's that word again. What does that even mean? I suppose it was simply a natural exchange. And true. And honest. No facade. No bullshit. She felt it too. I know she did. There's still hope. I could quickly drop in on the way back, just to thank her for this superb walk, which I'm enjoying so much. And the view! *Wunderbar!*

Fantastic. You were right. It's everything you said and more! Hell, if I were an artist, I'd paint the entire vista. Oh I am an artist actually. Didn't I tell you? Yes, I'm very good. I do landscapes. I do people too. Actually, that's my speciality. The human form. So much unique form, in every individual. What a marvellous landscape, the human is. I could do you. Tonight? Why not? On the couch. On no, you don't have to be nude. I would never pressure... Oh semi-nude? Are you sure? Yes we could do that. You could be like Rose in Titanic. Great movie. Yes, we could work like that. Oh shit, I didn't

bring my brushes. I can't work without them. Pencils? Thanks for offering but I couldn't possibly do that. Pencils and I have a thing. Yeah, I tripped once and stabbed myself. I had to remove them from my house. I can't even walk past an art shop or newsagent with getting the shivers. Really, I just came for the reading and the quiet. Art takes too long. But I tell you what. I could take a couple of photos, if you're okay with that. When I get back home, I'll have far more time to do a proper job with a myriad of colours and brushes and...

That's not such a crazy idea. I could find an actual artist to do it for me and she'd never know the difference.

That's definitely going to happen. Not. But I could pop in on the way back and thank her for pointing me to the remarkable view. No harm in that. She might be having a glass of wine and invite me in, as she's already on her second glass and feeling a bit tipsy and at the last minute I'll say I'm not drinking at the moment because of the diet... oh no, I'm very stringent about it. I couldn't. A refreshment would be nice though. I'm quite parched after all that exercise. Water or orange juice is fine.

I'm not going to blow three months of sobriety for someone I've just met. Not for wine anyway. I'm a beer man. Through and through. An ice cold beer. That's a different realm. God I hope she doesn't have any beer. It's the right time of day for me too. Maybe I shouldn't go there at all. One simple drink would lead me instantly to the desire for ten. A very insistent desire. One I couldn't shake off. I'd have to sneak off to find more booze somewhere. Drive back to town. Stock up. Sneak it back. And power through my usual routine. A few hours of pleasure, followed by a few hours of blurred semi-reality, with the potential to lower boundaries and begin texting the wrong people as I've been known to do and say something I don't want to say and wake up tomorrow with sickness and regret and *bang*... it's back to Day Zero. It's too fucking hard to start over again. Again. I can't do it. I just can't. I'm worn out. If she offers, I'll have to be firm.

If she offers...

I guess this means that I *am* going to see her. I can't let that opportunity pass by. There was some sort of connection there. And that's a rare thing. I have to find out one way or another. She won't know about the drink. And that other thing. The companion that I've been so very adept at hiding. Through years of refinement. I can fake it. I can fake it so well that it's part of me. The confidence. The public face. I've entwined it with my real self. I can always tell the difference but others can't. I'm not the only one. Many people

have a public face. Perhaps some are genuinely strident in self-belief. With that smug, innate...

Jesus Christ. A kangaroo. Just ahead on the track. Staring straight at me. Didn't see him coming. He's just there. Or she. He's not a big one. It's not a kangaroo. It's a wallaby. Ha-ha There you go Caitlin. There's your wallaby. I've seen him now. Another talking point. It's all leading to it. Solidifying the connection. It's pre-ordained.

'Hey little guy. I'm not going to hurt you. You're not going to hurt me, are you?'

Neither of us are moving. He's grey with little black ears and a black nose. Much more handsome than a kangaroo.

'I'm just visiting. Is that okay? Do you mind if I walk on your track? I'm really an okay guy you know. Despite what you may have heard. Don't believe them. They lie. They really do!' I'm almost lyrical with my speaking. Can he detect the friendly tone I'm attempting to muster? A musical quality? Or is it all gibberish?

I take a slight step.

'I'm coming closer now. Okay my friend? I won't be long. And you'll never see me again.' Never see me. Again. Disappeared. A mystery.

I take another step. He turns away from me. He bounds a few feet away then stops. He swivels to look at me. Presumably to see if I'm following. Which I am.

'Don't worry mate. It's just me. You go and have fun now. Track down some action. Don't forget to use a rubber.' Probably not a male at all. Female. Caitlin's bush spy. He bounds away again, this time into the bush. In a flash, he's lost to view.

'Put the good word in for me, will you? Cheers mate!'

I continue walking. He was untarnished. Not frightened. Poetic little guy. He had style. He was slick. I need a little friend like him. Perhaps I should get a pet. Not particularly feasible in a unit. Maybe a goldfish. Why are they always the next best option? Dog. Cat. Goldfish. I had guinea pigs when I was a child. They were cute. Plenty of space then. Growing up in the country. Big back yard. I let them loose and they would hang around the bricks at the bottom of the Hills Hoist. Once I forgot to put them back in their cage. I went and had dinner. It wasn't until I came out on sunset and there they were. Happily chilling out in the dying summer's day.

I remember Susan. My first girlfriend. I was in Year Four. Not sure how old I was but I remember it was Year Four. Eight or nine. A sort of bliss arises when I think of that time. Of her. I don't recall details. Just a general warm feeling. I was a romantic, even at that age. When most boys would rather be eating sticks and throwing frogs. I was

doing that too but I was always interested in the girls. Susan. She went out with a Greek guy when she was a teenager. I remember feeling jealous, even though our affair was brief and naturally, immature. The difference between eight and fourteen couldn't be more mountainous. Yet the feelings of inadequacy were there. Of having missed out somehow. That she was supposed to be mine. Silly really. I was already in love with Dee at fourteen. Besotted. Dee. She was a dark beauty. Italian. Rich black hair. Olive skin. All those Mediterranean clichés. She was gorgeous. Hips like a woman. I remember the power of her body. Very sexual. Yet I never got to touch it in the way I imagined. Kissing was a magical high. It was more than enough at fourteen. The love notes. The longings. The soul pouring out into juvenile text. The navigational aspects however were beyond my control. I lost her. She ripped my heart out and left me broken and pumping blood into the gutter. Weeping red tears. I couldn't imagine a pain that was worse. It was like death. I never got over her. I never got over any of them. I'm still in love with them all, to this day.

Simple country days, with not so simple emotions. Riveting. Deep. Clutching at the veins of life. Tasting its serrated edge. Left reeling. Damaged. The irreversible pain of loss.

I still miss the country though. There was peace to be found in-between the bouts of misery. And of course, there was a lot of fun to be had. There were other girls to chase down. Crazy times with my mates. And quiet moments swimming in the river or hitting a ball against the bricks of the local school after hours. Or riding my bike with nowhere to go.

Perhaps that's why I like getting out of the city so much. The old clichés ring true for me. The space. The quiet. I don't mind heading into the country on my own. I'm used to it. It would be nice to bring someone along occasionally. They say the second you stop looking for romance, it falls into your lap. Naked. Crying out your name. And at the end of the rainbow are pots of gold guarded by a maniacal leprechaun. I'd be happy with a friend, period. All these years of shift work, especially my weekend nights, has killed my social life. And the hope of building anything new. It didn't matter so much when I was living with Diane. She had her own circle of friends. I simply slotted in with them. Most of my true friends I'd left behind in the country. Well they had scattered too, mostly to Melbourne and Adelaide. Some of them are still my friends. It's difficult to see them. Once every couple of years. But when I do, it's like nothing's changed. No judgments. We'll be friends for life. Yet we live alternate realities. They're

married with kids. They stopped asking me about all of that. I guess I joined the breeding club when I moved in with Dianne and her kids. That was enough for me. But these last few years, being on my own again, there's been that void that I cannot deny. A terrible aching vacuum. It's pathetic that I feel this way. I don't want to. Yet, I can't kick it. It's a stain. My day at the nursing home is probably the happiest one of the week. I communicate with people all day long. I laugh with them. Hugs occasionally. Hold their hand if they need it. Occasionally even told I'm handsome. I guess some of them still have longing too. Others are quite depressed. Some are angry. Confused. Lost to their own despair. In the myriad of forms it can take. I do all I can to soothe. I partially succeed. But of course, it's all temporary. I have to move on. I have activities to run. And too much paperwork. Really though, being able to generate a smile in another is truly wonderful. I can see what effect my words, or my silliness, can create. That's why I'm there. It's just such a shame that I can't make it last. The smile fades. The mood drops. Secretly we yearn for that next elation, without being aware of it. I leave at the end of the day totally exhausted, physically and mentally. Spiritually too. I guess I'm drained. Yet I know I've done some genuine good. I give all of myself. For that one day. Just one day. I couldn't do it full time. It's too taxing. I can't switch off like others can. That's to their credit. But not for me. Besides, the pay is criminal. I couldn't survive on that sort of work full time. Perhaps if I was younger and living in a share house and had less financial strain.

On the other hand, I wouldn't be able to bring the experience and compassion that I have now. The ability to relate. Some of the younger staff there, the older ones too, are doing it as their main occupation. They care. Enough. But it's a means to an end. They're not qualified for anything else. It's just a job. For me, it's verges on a spiritual experience. Developing and maintaining a connection with people who need it the most. And they're so appreciative. The ones that are aware of what's going on. Which is certainly not the case for a lot of people. It's a fairly sorrowful place if you think in those terms. It can get to you. Yet it's also a caring one. Enriching. And that's why it's important to keep reminding myself of it. I need reminding. I'm one of these people that brings it home.

I do like to give. To give of myself. It's real. I like to be genuine with others. I can't simply ignore their emotions, wants and needs, when it's evident in their actions, words and expressions. Should I merely focus on my own career and interests and to hell with everybody else? Isn't there enough of those people about already? Yet, on occasion,

without prompting, is it selfish to want a little something in return? Not from the nursing home. The people who reside there give me plenty. I'm talking about a relationship. A love of my own. Someone who wants me for me, and not someone who can help look after the kids and share the finances. God that sounds cynical. Of course, I didn't mind doing it. At the time. I grew to love those kids. It didn't take long. Not without its complications too, being other family members, to highlight the obvious. Her ex for one. If you've got kids, you can never get rid of them. There were many wonderful times though. Times which I'm sure they've forgotten. One day I turned around and they were teenagers. It wasn't fun anymore. It was hard work. I didn't mind sharing the burden, but not owning it. They weren't even my kids. I grew to comprehend that I was being taken advantage of. I was doing all of the running around. Worse still. All of the boundary setting. And solely dealing with all the angst that comes with that. I was the bad cop. She wasn't even the good cop. There were no other cops on duty. I was the lone sheriff in a hostile town. She was too career focused. On a mission to improve her humble beginnings. Which is totally fine. In and of itself. But not at my expense. Not of her kid's expense. It's a whole other story. And I'm not without some culpability. It came to an end. And the end is never pretty is it? Afterwards, my parents said they couldn't grasp why I hadn't left earlier. They'd never said anything prior but could see it all along, even though they live in another city. I wish they'd told me. I could have done with a bit of support. Some early guidance. I'd rushed in. I quickly realised that I was in over my head. I thought I had to grin and bear it. *You made your bed. Now lie in it, motherfucker.*

I kept my hesitations and protestations locked away inside. A typical male manoeuvre? Perhaps. I wouldn't know. Men don't talk to each other that much. So, there's no other stories I can compare it to. I suppose that fact alone tells me enough already. A male thing. And a me thing. Being so isolated from my genuine connections, I couldn't really offload my shit. The online world was there but it's too superficial and short term for me to open up in the way I needed to. And I wasn't sure I needed to. You'd be surprised what comes to the surface within a genuinely warm, face to face conversation. There's no time to think about what you're going to say. If you feel safe. emotion emerges. Not so online. You can analyse each word before hitting send. And it's all staccato anyway. A conversational thread can take all day. Or longer. No. That's not enough. A ten-minute face to face can reveal things you didn't even know were buried. Perhaps I should have seen a counsellor. Perhaps I shouldn't have left her. No matter now. It's

done. Dusted. Polished. And filed into the realm of memory.

3. The enticing, intoxicating power of nature.

Oh Christ. Where is this lookout? Ninety minute round trip she said. Well shit, I've been walking for longer than forty-five minutes surely. I stop. I look back. The track is barely visible. Perhaps I took the wrong path. Just my luck. I face ahead. There's nothing to indicate the famous lookout. I listen. It's dead still. No wind. Not even a hint of a breeze. There are a few birds. I can hear a slight ringing in my ears. That's how quiet it is. It's as though the forest is waiting for something to happen. Watching me. Waiting for my downfall. Should I turn back? What would I say to Caitlin? I turned pussy and ran? You were so close, she'd say. And laugh. Laughing at me. She thinks I'm ridiculous. There goes the semi naked photo shoot. Five more minutes. Then I'm going back. Fuck the fallout. I'll lock myself in my cabin. Wrap myself in my book and fall asleep on the couch. Like I originally wanted to. It's funny how events can side-track you. Especially those with false promises. Before you know it, you're doing something totally unexpected. Something you had no interest in doing. Like an awkward first date that you can't get out of. There's been a few of those lately. Aren't all first dates awkward? App dating is a shitty way of meeting people. Too many to choose from. Too easy to move onto the next. Disposable people. No getting to know anyone like we used to through friends and work. We've lost something along the way.

I walk on, trying not to think. I think too much. Too much thinking is not good. Stinking thinking leads to drinking. It only works if you work it. Grant me the wisdom to know the difference. Give over to a Higher Power. Give over? I fail to see what that's got to do with drinking. I've got to cling to me. To what little strength I seem to possess. I don't know when I lost it but that's what's happened. I don't grasp all of this Higher Power business anyway. I wish did. This is my only Higher Power. Nature. Look at those trees. I'm stopping here a minute. They're so gracious. Stretching proudly to the sky. So positive. Life affirming. Why do we love trees so much? Even the dead

ones are beautiful. There's an art to them. That one there with its dried, black twisting frame. It contains its own power. An artistic expression. Graceful, even in death. A natural state of being. As ardently relevant as life. Being. Existing. Consistently grinding away. Waiting for the catch-up. The inevitable. It's coming, isn't it? To us all. But why does it feel so personal? Like we're being hunted. Chased down through time. We know it will catch us in the end, but still we run. Still we pretend it's not there. Its giant shadow merged with the sunshine. I fluctuate as to my philosophy. Sometimes I'm absolutely terrified. Right now, I'm not afraid to die. Sometimes I think I want it. Stop giving it strength by pushing it away. I certainly don't want to end up in a nursing home like some of them. Suffering. Tormented. Helpless. With no legal right to end it. Legalised torture. Forced to stay alive like some sort of sick Nazi experiment, as long as the body can hold out. That is the state of affairs for some of them. In this very second, while I have the freedom to dictate what I do. How can society allow this to go on? Because *they* don't have to see it. Some people have their faculties and are actually quite happy. My good friend David is as happy as Larry. Actually Larry is miserable but David is in top form. A great attitude. Ninety two. Still hobbles about. Smiling. Cracking jokes. Wears a pad but that's the case for most of them. The thing is, you just don't know how you're going to end up. Jesus. I could live for another fifty years. And do what exactly? I'm already tired. I'm already sick of people. Of the games. I have aches and pains. My knee is getting weak. I need to push off to stand now. Never needed to before. My back has never been great. And then there's that other thing. My big black backpack. It's what caused me to drink in the first place. I'm sure of it. The drink gave me relief. Temporarily. Ultimately it took away more than it gave. That's how it is for alcoholics. It gives you one and takes three. And when you're that far back it's only natural to reach out for that one step boost. Thus, continues the cycle. It keeps on robbing you until there's nothing left to steal. I can't live like that for another five years let alone fifty. I think two in that lifestyle would see the end of me. There's plenty of precedence in the celebrity world alone. The majority are invisible. I'd end up like them. One of the disappeared.

I continue walking. My shoes make crisp sounds against dried leaves. It's about all I can hear. One foot in front of the other. Hoping to find something ahead. Hoping for the path to be different to the one behind. It never is. More illusions. More disappointment. More hope. Hope springs eternal. Right? At some point Spring reaches its zenith, backs up and dissipates, soaking into the earth. I'm a realist. Hope is a biological trick. One of

the greatest strengths of the human being. To push on regardless to that setting sun. To those glistening stars. To a silver lined tomorrow.

The trees are thinning. Does this mean I'm finally reaching open space? It had better be or I'm going back. I'm certain I've been walking for over an hour. Forty-five minutes my...

Yes. The foliage is definitely diminishing. I can see the valley beyond. I speed up, as though it's going to seal over if I don't reach it quickly. I'm drawn to it. I want to see it now. I've seen the mountain views before of course but not from this specific area.

Ancient valley encased within walls of rocks, sheer drops in many places. There are millions of trees, many of them eucalyptus, creating that unique blue shimmer. I can detect it from here, thickening in the shadows.

In the old days of television, we had to grade the image. You could alter the hues in the light and dark spots, much like today's image software. It was necessary then as some cameras had varying elements specific to each camera. Professional graders would have to try and match them up. They'd sit there in the control room during live events, not far from the director and vision switcher, continually fiddling with knobs and levers. In the black regions there'd be elements of red and blue. That's what this looks like. As though the whole vista hasn't been graded correctly. Too much blue in the blacks. An entity lurking in the shadows.

I've gone as far as I can now. There's three rocks jutting out from the edge of the cliff. Like planks to the seas. It's an imposing drop. Certain death. A tree poses in defiance of the danger, only a metre back from the edge. I place my hand on its rump and peer up in respect. It's hanging in there. There's no fence here. Or seat. Or bin. The things you'd normally find at a tourist lookout. There are many such allocated viewpoints outside the towns that border the Mountains. Tourists flock with their cameras and phones, desperately fulfilling their photographic quota so they can pick the best ones to share. If it ain't shared, it ain't real. They quickly become restless and move onto the next thing. Chasing the buzz. Much like children. Tourism is a reflection of childhood. Seen it. Tick. Next!

'You're right Caitlin. It's stunning.' Just like you my dear. The gorgeous vista has nothing on you. You're an angel, made to rival nature. Now. Let me make love to you. Christ I'm in a pathetic fucking mood today.

I look around. I spy a rock close to the tree. It's flat, like a natural seat, albeit too close to the ground. It's also on a slope, angling towards the precipice. Someone may have

dragged it here for this very purpose. It'll do. I park myself on it.

Why do I do this to myself? There's no chance of me having sex with her. I do this far too often. Self-punishment. It's ridiculous. I'm ridiculous. Hope springing forth to dazzle and deceive. Hope fools the fool. Yes I am the fool. Thanks John Lennon. In love with love and not any real person. In love with a physical embodiment of my hopeless romantic notions, whoever happens to come along, without knowing anything substantial about them at all. I'm in love with the idea of romance. I must be. The fantasy of courtship. The poetry of human connectedness. Not in a mainstream way. I can't stand Valentine's Day and weddings and red roses and reality T.V. fabrications. They are false projections of what a union has come to commonly represent.

Institutions. Ceremonies. Religion. Driving, dominating and framing the simple natural union of two people coming together, until it's overdone, overcooked and over sold. It's all bogus. I only believe in the undefinable ecstasy that is created between a one and one. I've only ever had it once. I thought I had it twice, but its limitations were soon thrust upon me. Encumbered with another's responsibilities. No. It's only ever been the once. And I screwed it up. I was too young. She screwed it up too. A mutual sabotage. And now I'm too old to be that fresh and heady again. You're only ever that innocuous at a certain time. I was in distant land, so removed from my own, before technology stole the world's distance. All I had experienced until then was lust. Fun. Puppy love. And sex. And the wedge of peer acceptance.

It may also have been an enhanced form of puppy love, but it felt very adult to me at the time. Perhaps our first grown up love is destined to remain our sturdiest. At least I had it once. I should count myself lucky. Some never do. But I'm not them. I cannot project their emotional experiences onto my framework, even in order to save me. I can only ever be me. Trapped in this cage of self. The walls of my unique journey. The limitations of the singular. Coupled with inevitable entropy.

If I were better looking, the options would be multitudinous. People will excuse any sort of behaviour from a *looker*. Humour, intelligence, warmth, empathy. All good qualities. Great even. They only extend so far. It's a sad situation. One that crosses borders and cultures. We're all victims of it. The cosmic joke. One of many. If you listen at night, to the song of the stars, you can hear them mocking us, a pitiful sort of observation. It's not us looking up at them. It's the reverse. To us they serenade the possibilities, yet so far out of reach. Their turn of perfection is beyond our perceptions, much like the kookaburra who laughs at us and we're not quite sure why.

I'm too energised to sit. No more being idle. No more passivity. I'm done with it. I stand. No more shall I be stuck in my head. Victim to my thoughts. I move back to the tree. I place my hand on it. I can feel it's warmth from its day in the sun. That warmth that will soon be gone. Ebbing away with the encroachment of the chill, seeping up from the valley floor. The sky has shifted colour. Soon the sun will drop out of sight altogether. The valley will darken. We will be alone. I am alone.

I step to the base of the rock, that is the platform to nothingness. I've felt the pull of the edge before. Like an inner magnet. Terrifying me. Making me quiver. Keeping me back. I don't feel that now though. It's merely another state of being. Like the dirt. The branches. The rock. The air. It's not death, nor life. It's not a thing at all. It's a non-entity. A no thing. No need to jump. No need to step. No need to dwell. Or contemplate. Nor cry. Nor scream. Nor self-eulogise. There's no self-pity here either. There's far too much of that behind me. I'm beyond all of that now. It's simply a matter of traversing the short space from here to there. What's directly below? Trees? Boulders? Jutting rock? Persistent brush? I don't look. Nothing would break that fall. I know it. I don't need to analyse it. There's only here. And out there. The immediate space before me. No different than the space in any other environment. It is around me. I am part of it. It is within me.

A noise erupts. In the distance. Encroaching quickly. It's spectacular. What a sound! It's the wind. It's coming. Quickly. It's colossal. It roars. It's like a tsunami. Wide. High. Inescapable. I can almost see it. An invisible but tangible thing, steadily approaching me. There are no trees or bush between me and it. The tree encrusted valley is deep below. There is nothing that can help me to identify its approach. I close my eyes. I wait. It's louder. I smile. Here it comes! It rises up and rushes into me. Through me. Over me. I am in it and it is within me. I am part of it. Oh, it smells good. It's inside me. It's beautiful. It's cleansing me. Its cleared my mind. My ever churning mind. I feel contentment, as though for the first time. I've never felt like this. This is true peace. Truly. I know now, what must come next. What will come next. My calm is pure. My smile, real.

E n d



(Photograph Anthony J. Langford)

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