

THE COMEDY GAZELLE

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: KEVIN BOZEMAN



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey supercharge herself with a firm slap of the puss.

Why haven't I heard of her before?

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it's easy to miss.

That's why I'm starting The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to showcase this city's unrivaled talent. To keep everyone up-to-date on the scene, and to do it in a fun way. And not just in a one-off article, but all the time.

Each issue will include an exclusive interview, as well as whatever else I can pull together.

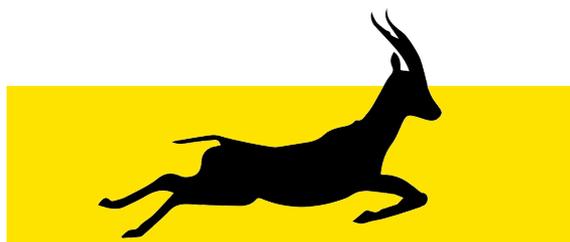
Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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INTERVIEW: KEVIN BOZEMAN

Kevin Bozeman (@kevinbozeman1) is a true stand up. I caught his free workshop at Comedy on State, where he shared lessons and advice from over 20 years in the business. I was fortunate enough to reconnect with him and continue digging:

So I just interviewed Blake Burkhart, and he said that you called him out for not working hard enough.

You know, sometimes people catch me at a bar and we're drinking and then they want these honest critiques of themselves. And I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. The only reason I don't have a problem with telling him that — people can say that to me too and it's fair. It's a fair assessment for most comics. We don't work hard enough. But I generally only give critiques like that to people that are really talented and that I like. But scrubs and people I don't care about? I don't say anything. So if I said something to Blake, that means I really like him and I was also tipsy. Him and I worked together at Comedy Bar a couple months ago, so that's probably where that conversation came from. I just told him if you wanna go to another level, you gotta put the work in. It wasn't so much, "You're not working hard enough," it's "Where do you wanna go and does your work ethic match where you wanna go?" There's people that don't work hard at all and that's perfectly fine, unless you're saying I wanna go *here*, and then your work ethic is (down) *here*. But some people are just happy to be in the game, and who are you to tell them their degree of happiness?

And to get to that next level, what really worked for you? How were you able to ramp up your work ethic?

So I don't consider myself necessarily above Blake or anyone. I've been doing it longer and I headline, but once we hit the stage together I look at everyone as my peers. But for me, after I cranked out my first headlining set I stopped writing and wasn't performing and creating new material. But when your friends that you've been doing stand up with get so much better than you, you've gotta have a healthy dose of ego and competitive fire to go, "Yo, I gotta get after it." Cause you don't have a boss. You don't have anyone to answer to. You have to be so self motivated to do stand up.

So you started comedy in '99 and by 2000 you were winning some major competitions.

I did alright. I got Comedy Central, Premium Blend, and then I won like an HBO competition and they put me on



that new Star Search with Arsenio Hall. So I had some success, but it wasn't overwhelming. I wasn't walking into the room like, "Guess what I did!"

Of course not. But a year or two in, a lot of comics would kill for that. What do you think lead to having that initial success, whereas a lot of other comics will struggle early on figuring out what to do.

I think the number one thing that comics have to not do is worry about anyone else. Really. The game of stand up comedy is rigged. All the problems you have with stand up are legit. But so what? Either you're gonna do it, or you're not gonna do it. There's gonna be people that get stuff before you, and you probably should've gotten it before them. But it's set up for you to quit. And the goal is to not quit until you realize, "Yo, this is as good as I can be in comedy." And if you realize that you're not good at stand up and you took your shot, then... you know. They say "ball don't lie," well, sometimes stand up comedy don't lie and it'll get you. It'll make you quit one day, sooner or later.

Do you think you'll get to that point?

Oh, god yeah. I don't think I'll ever fully quit stand up, but I don't know if I wanna be 45 weeks on the road, either. I'll pick and choose. I'll still always do stand up, but I don't know if it's gonna be like touring all the time.

Do you enjoy going on the road for 45 weeks? That's a lot.

I include 45 weeks also performing at home and stuff. I'm glad now I don't have to be on the road more than one week at a time. Very seldom am I gone over 4-5 days. A lot of times it's Wednesday through Saturday. I'm gone and I come home. So being able to come home and recharge my battery is always good. But when you're out there and you don't have any responsibilities and you're just working on your craft, the road is fantastic. Just be out there. Live your best life. Go out there and build your craft and enjoy the country and sight see and explore different people and figure out how your act meshes with different groups. It's fantastic.

When you were first going on the road, did you have difficulty getting your material to mesh with all these different audiences?

My biggest thing was finding my voice. Once you find your voice, you find your voice. You shouldn't change your voice to the different rooms. You can tweak jokes and material towards the demographic that's there, but still your voice should be what you're trying to do. Define your voice and don't worry specifically about the crowd that's in front of you. Worry about "Am I consistent? Am I sharing? Do I have a point of view? Who am I as a stand up?"

So do you think if you're true to yourself your material will work anywhere?

No, it doesn't mean it'll work anywhere. But it means you're true to yourself. You go, "This is who I am as a stand up." And if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. Generally, if you're great at stand up, you really only need 1,000 people to like you wherever you go. If you have 1,000 people that love what you have to say, then you're good. You don't have to be Chappelle, Burr, Rock, whoever the greats are. You only need to go to a club and do five shows, and have about 200 people pay a ticket to see you. And clubs will book you constantly. If you wanna sustain a career, 1,000 people a week can keep you going.

To get to the level you're at, where you were doing 45 weeks a year, what kind of work ethic do you need to have?

Well, stand up is a giant hustle. Know your strengths and weaknesses and who you are as a person. There are some people that can get to where I am cause they're just a better comic than me. And there are some people that can get to where I'm at cause they're better at hustling and getting in with clubs and networking and social

media. It's all figuring out what you're good at and playing to your strengths. And whatever your weakness is, developing it to a sustainable level. Whatever you're weak at — obviously stay away from things you're bad at — but then try to build it up. It's the same thing with sports. The dude that can't go left works on being able to go left. He'll still be able to go right better than left, but it's not necessarily the biggest weakness. Like, "Oh, you forced me left, dude? I'm gonna punish you. But if you force me right, it's over." It's the same thing with building your strengths and weaknesses. Because I'm horrible with social media. When I started doing stand up there was no social media. But now it's just like, "Yeah, why should we book you when we have this person that has 150,000 followers?" When they come, people are just gonna go and see them cause they're so good at TikTok and creating these little sketches and stuff. "Yeah, you're good at stand up, but we gotta put you on radio and promote and do all these other things because you don't have this natural built in base." And that's on me, and I fully accept that. I just want the mic.

I want to get into some of your material. You have this bit about how love is so crazy. I'm really curious how you found the right balance of saying what you want to say, making a point, and getting laughs.

You know, it's crazy. When I wrote that joke, I had done this show with my buddy, Tim Slagle, at Acme Comedy Club in Minneapolis, one of the best comedy clubs in the country, and it's not even close. If you talk to all road comics, almost everyone has Acme and Comedy on State in Madison as their top clubs. But he was doing this show called Crash & Burn. We go up with 20 minutes of material that we've never performed at all. And it's a Tuesday through Saturday club, so we

start on Tuesday and give each other notes. So I did it on Tuesday and had a good set. On Wednesday, we all ate it. And I was so bothered that Thursday morning I got up at 7:00 and walked to Starbucks in downtown Minneapolis. And I was right across the street from First Street Ave, which is where they filmed Purple Rain. And Prince is like my all time favorite. And that's the day that he died, was the day that I wrote the joke about love. And I was so creatively in-tune. When I wrote that joke, I wrote it with a real good creative spirit and it all just flowed. So I was able to speak my truth. All the shit that I say about love I truly believe. I also tell comics when you hold onto your truth longer, it just makes for a better punchline. Because it's a truth as opposed to having to add an absurdity to it to make it funny. If you can make the absurdity in the truth, then that makes for a better joke, just in my opinion. So I was able to hold onto the truth and I wrote it all out and that was the basis for that joke.

Did it need any work, or did it pretty much come out already done?

With a joke like that, that's gonna be that long, where I have that many different takes and analogies, I needed to tweak it. But the meat and potatoes of it was really solid. It was just a matter of adding the side dishes to make it a complete meal.

The side dishes. I like that. So how often do you write something and then go back and tweak little adjectives and stuff like that?

Every month or so I go back and look at what I've been writing and see how it's different now and if I would say it in the same way now. I'm always going back through old books and my phone and stuff. The biggest question is: "Why am I not saying this joke on stage?" That's it. If I wrote it and I'm not saying it on stage, I'm asking, "Why is it not ready? What's going on with this?" It's like a boss going in to check: "You got this project done yet?" That's how I look at the joke. Why is it not ready? What am I missing? But that's really it. If you write something and you're not performing it, then you've got to be like, "Why am I not performing it?" And there's reasons why you're



not, and it's clear on some level you don't feel good about it.

What's the most common reason for you that you're not doing a certain joke?

It's just too wordy. Or it's not original enough. Or I wrote it and it doesn't fit with who I am as a stand up. It's gotta fit in my wheelhouse and it's gotta be able to stand up to the jokes I really like. Cause if there's jokes you really like in your act, you sell them harder. You sell new jokes that you just wrote and jokes you really like. This joke might be okay, it might be decent, but it doesn't stand up to everything else. And now it's like, "I gotta hide you buddy. I gotta hide you around some other jokes."

One thing I'm finding is that within a bit, there are certain jokes that don't stand up to the other jokes within that same bit. Do you just cut those and keep the strongest part?

No, you just gotta be able to figure out the order of it. I talk about having a bit

"WHEN YOU HOLD ONTO YOUR TRUTH LONGER, IT JUST MAKES FOR A BETTER PUNCHLINE. BECAUSE IT'S A TRUTH AS OPPOSED TO HAVING TO ADD AN ABSURDITY TO IT TO MAKE IT FUNNY. IF YOU CAN MAKE THE ABSURDITY IN THE TRUTH, THEN THAT MAKES FOR A BETTER JOKE, JUST IN MY OPINION."

and developing a routine. A routine is so much more important than a bit. It kinda tells a story of yourself. A bit is just one moment in time. But a routine, if you have such a great bit you can build a routine around it. And then it's just a matter of "Where do these jokes go so this routine can flourish?"

And do you have any advice for building routines and finding the right spaces for jokes in a routine?

It's boring and generic, but that's just getting up on stage. You should try to count how many punchlines you have in your routine and think, "Is this an acceptable amount of laughs in this routine?" I'm not gonna say how many punchlines, because sometimes people are one-liners and sometimes people are storytellers. So you have to figure that out. And really to me, a big problem in jokes is you're just sharing too much information. Where is the punchline? Stop telling me things I don't need to know. What you're telling me, is that important for this punchline? Or are you just sharing it because you think you need to share it, because you're painting a picture? Treat a crowd like they're smart until they show you otherwise.

So with smart crowds. What do you do if you tell a joke that goes over everyone's head. What do you do in that moment?

Nothing. You just keep going. It depends on how long you're doing. If I'm on stage for an hour and one joke doesn't resonate, hopefully I've built enough cache where it's just whatever. But if I've established a rhythm of who I am and I say something, then it's generally not gonna bomb. But if you've got 12 dumb jokes and one smart joke and that joke goes over their head, that's really on you. Cause you dumbed them up and now you say this really smart joke and they're like, "What??"

That's interesting. You kinda need to have a consistent —

That's where the building routines comes in. When you're building a routine, it's more cohesive and it says who you are. So these individual bits are part of a routine and they all work together. One selective bit might be great, but if it doesn't match the act it suffers the consequences.

Can you talk a little bit more about establishing your identity right out of the gates?

Once again, that comes from finding your voice and getting on stage and talking about the things you're comfortable with and how vulnerable and opinionated you want to be. Right away, you just want to get on stage and get comfortable with telling jokes. You don't have to find your voice. You don't have to be like, "This is who I am" right away. You figure that out. You're growing as a comic, like you are as a regular person. When you're six years old, you don't know what you wanna be in life yet. You're still just trying to figure out how to walk, talk and have a conversation. It's the same thing with stand up. You don't have to necessarily have your voice, but you just want to get comfortable, get laughs and stuff like that.

Looking back on your 20+ year career in comedy, how do you think it's changed you as a person?

As a person? Oh, well, that's easy. I get to do what I want to do for a living. You can't put a price tag on that happiness. There's so many people that have to go to a job every day that they don't like because they've gotta support a family or feel like they've got no other options. I can't imagine that sort of depression of being in a spot 40+ hours a week in something you don't love. Doing stand up is something I want to do and the fact I get to do it for a living automatically makes me a happier person.

So you'd say you're a lot happier than when you first started?

Yeah, and I'm generally a happy dude. But I think part of my happiness — I don't really wanna compromise my happiness. I do everything that I do because I want to be happy, and stand up is part of that.

And what about as a comic? How do you see yourself having changed?

The biggest thing was finding my voice as opposed to running out and telling jokes about Taco Bell, which is on album one. Now I'm talking about family, kids, point of view, how I feel about things, strong opinions about it. That's probably the biggest growth I've had in stand up, was speaking my truth.

When did you feel like you started finding your voice and getting to that point?

After I did that first album, which was like 2005, 2008-2009 I was like, "Why are you still doing this shit? What are you doing?" And then I started writing and then after that album I was like, "Alright, do you still want to do stand up?" And I was like, "Before you quit, make sure you give it your best shot." Then album three, *Life Coach*, I felt like, "Alright, now you're starting to get real, even if people don't like it, you're starting to speak your truth." And once I started speaking my truth, comedy became way more fun.

Can you realize that as a new comic? If you're saying a bunch of Taco Bell jokes and you're like, "This isn't me." Can you realize that and just jump ahead and speak your truth?

If you're honest with yourself you can. But how many times have you seen people eat it and think that they killed? If you record yourself and listen to it and you don't hear laughs, that should tell you. I went to this show and did this joke, I went to this show and did this joke, then went to this show and did this joke, and I'm not getting laughs across the board? What am I doing wrong? Is it the writing, or is it the delivery? Cause it can be one or the other. Everybody thinks it's just poorly written jokes, but you listen to some people that get laughs on simple stuff and you realize they're able to do it because their delivery is so flawless. But if you tried to write a similar joke to that, you wouldn't be able to get any laughs because your writing doesn't match your delivery.

So a lot of comics are told to record their sets and they do, but might not know how to properly review a set. Do you have any advice for that?

Yeah, you've just gotta ask the tough questions. "I was expecting a laugh here, I didn't get a laugh. Why?" That's the question. You might listen to yourself and be like, "Why did I say that? Maybe I should say it like that." Just reword, restructure it. It's so loose. It's creativity, it's art. It's so hard to be like, "This is how you do art." It's playing around. You can teach the class or have workshops and seminars and watch how-tos and study your favorite comics, but there's no greater teacher than a stage.

What's something you wish someone had told you at the beginning of your comedy career that would've saved you a lot of time?

Reminding me that it's a job. When you have a job, you're required to do certain things within your job. But if you're doing something that's so fun, you think it's great to be out there doing stand up and this and that, but it's a job. To be successful at this job you gotta put work in, and that's it. Someone reminded me, "Hey, great, you got a paycheck. It's a job. Make sure you're getting up and you're writing and doing all the things you need to do before you go out and play." Get all your work done, then you can reward yourself with play. But job first, everything else later.

And what's the best advice you've ever gotten in general?

Someone reminded me that I don't have to be dirty to be funny. I try to work funny. Sometimes I'm clean, sometimes I'm dirty. But I always try to write funny. Some things in your life are clean, some things in your life are dirty. Some comics just work dirty and it's super, super funny. Some people work clean and are super, super funny. This is your choice, this is your business. But I just like to work funny, and if you tell me, "Hey, we need you to come in and work clean," I can do that if I want to, whereas some people are like, "There's no way I can do that."

So you've had a lot of high pressure performances on competitions and showcases. How do you prepare yourself mentally for a big opportunity?

It just helps when you know what you're gonna say. And then you also embrace the moment. Don't run from the moment, embrace it. When I did Last Comic Standing, they held us in so many holding rooms. When I made it to the semi-finals or whatever, I was actually super nervous cause it was like, "Okay. Finally, it's go time." The moment almost got away from me. But then once I got on stage, I was nervous at first, but my jokes still came out clean and crisp. Nerves are good. Nerves are a good adrenaline rush. The biggest problem is if you're too nervous and you can't perform. But there's also the other part where you don't have enough adrenaline and then you're stumbling over your jokes because you're not really invested.

Last couple of questions. Is there anything about Chicago Comedy that stands out to you?

The amount of great comics in the city that will push you. And the amount of great rooms in this city. It's such a great comedy town and there's so many great comics out there that you can go to almost any show and know you're going to see someone that's going to be fantastic. The Chicago comedy scene takes a backseat to no one.

Is there anything about the Chicago scene that you'd change if you could?

The only thing that I would tell people, and I said this to the comics at CYSK, I go, "You guys are all so great and you guys all push each other, but you guys are always going up to kill, and sometimes you forget to go, 'Oh, I need to just go and work on this.' You won't take any Ls for the day for the big W." So they're all just trying to get Ws, and that's true for all these Chicago comics. So many of them. They're trying to go out and kill for that moment, but that moment doesn't really matter in the big scheme of things.

How do you balance that? Trying to get the W while also being willing to take the L.

If you're constantly working to develop the routine and stuff, once that routine gets developed and you're really polished, you're going to be giving Ws to everyone. But you're taking Ls to get to that routine. And once you get that routine, what do you want to do with the routine? That's why I tell comics: "What do you want to do with stand up?" Is your goal to be on Late Night? Do you want to develop an hour? Cause once you can answer those questions, it's easier to work on your material because you know what you're doing. Then who's on the show and what's going on doesn't really matter, because you're working on what your end game is.

That's really interesting. I agree, I think a lot of comics in Chicago aren't willing to take Ls. A lot of times they're the measuring stick and they don't want to be perceived in a lesser light or have younger comics think that they stack up to them.

Yeah, and I've had conversations with a couple of comics that've had to deal with that. It's hard to be considered the best in the city and people are looking up to you, then you see someone go up and kill and you've got to explain why you didn't kill. But real creative comics that are comfortable in their own skin never have to explain it.



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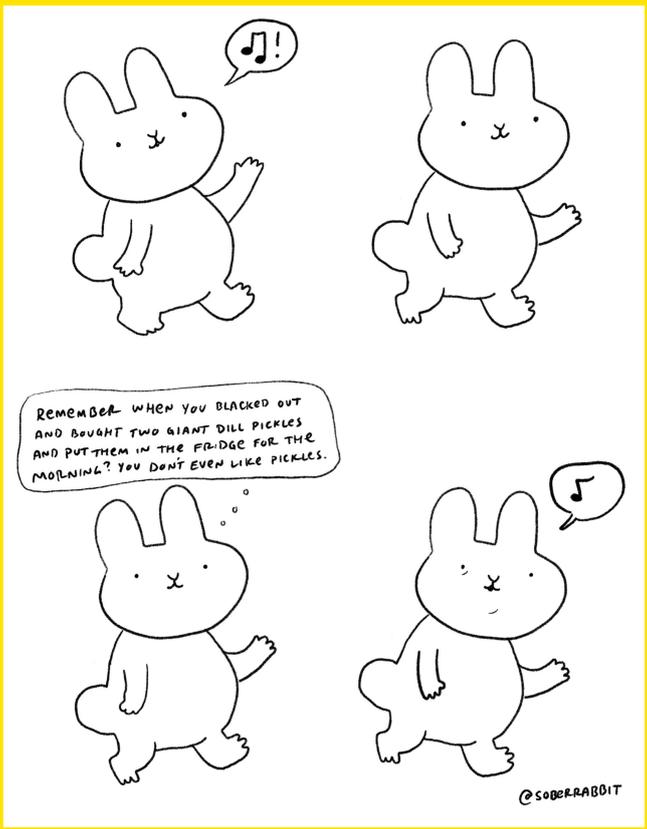
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ARTWORK: WHITNEY WASSON



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BOOK REVIEW: THE TAO OF COMEDY: EMBRACE THE PAUSE

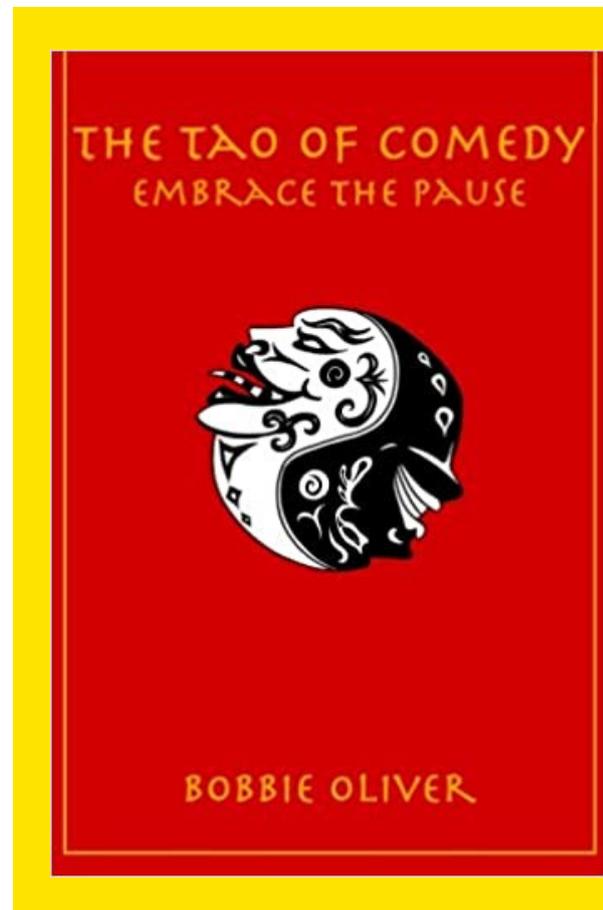
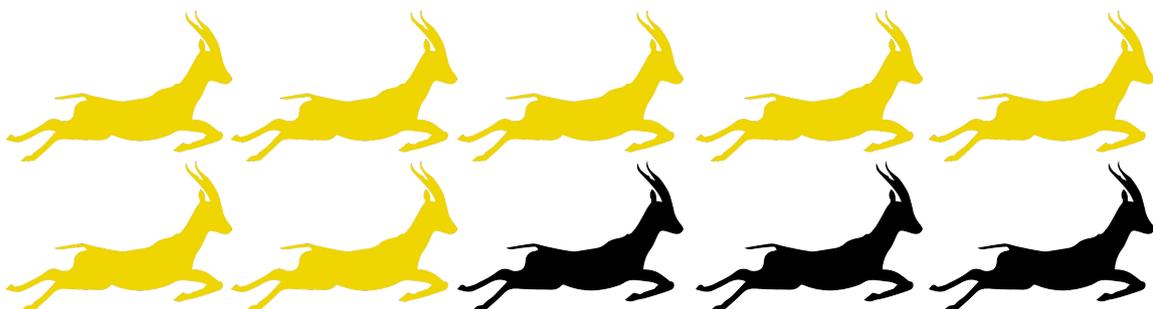
Review by Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

When you've been doing comedy for over 30 years like Bobbie Oliver, you learn a thing or two about how it should be done. Bobbie runs comedy workshop classes for anyone to improve their comedy, from newbies who have never done an open mic to pros who have full fledged careers. This book is essentially the curriculum she provides in those workshops.

If you don't have at least a little knowledge of Eastern philosophy, the concept of Tao might be alien. The Tao of Comedy means that if you are a comedian, comedy is your entire way of life. The duality of Yin Yang is my favorite adapted concept in every chapter. In the chapter on delivery, the takeaway is: "Writers are introverts; performers are extroverts. Comedians are both. Make peace with both sides of yourself and seek balance." Other intro to comedy books I have read do not explore this duality of comedy.

At times, the writing felt repetitive. Along with being zen and consistently working on being funny, Bobbie does not shut up about meditation. It is the main mantra. She insists that through meditation you can shut out the noise of the world and better channel your creativity. So if you don't want to read any of the other insightful information, do yourself a favor and start meditating.

7/10 Gazelles



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MADE THIS POSSIBLE.**

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