

Brandon Gets His Big Break

Chapter Six

By

John Eisenhauer

It was Friday and that weekend would see *The 2023 Frogtown Art Walk*.

After getting off from work at the construction site, Rico, Bobby, and Dustin were having a beer.

An electrician - from a day labor place - had recommended the bar. They agreed that it was a hell of a find. For one thing, it was deserted. The construction site was in a commercial area. The pubs near the site would fill up quickly after 5 PM as employees – of various stripes – grabbed a drink before heading home. To get to this place, you had to wind through a few side streets but that filtered out the other people. It served a no-nonsense selection of domestic beers and liquors. There was soda for those who didn't want to drink: they were also used to make the limited offering of cocktails. The mixed drinks all had the word 'and' in their names. None of those drinks required a blender to make.

Something that differentiated Rico from his two friends was the fact that he went to college. He ended up majoring in History. His objective was to go to law school but was too much of a drinker. He was still paying off his student loan debt. He never regretted his choice. It gave him a reservoir of knowledge that enriched his life. Now college was not for most. He agreed with those that said that a liberal arts education was a bastion of progressive indoctrination. Fortunately, he was smart enough to resist those evil charms. And the experience gave him a glimpse into the strategies of the enemy. He appreciated that the information enriched his mind. Despite what the communists said, God-fearing Conservatives were not stupid.

He recognized that the bar was done in Art Deco. He knew that this style of interior design became popular in the 1920s and 1930s. It was meant to reflect the moral decadence of the flapper era.

The flappers were a generation of young women in the 1920s who wore short skirts and bobbed their hair. They listened to the jazz that was made by black musicians. Not surprisingly, they had disdain for proper behavior. Their 'personal freedom' was the embrace of a lifestyle that was outrageous, immoral, and downright dangerous. The progressive indoctrination of his college told him that this was the beginning of the push for the political and sexual freedom for women. The bar made him think about this one commie professor, who would lecture with his shoulders draped in the American Flag, who said that they were the first generation of independent American women. But Rico knew this was bullshit. They were godless, lazy, sluts who lived off the wealth created by men. Instead of being grateful, they spat on their betters.

Now, the decadence was in decline. The walls, which were once a bright green, were now a dingy camouflage color. Matching accent lamps lined the perimeter of the room. Approximately five feet

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high, each lamp was a cylinder made of a translucent screen: the base of each lamp was ceramic. The once white screens were now dingy yellow: the faded ceramic bases were all cracked, chipped, and covered in hairline fractures. The wall behind the bar was a tile mosaic in a zig zag pattern. The tiles were now cracked and broken, some completely missing. Everywhere Rico looked, he saw arrogance in decay. The entire bar was a metaphor for the damage that the liberal agenda had done to America. In that metaphor, Rico saw hope. Liberalism was the arrogant lie that we could build a world without God: now that delusion was in disrepair. But right-thinking Conservatives were about to fix everything. Someday – Rico imagined – someone would come here and turn the place into a Sports Bar.

Rico took sipped his beer and said:

“I’m getting three ‘ghost gun’ kits. I know a guy who bought them at the [Tanner Gun Show](#) in Denver. He was able buy them legally – they don’t have all the bullshit laws that we have in California. in 2016, those godless bureaucrats passed this thing that requires me get a serial number from the State if I’m planning to buy a kit. That’s de facto registration! So much for my second amendment rights! And I have to pass a background check.”

“Those godless bastards!”, Dustin exclaimed.

“You know it! But I’m getting them for almost sticker price: the guy is cutting me a deal.”

“Sure...I’ve heard these kits.”, Dustin said. “We assemble it ourselves. No serial number...untraceable.”

“Yeah.”, Rico said. “They’re made with a polymer. We can get them past a metal detector.”

“Wait...”, Bobby said. “Guns...we’re just going to have handguns? I thought that we were going in with AR-15s and shoot the place up.”

“I know...I know”, Rico said with empathic reassurance. “But this is about quality over quantity. Look...mass shootings happen every day. No one even notices anymore. If we do it right, people will take notice.”

“What’s the plan?”, Dustin asked.

“Need to know. The bottom line is that we get people reading my manifesto.”, Rico said.

“Yeah...”, Bobby said. “It’s great.”

Dustin nodded and sipped his beer.

“Now...we are all agreed that we are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice?”

Both Bobby and Dustin nodded.

“Good...”, Rico said. “I wanted to remind you about what was I saying the other day when I was teaching about *Romans*. He was referring to [Romans 12:1-2](#).”

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Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

“We must be bold, brothers, to act to wipe out the homosexual agenda that is tearing this Christian country away from Jesus. My plan might seem modest - in that it involves only a hand guns - too small to accomplish the task at hand. But I have spoken to the Lord and my written words will set in motion the events that will return this nation to Christ and help prepare the way for what is foretold in *Revelation*.”

Rico held his beer mug out and said:

“[Matthew 10:28!](#)”

The other two men held there mugs out. The three said in unison:

“Matthew 10:28!”

They clinked their mugs together and drank.

They toasted over this verse:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

The common interpretation of this verse was that humans have power only to kill the body, not the whole person, and that God alone can destroy both soul and body. Soon they would shed blood to strike a blow against the demonic homosexual agenda. God would preserve their souls and place them in heaven for an eternal reward.

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It was 2019. It was a few days after Jane found Amy in her private bathroom having a breakdown: they subsequently spoke about their lives on that day. After that, the two got back to work and did not speak of it again. That morning Amy came into the office and made the coffee. She made herself a cup. Jane joined her. After they made some small talk, Amy furrowed her brow:

“You remember the serious stuff that we talked about the other day?”

“Of course, sweetie, let's sit.”, Jane said as she motioned towards the couch.

When they sat, Jane said:

“How are you feeling?”

“It's a work in progress. I don't want to talk about me. I want to talk about you.”

“Oh?”, Jane said before taking a sip of her coffee.

“We're friends...not just employee and employer. Right?”

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“Absolutely.”

“And we agreed to talk to each other about the other’s shit. Right?”

“Yup.”

“Now, you were there for me...and thank you. But you said some stuff about your situation...the horrible thing that happened to your parents. Then you said that I was the first person that you’ve spoken to about it...outside of shrinks. I mean...that is crazy.”

“Oh...well. Of course, I have. Plenty of people. What I meant was that there’s this current assumption that I have come to terms with it. And...I suppose that I have. But I’m still working through things like survivor’s guilt. It’s still a struggle. Much more than I let on. But I’m working on it...seeing my counselor...sticking to a regimen...”, Jane took a sip of coffee. “...I just don’t go into great detail with people. I’m totally functioning: I’m on top of it.”

“Okay...and you told me that your counselor is encouraging you to talk to this guy that you moved in with...um, Jim...about the full extent of your issues. Why won’t you?”

“Well...we just moved in. I’m sure that I will at some point. But things are new. And once that is out there, it changes the entire dynamic of the relationship. I just want to wait for the right moment.”

“Your shrink thinks you should. Do you trust him?”

“Her.”

“Her...do you trust her?”

“Um...yeah.”

“And Jim? Do you trust him?”

“Yeah.”

“Love him?”

“Yeah.”

Um...okay...I’m not a counselor. I’m only reiterating what your shrink said. You trust her. You trust Jim...and love this guy. Tell him what you’re going through...the full extent. If he’s a decent guy...he’ll be there for you. If not...he’s an asshole and you’ll end up breaking up with him at some point anyway.”

“Fine.”

“What...that simple?”

“I’ve been on the verge...anyway. My shrink has been on my case about it. I’m getting sick of it, frankly. Now...you’re going to give me a hard time? Fine, I’ll talk to him. But...my turn...you’ve been in Hollywood for a few months. Do you have any friends?”

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“There’s Andrew. You know...he got me the interview with you.”

“What do you do with Andy...go to movies...have dinner...what?”

“Well...we’ll grab coffee after we do a sitting at the Buddhist place.”

“That’s it?”

“Um...yeah.”

“And...who else?”

Amy shrugged.

“Okay...I want to have you over for dinner. You can meet Jim. And I am going to have this other guy over named Brandon. He’s a really nice guy. We’ll make it a foursome...just chill and talk.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“I want to get you involved with the Hollywood gay community.”

“And how would you do that? You’re straight.”

“Bisexual, actually. I know some great people and you need them around you.”

“Okay...fine.”

“One more thing. I want you to start seeing my counselor...her name’s Elaine Gonzalas.”

“Well...sorry. I can’t do that. My health insurance hasn’t kicked in yet...won’t for months. I don’t know if it will even cover that. And, if it does, the co-pays...”

“I’ll pay.”

“Hell, no.”

“You’re my friend. You’re an amazing assistant. And, honestly, I’m solid financially. All we are talking about is a change on the numbers on my bank statement.”

“God...”

“Not taking ‘no’ for an answer. You’ll love Elaine. She’s great.”

“I...fine. Yes. Um...you didn’t tell anyone about the how I fell apart? About how your assistant had a nervous breakdown curled up around your toilet?”

“Sweetie! No!”, Jane said with faux shock as she gave Amy’s shoulder a playful slap.

It caught Amy off-guard. She came to appreciate that Jane was an amazing person: decent and empathetic. At the same time, her demeanor was pretty deadpan. The flash of playfulness made her smile.

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“Seriously, I would never betray your confidence. I’m sure that works both ways.”, Jane said.

“Of course. I think you’re a special person. I hope that it’s cool for me to say that.”

“Same here...I really mean that.”

“Thanks.”, Amy said.

“Yeah. I need a confidante. Someone that I can just talk to. Honestly, I really could use that. I know people but always have hold back.... I’m afraid that I’ll taint the relationship. Hell, I couldn’t tell Jim about how hard I’ve been struggling with my parents’ murders...and the full intensity of the subsequent emotional strain...because I was afraid about hurting our relationship. It would be great if I just had someone that I could open up to completely. And you could feel free to talk to me about anything.”

“Is that where we are?”, Amy asked.

“Um...I guess so. We’re sharing all of this...all of this stuff...I guess so.”

“I can tell you anything and vice versa?”

“Yeah. Complete trust.”

“Okay. We’ll advise each other?”, Amy said.

“Yeah. You just blew me away. You followed up on my situation. You didn’t have to...but you did. You couldn’t have been certain how I was going to react. You put yourself out there for me. That meant so much to me. And you gave me good advice. I want your input. Hopefully, you will find mine valuable. We’re both dealing with some heavy stuff, and we’ve already started sharing with each other. All I’m saying is that we should continue to lean on each other. Do you want that?”

“Yeah...I’d kinda love that.”

“Okay...we have an understanding. Anyway...dinner with me and my friends and you’re on board with seeing Elaine?”

“Double yes.”

“Great. It’s settled. I’ll call Elaine today. I’m not sure when we’re having Brandon over. But it will probably be Tuesday or Wednesday of next week.”

“Sure.”

“Okay...let’s get to work.”

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It was mid-September of 2008. It was the second month of Amy’s seventh grade term which lasted four months.

Upon their initial encounter, Amy and Linda fell into a romantic relationship quickly.

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But this was 2008 and a lesbian couple was unheard of in high school. Emotionally, they were well past the point where the *I love you* would have been exchanged. But both were hesitant to take that step. If this were a hetero relationship, they would have been engaging in all of the accepted displays of public affection – kissing, necking, and hand holding. They would engage in the banter between two lovers that was seemingly designed to annoy everyone around them. As it was, they were careful to be discreet in public. This is not to say that things went unnoticed. As Linda spent more and more time with Amy, she spent less and less with the clique of popular girls whose friendships she cultivated. She would show up for cheerleader practice but spend the minimum time required. While discreet with public displays, they hung out publicly constantly. Rumors that Linda was ‘doing something’ with the weird girl swirled around campus.

Amy was dealing with something different. Her faith, which had been cultivated by her mom and her Pastor...her Shepherd, was dead.

When she had entered her second period Biology class on that first day, she was already experiencing what was commonly called 'a crisis of faith'. She was tormented by her budding sexual desires. Such feelings were an abomination. When it came to understanding the women's role in God's plan, her Church emphasized *Genesis 2:18*. A woman was to be a man's helper (or *ezer* – the Hebrew word). Sexuality was the bond between a man and a woman in the confines of a godly marriage. One of the reasons why lesbianism was an abomination was that it frustrated that divine plan. When she entered that second period class, she consciously clung to her beliefs, doubling down on them: subconsciously, she rejected those beliefs, renouncing them. This was her crisis.

That crisis evaporated.

As her relationship developed, the combination of her sexuality and her love for Linda crushed her faith (which was already falling apart). She did not embrace atheism. She loved science. Stuff like anatomy just spoke to her. In it, she saw God's wonderful handiwork. On that first day, she thought it was the God of her church. Her relationship demolished that view. She realized that Reality was the handiwork of a different God. She could not define it but believed in it. This created tremendous tension, even greater than the prior strain, between her and her mom.

There was a term that described the nature of their relationship, but they were unfamiliar with it. They were a couple of suburban white girls in the early 2000's. African American men, in the 1990's, had a slang term for men who identified as heterosexual but sought sexual encounters and relations with other men and were very discreet about it. That was ‘down low’.

Although they did their best to keep it on the down low, they failed and knew it. High School rumors are not secrets. Linda saw that her friends were pulling away (and she didn't care). Amy saw it too. While it didn't bother Linda, it tormented her. No one wanted to screw with the life of the person that they loved.

One day they were in Linda's room: her parents would be away for a few hours. Amy brought it up.

“You're losing your friends over me.”

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“Yeah.”

“Really...‘yeah’? It feels like I should be doing about it.”

“There’s nothing to do about it. Honestly, I don’t even like those girls but I...”, Linda’s voice trailed off.

“I love you.”, Amy said.

“I love you.”, Linda said.

They kissed. And started making out. Over the past month, they had rounded first, second and third bases but never hit a home run. While sharing various degrees undress, they never went ‘full monty’. They removed their clothes and had their first total experience. It was fumbling and awkward. But it was also intensely passionate. Both of them would look back on that encounter and remember it as the best time ever.

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Brandon Speaking

It was Sunday night - the second evening of *The 2023 Frogtown Art Walk* - and almost 7 PM. I left the house to meet Jim at *Lucille's Smokehouse* in Culver City. For my money, it was the best BBQ place around and worth the drive. We were going to talk through some of my ideas for the reimagining of *Friends*. My first day as a Staff Writer was tomorrow. The reimagining was going to lean heavily into psychodrama and social commentary. And I felt that I needed a distinct POV about the various relationships and situations. I didn’t want to pitch jokes to Jim but have him help me sharpen a message.

When I entered the restaurant, Jim stood up and waived. I made my way over to his table. After the waitress took my order, Jim and I made small talk that you honestly don’t care about.

“So...you want to run some jokes by me?”, Jim asked.

“No...not quite.”

I explained that shows like the *Friends* reimagining was fundamentally different than sitcoms a couple decades ago. Modern day shows were about exploring the characters’ motivations and the world that they inhabit.

“It’s like the first show that I worked on...*The Mindy Project*. On one level, it was just quirky humor. On another...it was exploring the rom-com convention where the two protagonists are really flawed people and that’s a curve ball. On a third level it’s about this woman who is really pretty fucked up. She’s not malicious or hateful. But she’s flawed: self-centered. She dealing with the seven deadly sins...pride...greed...gluttony...sloth...that shit. But she’s ultimately a good person who’s trying to work all that through and is looking for her man. There’s some complexity there. And the viewer...if that person’s smart...gets it.”, I said.

“So, we aren’t going to talk about jokes?”

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“No...tomorrow will be my first day in the writer’s room. I need to come in with a unique perspective...my point-of-view. I have some ideas worked out in my head but need to bounce them off of you to make sure that they sound good...solid.”

“Brandon, your job is so different from mine.”

“You have a creative job. You’re an architect.”

“I work for a company that designs homes that are environmentally sustainable...that incorporates passive solar and such. There’s a creative element, sure, but pretty much I stick to established design protocol. I can’t be totally freeform.

Jim took a drink and said:

“Okay, lay it on me.”

“So, last Friday when I was at Glazer’s house talking about the show, it occurred to me that there was this thematic thread that connected three of the major characters: Monica, Phoebe and Ross. I didn’t understand immediately but now I’ve got it. I want to try and sell it as something that can be worked into the stories. Even if it doesn’t fly, it should make a positive impression.”

“Lover, your job is so fucking different than mine, I gotta say that I like it.”

“For sure...there’s a reason why I pursued this career: it really gives me the opportunity to be creative. Creativity is not an option that a Dentist has...can’t believe that I was thinking about becoming one. Yuck. Anyway, I gotta emphasize that you have to forget the original: these characters are just different.”

“Okay...pass me that bottle of BBQ sauce. No...the mild.”, Jim said.

“You’re such a pussy.”, I said as he handed him the bottle.

“Am not!”

I laughed and said:

“The subtext that I want to pitch in the writer’s room is the struggle to realize one’s authentic self. It’s a continuum. Ross has no sense of who he is. Monica has a partial handle on it. Pheobe fully knows who she is. And the fight for authentic self is against those that want to deny it.””

“Okay. What do you mean exactly by ‘subtext’? I mean...I think I know.”

“Okay...let me make something up to illustrate it.”

“I love this about you.”, Jim said. “You really think differently than me.”

“This guy is...taking a prescription drug all of his life...”

“...diabetes?”

“No...no. Yeah...okay...epilepsy. He first seized in the first grade. The doctors put him on some kind of drug to stop it...”

“...so...an anti-convulsant?”

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“Right...duh.”, I said. “I’m going to call the boy ‘John’. And the stuff works. But John starts seizing again in high school...”

“...why?”

“Because...John’s drinking. Drinking causes seizing. His parents encourage his drinking because they are insanely over-indulgent.”

“That’s crazy. No parent would be that stupid.”, Jim said.

“I’m just making something up on the fly. But, yeah, they’re that stupid. So, the medical guys keep upping the prescription. As they do so, they keep telling the parents that drinking causes seizing. The parents don’t intervene. Hey, in fact, they start buying John booze.”

“Really, shitting on the parents.”, Jim observed. “You called them ‘over-indulgent’ so they consciously love the kid.”

“Right. In fact, come to think of it, their stupidity would be the whole point. Also, the medical guys know the kid is drinking because he dresses and acts like a stoner. They don’t intervene...by calling social services or lecturing the parents to act. Instead, they just keep upping the anti-convulsant prescription until he starts developing intense emotional and psychological side effects. Let’s say...the boy ends up taking 300% more than he should. That ruins his life.”

“Powerful. That could be one of those limited run streamer things.”

“Sure...but the point is ‘subtext’. What’s the subtext?”

“You know you’re going to tell me.”, Jim said.

“No one would willingly take 300% more of powerful prescription than needed, especially if that would cause debilitating emotional side effects. John did that because he was grossly misled by those he trusted.”

“Okay! I get it. The parents were fools. They thought that they were actually being loving parents by over-indulging him. In fact, they destroyed him. The medical professionals could only think about medical protocol...because they limit their focus to Western medicine. And the boy’s real problem was holistic. Not physiology but behavioral...his drinking. By slavishly adhering to medical protocol, they make the kid’s problem worse.”, Jim said.

“Right.”

“So, the subtext...or moral of the story is the same as *The Gift Of The Magi* by O. Henry.”

“What...no. Not even close. The O. Henry story has a sentimental moral or subtext. It’s about the true meaning of gift-giving. While both the husband and wife are both financially strapped, each one sacrifices to give the other something special. The story’s irony underscores the purity of their sacrifice. The little thing that I just made up has a totally different subtext.”, I said.

“What is it?”

“Control diminishes a person and his greatest personal challenge is overcoming it. John was controlled by those who he trusted. And, more importantly, by those who had authority over him. His parents were stupid:

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the medical establishment – that he depended on – were crippled by cowed groupthink. The Doctors never practiced due diligence.”

“The subtext is that John is screwed over by those that he trusted, who had authority over him. And now, he has to rise above it. Okay.”, Jim said.

“Yeah, and that subtext applies to everyone. Every person is undercut by those with some kind of power over him or her. To grow, a person has to rise above the control...past, present, and future. This example really underscores the subtext that I plan to pitch the writer’s room about the Ross-Monica-Pheobe dynamic.”

“Now...are you sure this isn’t a bit much? You aren’t overthinking?”

“No. I really think that is what I need to bring to the room...as the junior writer. It shows that I put some thought into it by providing a subliminal theme that we can work into the story. Besides, Ilana digs this kind of shit.”

“She does?”, Jim asked.

“Yeah...do you remember how *Broad City* ended?”

“Sure...It was upbeat. The two of them grow from the years of mutual support. Abbi is accepted by an arts program with the University of Colorado: she moves to Boulder. Meanwhile, Ilana is going for her master’s in psychology. When the show starts, they’re both immature but grow into being independent women. Very positive.”

“Yeah...that is the surface meaning. But the subtext is bittersweet.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure.”, I said. “Over the run, Ilana is bisexual, but Abbi is straight. Ilana wants to be more than Abbi’s best friend. She wants to be her girlfriend. But it’s unrequited love because Abbi’s straight. But in the final episodes. Abbi gets involved with a woman, the Doctor. The relationship ends badly. And I remember thinking that Abbi and Ilana will hook up in the finale.”

“And...it doesn’t work out.”

“No...like you said. The show ends with the two going their separate ways. And...as you said...that seems really upbeat. Personal growth and all that. But the subtext was dark. It was really clear that the two were slated to be life partners. And – when the last hurdle is cleared – Abbi comes to terms with her bisexuality. It seems like it was going to happen. The subtext was heart wrenching. Ilana Glazer is a frickin’ genius.”

“What about [Abbi Jacobson](#)?”

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“She’s a frickin’ genius also. Of course. It would have been so cool if they were co-showrunners of this reimaging of *Friends*. At least, I was hoping to meet her Friday night. But I – Brandon – will meet her.”

“Dude, that last sentence was really fucking weird. And never refer to yourself in the third person.”

“Yeah...sorry. I even have a name for the subtext of the Ross-Monica-Phoebe theme. I call it *Assumed Harm*.”

“So...a little bit of philosophy. Okay, fun. Lay it on me.”, Jim said before eating a French fry.

“The fundamental challenge that a person has in life...and this assumes that he’s in a good place, access to food, water, shelter, and opportunities...is that those who nurture him are undercutting his emotional and psychological needs. His existential growth can only begin when he realizes that.”

“Wait...wait. This is what you brought me down here for? All of this build up...we’ve been talking for 15 minutes...and this what you were building up to...is nothing but ‘everyone’s out to get me’. Fuck, man.”

“No. There’s more to it than that. Now, when I explained the idea of a story having subtext, I made up John. He was overprescribed a needed drug, an anti-convulsant, and he takes that excessive amount for decades. Let’s say that he was overprescribed by 300% and that results in super-intense psychological and emotional side effects. It renders him self-destructive and screws up with his ability to achieve his potential. But...here’s the point. No one was being malicious. Those that he was depending on – his parents and the medical people – did not consciously conspire to screw him over. Regardless, John needs to overcome the pernicious influence of his parents and the medical establishment to personally grow.”

“Okay, fine. The anti-convulsant angle is interesting but unneeded. His parents would have fucked him simply by enabling his drinking.”

“Right...and that’s good. Let’s change the scenario. They spoil John rotten. He grows up and gets married. How would he treat his wife and kids?”, I said.

“I’m going to go with abusive drunk.”

“Right. The subtext that I’m going for...this *Assumed Harm* thing - is the idea that a person is undercut by those that he counts on. Even if basic needs are being met, he is still being undercut by those that he depends on.”

“Hmmm...and what does this *Assumed Harm* idea have to do with the whole Ross-Monica-Phoebe thing?”

“I’ll get to that. I want to flesh this out more. By the way, this is helping me. Show writing is about thinking on your feet and developing stories on the fly. Let’s return to the original scenario. John’s parents fail to place limits on him. He becomes a drunk in high school. And that sets up this cascading effect. He’s overprescribed until it fucks his head up. Why didn’t the medical people intervene? It’s a given that they knew about the causative relationship between drinking and epileptic seizures. John looks really messed up. He dresses and acts like a head. Why didn’t the medical people intervene?”

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“How?”

“They could have called social services. They could really gotten in the parents’ faces. They’re smart and would have seen that just upping the dose would not fix the problem and would result in side effects.”

Jim laughed:

“Okay...this is really getting good. There would be several reasons. This is Western medicine. They just stick to protocol. They aren’t into ‘holistic’. They don’t aggressively deal with something like the kid drinking.”

“Shouldn’t they? In this scenario, his drinking...which they would assume by his demeanor...is the problem.”

“The medical system is flawed.”

“ ‘Flawed’ is an understatement. Again, the subtext is that a person has to overcome external control. But you said there are several reasons why they would not intervene. Can you name another?”

“Sure. We are talking about getting into it with the parents. As you said, there are two ways that they could intervene: call social services or really lecture mom and pop to take care of business. The medical establishment is not into confrontation.”

“Any other reasons that the medical establishment wouldn’t intervene?”

“This more like a summary. It really is a group think situation. Between their inability to deal with a situation in a holistic manner and the natural human tendency to not confront strangers...and the parents would be strangers to the doctors...they just do what they know...they keep upping the prescription. Even though it’s reasonable to assume that they knew all along that it would cause problems. So...group think.”

“So. It’s a clusterfuck. Yes? The parents are functionally corrupted because of the experiences of their past. The medical establishment is a staid and unimaginative institution that’s unable to think outside the box. Taken together, it fucks John up.”

“I get it. It isn’t a ‘everybody is out to get me’ thing. People are inherently fucked up. And that is passed along from generation to generation. In the John scenario, the two influencers are well-meaning but hopelessly unable to make the right choices. Yeah...okay...malicious can also be the problem. The holy roller fucks that constantly give us shit for being queer do so because they enjoy hating.”, Jim said.

“Why do they enjoy hating?”

“That’s easy. Self-aggrandizement both as individuals and as an institution.”, Jim said.

“Right.”

“Okay...that’s really interesting. But...it’s grim as hell. Your point is that you intend to use this as a subliminal message in this Ross-Monica-Phoebe thing. Do you want such a dark and hopeless theme: we all endlessly fuck each other over...even when someone is trying to do the right thing?”, Jim said.

“Except that a person can rise above it...as I said. That’s the greater point. And until that person starts the process of rising above the bad influences, that person is assuming the harm. As I thought about this, I realized that this is about rethinking the eastern concept of enlightenment.

Jim laughed:

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“Fuck, lover. It always comes down to shit like this with you. Okay. Let me have it.”

Okay...I think there are essentially two enlightenment philosophies...well, the only two that interest me: Buddhist and Taoist.

“What do the Buddhist say?”

“Buddhist says that self does not exist. A person is impermanent and ever changing because that’s the nature of reality. And a person is merely a manifestation of that reality. But a person tries to deny this by creating the illusive concept of a soul. Of course, Buddhism is a reaction to Hinduism and its concept of Atman: the true or eternal self. The Atman or ‘Hindu Soul’ is the self-existent essence of each individual. That’s distinct from ego, mind, and embodied existence. So, Hinduism is about an unchanging self, analogous to the Christian soul. Whereas Buddhism says that self is constantly changing to the point where self does not exist. Buddhist enlightenment is the full embrace of this truth.”

“I am fond of Buddhism.”, Jim said. “Some of it is really sober minded. And Taoism?”

“The Taoist concept of enlightenment is becoming a Complete, True or Real Human. They draw a distinction between the social mind and the Tao Mind. Our social reality is manmade whereas the Tao is that which is everything. Now, Enlightenment is the natural state of a human. It is how all humans are meant to be. But most just live in a representation of reality and that is the social mind. The True Reality, outside of the shit in your head...the social mind, is the Tao.

How does that all compare to your thing...what was it...*Assumed Harm*?

“Okay...until you consciously work to rise above the restrictions placed on you by external forces, you are just assuming the harm. When you start the concerted process of throwing the limitations from other people off of you, you get closer and closer to your Real Self...the Taoist concept. This takes planning and effort. I like the Buddhist emphasis on personal discipline and practice.”

“And Taoism isn’t about personal discipline but *Wu Wei*.”, Jim added.

“Right. *Wu Wei* is taking no action and just flowing with the natural course of the universe. You are in harmony with the Tao, the natural order of things. This is not passivity or inaction: it’s dynamic action that arises from a deep understanding of the nature of things. But it is not a conscious plan.”

“Right. Right. What’s your deal?”, Jim asked.

“I’m calling it *Assumed Harm*. If you don’t work to understand how society...the actions of others...limits and enslaves you, you cannot grow beyond them. If you don’t understand the nature of the restrictions being placed upon you, you are assuming the harm.”

“Define ‘you’.”, Jim said.

I believe that there is an authentic self. That is the self that you’re meant to be.”

“I’m a secular humanist and think that’s bullshit. But keep going.”

“In the John scenario that we talked about, external influence – from well-meaning people – denied him from being his from authentic self. His authentic self would have been to be smart: the drugs – and the drinking – made him stupid. His authentic self would have been to be stable and clear-headed: the drugs

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– and the drinking – made him crazy. In fact, it sounds like that these external influences totally fucked him up. His authentic self would have made him a success: the drugs – and the drinking – made him a failure.”

“And that was for my benefit.”, Jim said. “I’m a pragmatist, a realist. And, you know, that the term ‘authentic self’ sounds new-agey.”

“Right. Consider the idea that transgenderism is a type of authentic self. There is a growing body of evidence that transgenderism has a biological basis at least to some degree.”

“Okay. Cool. Now, let’s get back to this *Assumed Harm* enlightenment thing.”

“Sure. Let’s stick with trans. Someone is transgender: shit...let’s say...Elliot Page. Now, in dealing with the situation, Elliot would have to come to an understanding about both the bigotry and well-meaning concern that he’s facing...the controlling externals. Before the guy can grow, he has to understand the limitations that constrain him. I think that the Taoist view is closer to actual enlightenment, but the Buddhist emphasis on discipline and community is closer to the process.”

I took a drink and said:

“I mean...there is an evolving body of information regarding transgenderism. If you combine that scientific data – and it is growing – with first person accounts, no serious person can just blow it off. A credible account should be accepted. In keeping with my thing...as a form of authentic self.

“Sure. Here’s what I’m hearing. You’re thing is closer to Taoist Enlightenment in that there is a ‘self’ that a person is meant to be and that is the ‘authentic self’. In Taoism, each person has their inherent quality...a Complete, True or Real Human. But the ‘social mind’ – the manmade reality – gets in the way of Tao Mind: the Tao is everything. Now, Enlightenment is the natural state of a human. In fact, as we all know, Taoists don’t use the term ‘enlightenment’. That implies that a person is learning something new, and Taoists are talking about embracing who you are all along.”

“Right.”

“In your *Assumed Harm* thing ‘social mind’ is analogous to a society is peopled with individuals and groups that work to undermine someone’s realization of their true and authentic self. In the Elliot Page example, he encounters a myriad of those who are blocking his attempt to be his true self. Those blocking his progress are motivated by everything from sincere concern – that is corrupted by ignorance – to malice and hate. In the John scenario, the kid is overprescribed a powerful drug in high school. The excess is so great that it causes all these shitty side effects both psychological and emotional. This fucks up his life. As in the Elliot scenario, the harm arises from the influencers in his life.”

“Yes. And the influencers that retard progress in both Elliot and John are doing so because each of them had their progress retarded as well. So, personal growth is possible only by breaking free of the control of society. True personal growth means becoming a free thinker. That’s the meaning of free thinker...you figure life out on your terms. Among many, being a free thinker is the same as militant atheism. Bullshit. If God works for you, so be it. But you came to that on your own without being coerced by an external. Such a person respects that each person has the right to figure things out on his own.”

“Right...”, Jim started.

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“I have to emphasize something. This growth to a state of personal clarity – free thought – is only possible when there are no overwhelming functional impediments, such as a profound form of clinical depression or schizophrenia. The person’s connection to his authentic self can only be realized if the primary block is the smothering influence of others and that block is not an insurmountable psychological issue that is a diagnosable pathology.”

“Yeah. I’m into this now.”, Jim said. “In the Elliot and John cases, we are looking at different kinds of barriers to the realization of self. the Elliot scenario, he is not suffering from a profound psychological block: he is clear headed. He’s facing a profound pushback from others and, to realize his true self, he’s called upon to do really profound things. Intimidating as hell. But he has the potential to address it.”

“Yeah...that’s it. And the John thing?”

“John’s perception of reality is hopelessly corrupted by drugs. Realizing his authentic self is not possible. But, when you made this up, you did something interesting. You made John’s emotional pathology a side effect and not an ingrained thing. So...if he readjusted his medication...and his head cleared...he could realize his authentic self under your model.”

“Yeah...that’s true.”

“That interests me...”, Jim started.

“Yeah. Me too.”, I said. “We’ll get to that...when we are talking about Ross. But you were summarizing the idea. I want to make sure that we are on the same page. I like the notion that someone just accepts their fundamental nature...like in Taoism. Buddhism is about coming to a whole new realization about self by jettisoning all emotional attachment. I just reject that. But I said that I like the Buddhist method of achieving enlightenment – authentic self – and not Taoism. What’s up with that?”

“Okay.”, Jim said. “*Wu Wei* is taking no action and just flowing the Universe. A guy places himself in harmony with the Tao. I think that you and I are on the same page. That’s bullshit...tie-dyed bullshit. Society is complex and all kinds of shit is coming at you. To deal, you have to have a plan and execute it,”

“Yes! Buddhism *is* about having a plan. Okay...Mahayana Buddhism talks about *Buddha-nature Dharma-nature*...”, I said.

“Yeah! Right! So, *Buddha-nature* is about the potential for enlightenment that exists in every being and *Dharma-nature* is the ultimate nature of reality. This is beyond all concepts and dualities...Okay...then...Your *Assumed Harm* philosophy believes in an ultimate reality and transcending personal demons to realize it.

“Yeah. But I don’t like the word ‘realize’ but prefer ‘accept’.”

“As a secular humanist, I don’t think that I’m on-board.”, Jim said.

“Well...I think that you might be. Just let me keep laying this shit out.”, I said. “Okay, *Buddha-nature* is the ‘seed’ that is present within all beings, waiting to be awakened. And I prefer the Taoist Complete, True or Real Human to the Buddhist end goal.”

“Hmmm...yeah.”

“Years ago, I read [*The Three Pillars Of Zen*](#) by Philip Kapleau. He told this story where a Zen initiate comes to his Master and tells him how happy he is because he has finally found peace of mind. The Master admonishes

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him and says that he is not yet enlightened because he is still attached to the idea of happiness. The Master then instructs the initiate to continue his practice until he can find peace of mind without clinging to it .”

“Give me more.”, Jim said.

“Okay...let’s go back to the Elliot Page thing. He comes to this really profound realization of who he is. He then has to take super-scary steps to physically manifest it. Elliot is happy. Zen would dismiss his understanding because that made him happy...and ‘happiness’ is an attachment. That’s invalidating Elliot’s personal epiphany because of an ideology. Elliot’s awareness of his authentic self is a ‘Oh fuck. This is who I am. And what others say simply doesn’t matter.’ And...of course...the acceptance of his true nature made him happy. And it should.”

Jim added:

“Yeah...Taoist philosophy says that happiness is not something that can be pursued directly. That’s the bullshit of the West. If I buy this...car...whatever...*then* I’ll be happy. Instead, it is a byproduct of living in harmony with the Tao, the natural order of things.”

“And I’m saying that you can’t be in harmony with the natural order of things until you know...shit, I have to stop saying that...*accept* who you are. And other people get in the way. I love a lot of the Buddhist stuff. If they’re saying that a fella can’t be happy after making this connection with his authentic self because ‘happiness is an attachment’, they’re just more motherfuckers in the way.”

“And this connection with ultimate reality is not inconsistent with secular humanism?”, Jim asked.

“There is a singular essence that defines reality. This exists beyond any attempt to describe it. It exists separate from religious or metaphysical attempts to describe it: that’s 100% made up and is just bullshit. Science is of tremendous value in that it describes the ultimate in a surface way. It’s unable to penetrate the essence of ultimate reality because linear thought is not up to the job.”

“Okay...fine...so what’s the deal with Ross?”, Jim asked.

“Like the original, the show starts with Carol leaving him for a woman...Susan.”, I said. “ So, that sucks. But instead of working through the divorce, he embraces a comforting social trope...just hates gay people. Now, unlike the original, Phoebe grew up in the same neighborhood as Ross and Monica. As an adult, she transitions. Ross can’t handle the change. It makes Ross question his own sexuality...even though it has nothing to do with that. At the same time, he’s already bought into sex-based hatred to deal with Carol leaving him. He applies that to the Phoebe situation. He’s controlled by the hatred of others.”

“So...Ross is a mess in the reimaging.”

“Yeah...and a theme in the show is how he grows and comes to terms with his hatred. And my subtext is that his hate arises from external influences.”

“I get were the *Assumed Harm* thing come in.”, Jim said. “We can break Ross’ head space into two interrelated things. He’s dealing with a divorce...one that he didn’t want, cuz he loved Carol. Since the home wrecker was a woman and not a dude, he makes this about gays. In this reimaging, Phoebe grew

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up with him...probably played sports and stuff with Ross...and, possibly, Ross felt same sex attraction for the childhood 'Phoebe'..."

"Very good. Before Phoebe transitioned his name was 'Phillip'." I said.

"Ok. He's unable to deal with his admittedly legit issues because he's being manipulated by the negative BS of others. Not only can he not deal with it because of the bad input, he's alienating his friends. To grow, he'll have to embrace his authentic self. To do that, he will have to jettison what is misleading him. To do that, he must plan and execute a strategy."

"Right. And what is the initial motivation that gets Ross to develop this strategy?" I asked.

"You'll say that it's the authentic self is asserting itself. And to appeal to secular bent, you'll say that assertion is evolutionary imperative."

"The imperative is the embrace of Ross' authentic self-concept. He's a smart guy...an academic. The essence of his authentic self is to freely express himself as he studies the human condition. The endless tension of strained friendships frustrates that. He needs to jettison the pernicious effect of others bigotry."

"I've conclude that you're repackaging evolutionary theory in a way that's more touchy feely." Jim said.

"I think that I am providing a more well-rounded view."

"I'm fine with the notion that an individual has a fundamental nature that wants to be realized. But what your saying is open to sophistry. It leads to nonsense like a person's authentic self is tied to traits credited to his astrological sign. He should literally cut people out of life who he feels frustrates that."

"I know but any idea can be misused."

"I can live with what you're saying but have issues. Anyway, the question is what steps Ross does undertake to change." Jim said.

"Yeah. He's completely controlled by social bigotry. But he's smart and could come up with something bold. I know...he could write a novel."

"A novel?"

"He's a person and not some AI program. He could concoct a story that is not directly related to his problems. But as he writes about the characters and situations, he reflects on his life." I said.

"Okay...let's go back to the John scenario. John finally gets his med dose correct. Overtime, his heads clears and that is a process that was slowed by all psychological baggage that we had to work through. At what age does he achieve enough clarity to act?"

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“55.”, I said.

“Damn...you’re sticking it to the poor guy.”

“Let’s give the motherfucker a hard time of it.”

“Okay,” Jim demurred. “He’s in his mid-fifties and still coming to terms with his sexuality. Let’s say that he realizes that he’s bisexual. Prior to achieving some real clarity, he just thought he was straight and was tormented by his same sex desire. He writes a novel populated by ‘bi’ people. This would allow him to reflect on his sexuality from different perspectives.”

“I like this.”, I said. “ The protagonists could be in a polygamous relationship.”

“This is fun. Check this out...”, Jim wiped his face with a napkin and continued:

“In his novel, John could write about the developing sexuality of the various characters. As he is writing his book, he would use the opportunity to reflect on human sexuality in a focused way. Writing a book demands the author’s attention. Some sequences would be general reflections on the human experience. Another sequence might be about the sort of experience that he wished he had: but he didn’t because of the emotional side effect caused by the overprescription. If he’s a guy coming to terms in middle age, he might write about a positive same sex experience in high school.”

“Like you and Mark on Christmas Eve?”, I asked.

Jim laughed:

“That’s a good story. So...we would be the characters in this book?”

“Sure. Think about this whole conversation. He creates this whole set up that leads two of his protagonists – and he goes out of the way to establish that they’re annoyingly bright and into philosophical speculation – to discuss the meaning of life. Writing this scene would be a meditative experience for John. In fact, the novel would ultimately be an allegorical exercise.”

“Allegory?”, Jim asked.

“Sure, allegory is a story that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning. What could be more hidden than the author writing a story as an instrument for self-reflection? But let’s assume that the reader is clued in. The whole book is a complex piece of self-reflection. The reader could have a shitload of fun interpreting the book from that perspective.”

“Okay...sure. John could write a prologue to his novel. In this, he could clue reader in on the heavy metaphoric tone of his novel. He could be autobiographical in the prologue and encourage the reader to analyze the novel from that perspective...to seek out the story’s hidden meaning.”

“Yeah...okay. I like that.”

“Ok...so John writes his novel. What does he do with it?”, Jim asked.

“Well...it’s not some guy trying to write a ‘Harry Potter’ rip-off. He’s doing this as an exercise in self-reflection...a meditative exercise. But he wants to share it with people. Oh...maybe he creates a website. And...oh, I know!...he uses social media, sites like Twitter or X...whatever they’re calling it...and he tries to bring it to the attention of people that he respects.”

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“As a cry for help?”

“No...I like to imagine that John is starting to figure things out. So, if the book is an allegory for his life, he wants to bring it to the attention of those that he respects for feedback.”

“Like whom?”, Jim asked.

“Hmmm...maybe there’s a guy who made some bold personal choices that improved his life. And John found the guy an inspiration. He would want this fellow to know that. And to get the dude’s thoughts about why – and how – he made those personal changes that improved his life.”

“Elliot Page?”

“Seems like we have Page on the brain. But, yeah, that tracks. John is going through some profound changes and would turn to someone who has firsthand knowledge of that.”, I said.

“Hmmm...who else?”

“Well...if John wrote a novel as a means to understanding his life...he strikes me as a creative fellow. He would want creative people – actors and writers and such – to know about him. Um...perhaps...he’s hoping for some advice on the creative process and wants some encouragement. Possibly he thinks that a person who succeeded in a creative endeavor would have needed insight?”

“So...any old successful actor or writer?”

“No...no...he would target those whose work he admires. Also, I’m thinking that he would want to get the attention of a politically progressive type...someone he shares similar views with. John would target those that he respects.”

“Any names jump to mind?”, Jim asked.

“I’ll go with Ilana Glazer. Of course, she just hired me as a junior staff writer, so I have Ilana on the brain. But...yeah...she’s cool.”

“Why ‘politically progressive’?”

“Writing a novel as a means of introspection is not what a Trumpian would do. And we’re characters in his novel, remember? We’re queers in a polyam situation. This entire conversation was written by John to express some of his thoughts about life. If that’s the case, he would have to feel comfortable with us as a vehicle of expression. Also, the very act of writing our conversation would be an introspective undertaking. He would create characters that represents his world view and would help him with his reflection.”, I said.

“And if he isn’t pulling his life together until he’s middle aged, he might be uncertain how to proceed. He might...no *would*...lack self-confidence and would like to catch the attention of those whose advice he values.”

“Right! Good point!”

“Oh, I know! He could make some of those people characters in his novel!”, Jim said.

“Dude, that’s creepy. I’m really getting emotionally invested in this guy that I just made up. He might decide to do something ‘outside the box’ but wouldn’t be weird about it.”

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“You have an interesting mind.”, Jim laughed.

“Thanks...that was a fun ‘stoner’ tangent. But I’m here to run some stuff about the writer’s meeting on Monday. I’m going to pitch the notion that Ross is someone hobbled by social bigotry. He wants to transcend those external controls to become aware of authentic self.”

“Yeah. Ok. Monica?”

“Monica becomes a social influencer and has a stake in a trendy restaurant. She’s a success at the outset of the show. She becomes a success – on her own terms – because she wants to transcend the stigma of being a fat kid and the indifference of a distant father who lavishes his support on her brother, Ross. She’s able to partially throw off the judgement and control of these external influences. She is unable to completely transcend it. She’s overcome by survivor’s guilt, doesn’t feel that she deserves her success. Because she cannot get past her perception that she’s a fat girl who’s unloved by dad. She gets beyond that partially but not completely. The show also explores her growth...in my subtext...her transcendence.”

“So...Monica is a work in progress?”

“Yes. And she’s the group’s alpha. She is that alpha because she has grown progressively closer to a reasonably full awareness of her authentic self. Now she can further this process of self-discovery by relying on her friends for ever greater insight. And I think Phoebe would be instrumental at this point.”

“Phoebe?” Jim asked.

“In order to be happy, Phoebe has to fully embrace fully who she is. And, to do so, she really has to fight some really intense external opposition. She has most fully accepted her authentic self. Given the intensity of social pushback, she is still fighting to accept her authentic self even more fully. Ross – at the story’s outset – is a big part of the problem. ...He’s a metaphor for the opposition that she always faced. Fuck, I just came up with that! Josie will love that.”

“Josie?”, Jim asked.

“Josie Totah. She plays Phoebe and is acting as a consultant on the show on the trans angle.”

“Seems like I should know that name...”

“We binged Mindy Kaling’s thing *Champions* recently. She was the boy, Michael.”, I said.

Jim’s face was blank for a moment. Then it brightened as he had an ‘a-ha’ moment. He said:

“Okay...I get it. Let’s get back to Phoebe.”

Phoebe can’t just cut Ross out of her life. He’s Monica’s brother and she is the lynchpin of her group of friends. She would find herself helping Ross to accept his authentic nature so that she could more fully embrace hers.”

“Okay. You said that Amy helped you work this stuff out. You spoke to her last night?”

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“Yeah...I had a really intense dream. It was trying to tell me something. Anyway...I couldn't get back to sleep. I went to the living room to smoke some Indica to knock me out. Amy joined me.”

“And Amy had something to do with dream?”, Jim asked.

“Yeah...do you remember how Amy simply had something of an angry energy when she first got involved with us? How she becomes so open and loving?”

“Yeah. I get it. Amy realized her authentic self when she got involved in our polyam. Or I should say re-realized it. I guess she had it with her girlfriend...um, Linda...but her abusive mom fucked that up.”

“Sure, but Amy's reconnection to her authentic self started before she became part of our group. It really started with her intense friendship with Jane.”, I said.

“Talking to Amy helped you pull this together?”

“Yeah...I've been toying with this philosophy for a while. Between the party at Ilana's and my follow-up with Amy, it fully came together. And this is more than some subtext that I'm going to pitch in the writer's room. It is my life philosophy now.”, I said.

“Cool. What about the other ones: Chandler, Joey, and Rachel?”

“Yeah...I have a subtext for them. It isn't as interesting...didn't give this concept its own name...not my new life philosophy.”

We went on to talk about my ideas for those characters.

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