

# Daniel Belasco Rogers - Unfallen working text draft - February 2003

## Introduction

1039 kilometres

[photocopy of room under video zoomed in close]

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good afternoon and welcome to the University of Bristol Chemistry dept. I want to say straight away that if you're expecting a chemistry lecture, that isn't what I'm going to be talking about this afternoon.

It may be, however, that if you have come for a chemistry lecture and find yourself in the wrong place, then you should stay because being accidentally in the wrong place is very much what I am going to be talking about.

[place Introduction transp on overhead projector (OHP)]

I am very happy to stand in front of you this afternoon. A series of accidents has brought me here and, I believe, you too. I have been looking forward to this lecture and preparing what I want to show you for some time now. This lecture is a continuation of research which started with my first lecture a year and a half ago in London, where I was born, but was prompted by something I witnessed seven years before that.

You could say that it took me 7 years to make that piece, from the day I witnessed the fire to the day I presented the first lecture.

You could also say that since then I have been travelling to meet you and that you have been travelling to meet me. It is some of these convoluted paths that I want us to think about this afternoon.

Whenever I begin a lecture like this, I like to address you, the audience, as ladies and gentlemen. When I first thought about this piece and I was talking to you in Berlin, where I live at the moment, 682 miles in that direction, and you were far away, and we hadn't arrived yet in this room and I hadn't finished the lecture, I imagined that you liked being called Ladies and Gentlemen. I like being called Ladies and Gentlemen when I am attending such events as these.

We have established much already, you are Ladies and Gentlemen, I have had accidents, we are sitting opposite each other in a chemistry lecture theatre, there is a drawing of the room we are now in projected behind me and this is Bristol.

[remove paper - reveal map of Bristol]

We should feel pleased that we have come so far so quickly but we have a long way to go, about 1039 km to be precise.

## 1 Unfallen

**Dark Matter- as above so below**

I think about accidents a lot. You could say they were a kind of obsession. I fear them and I play with them to try to take their power away. I will come back to that later.

I think of accidents in some way being the tip of something much bigger and ultimately imperceptible to us. Something like the dark matter in the universe.

I find a lot of comfort in physics, I like the way it starts out like boring common sense but quickly leads into completely mysterious worlds. Dark Matter is one of these things. There is not enough stuff in the universe to make it work. The way gravity behaves tells those who are able to interpret it, that there should be much more matter than we can see. 95% more. Everything we know the universe to be made up of, all the stars, the galaxies, the planets, the dust, the matter, is only an impossibly tiny amount of what it must be.

[pan map out]

Neurologists say that we are only using a tiny percentage of our brain capacity. When you walk down a street, even if you have never been there before, a part of your brain is logging every single person, shopfront, object, event. Every word muttered in your audible range, every item of clothing visible to you on everyone, every headline on newspaper stalls, all the text on the advertisement hoardings. Every single word I'm saying, every single person in this room, is being perceived.

And yet most of this is unavailable to us under normal circumstances.

[pause]

At the dawn of western understanding of the physical world, physicists were called alchemists and they were somewhere between scientists, philosophers, doctors and priests. They would say, as above so below.

Having read more alchemy than chemistry, I can tell you that what they are alluding to is a belief that the universe is reflected inside us: that looking outward is looking inward.

[pause]

When you make plans or think about the future or even plan something as mundane as a shopping trip, you are mostly unaware of all the potential accidents that wait to derail your plans, perhaps even leading to you never making a shopping trip in the same way again. Turning right instead of left out of your front door may lead you to be over the other side of the city when that thing you see on the news happened, or may lead you to it. Perhaps you could say that these accidents are where the dark matter of the universe, in what ever way, is intruding into our lives, that an accident is the meeting place, the co-incidence between a hidden world and our own.

## **Title Accident**

The title of this lecture is an accident. I first called the piece 'Unfall' this is the German word for Accident. Perhaps I was tempting fate. When I wrote an email with the title to my English-speaking friend she sent me one back saying 'Unfallen' is a marvellous title. My first instinct was to try and claw back the original title from the jaws of the misunderstanding but I remembered that I was being given an opportunity. When I realised this it was clear to me that Unfallen is a much better title: it stands half way between the two languages, feeling slightly uncomfortable in both, kind of half making sense, whereas Unfall is a proper German word and a nonsensical English word.

## **Gott Würfelt nicht, the case for falling**

[place list of German words on OHP]

[write fall=case on Blackboard]

I am learning German as I learn my way through a new city. Berlin, for me, is relatively empty of my own personal associations, my accidents if you like, and my head is full of the associations and accidents from other places.

This means that I meet streets and words in a way I can never meet English words and London streets. Commonplace words that strike me as similar, a native speaker might never put together because they are met in such different circumstances, with different associations. The reason I wanted to call the piece Unfall is that it comes from a series of words that fascinate me. If you sit on public transport in Germany, you are likely to see a sign with the word Notfall on it. It means Emergency and it's similarity to Unfall alerted me to the fact that something was going on and it was to do with the word 'Fall'. There are in fact many words in German that contain the word Fall and I hope that you can see some of them here. The translations of these words mean

Waste

Attack

Loss

Infestation

Idea

Emergency

Accident

Decay

Incident

Decline and

Coincidence

This list makes it obvious that each word is made up of Fall with a different prefix, but it can come as a surprise to German speakers who have forgotten to remember that fall is in einfall, idea and zufall, coincidence just as I forgot that accident and incident and therefore coincidence share the same ending until a German friend pointed it out. The question that confronted me, when I began to look at all these words, was how do all those meanings affect 'Fall'? I will read the English words out again and I want you to try and imagine that there are concepts that are shared between them and then I shall try and get to the bottom of the word 'Fall'.

Waste

Attack

Loss

Infestation

Idea

Emergency

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[replace on OHP with print out of fall etymology]

Fall has two main sets of meanings. It corresponds to the English, fall but it also means case, as in a legal case or a grammatical case or the case in point. Even though case and fall have very different meanings, I think can all sense that they are linked. This feeling is confirmed when you think about the word Unfall, accident and try and decide whether fall is being used to mean falling or the case of an accident. It could be both.

The history of how fall came to have two groups of meanings, case and fall, is strange. It says that the usual meaning of Fall, to fall or the fall, had a point of departure in its meaning at some point to include the meaning of the case and that this departure point is from the term 'Der Fall der Würfel' which translates as the fall, or roll of the dice. Finally there is a link between the worlds of category and accident, that most potent symbol of chance, the dice.

The more I think about it though, the more I like it. It reminds me of what Einstein famously wrote when he was in the midst of accusation that his theories had thrown everything into confusion and doubt. He said 'Gott würfelt nicht' – God doesn't throw dice.

[OHP with title of story on]

### **Story 1 White Ford Escort (not Cortina) 1974**

[Take Bristol map off, London under, relocate camera to Falconwood]

Even I, a Londoner, find it hard to suppress the Eastenders theme tune whenever I see the tell-tale oxbow of the Isle of Dogs on the London map

[constructing the fish finger map over tracing]

My route to Alderwood Primary school in South East London took me alongside a busy A road, the Rochester way. Yards from where I lived and where my Dad was waiting for me to return, the A2 met it's first set of traffic lights since leaving Dover. One school day in 1974, I was walking home as usual but feeling particularly hungry. As I turned left alongside the A2, and followed the cemetery wall my hunger had focussed in my mind into a palpable hallucination of fish fingers, which I knew my Dad would make me if I asked. Fish fingers was all I could think about. And so it was that I was looking to my left, practically smelling them, when I absent-mindedly decided that if those older children on the other side of the road were crossing, then I could cross too and was oblivious to the car which struck my right hip, rendering me unconscious.

I have to break the narrative here for the moment and explain something about the car.

[strap log cast around waist]

I have told people for about 20 years that it was a white Ford Cortina that ran into me that day but I have recently found out that that's not what I meant at all. I found a picture of a Cortina and it is not the right shape at all. I realised that I'd taken the name of my uncle Barry's green car and told everyone that it was that but what actually hit me that day was a Ford Escort mark 1. The Internet is a powerful tool indeed.

[move map along table? Come out front?]

After an embarrassing and emotional trip to the hospital with my Dad beside himself in the back of the ambulance, it stopped outside the part of the hospital that coincidentally enough, my Mum worked in at the time to pick her up. My parents were much more shaken than I was. While waiting for my X-rays, Mum even fainted. I was fine though, Mum later told me "Your main symptom was embarrassment".

The excitement didn't dint my hunger for fish fingers though, and when we finally got back home, my parents asked me what I'd like for tea and I said "Fish fingers, please"

## 2 Correspondences & Maps

### Walter Benjamin

[berlin map]

Walter Benjamin was born in Berlin in 1892, in his unfinished 1932 essay, A Berlin Chronicle, he writes:

I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life – bios – graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff's map of a city centre, if such a thing existed. Doubtless it does not, because of ignorance of the theatre of future wars. I have evolved a system of signs, and on the grey background of such maps they would make a colourful show if I clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girl friends, the assembly halls of various collectives, from the 'debating chambers' of the Youth Movement to the gathering places of the Communist youth, the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves that I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafés whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips, the tennis courts where empty apartment blocks stand today, and the halls emblazoned with gold and stucco that the terrors of dancing classes made almost the equal of gymnasiums.

### Life as a drawing

I often imagine my life as a drawing. The pen first strikes the paper in 1966 in a now-demolished hospital in Woolwich in South East London and for a week it stays there, the pen only moving in time, not in space. From that November night my life is a line and I am dislocating myself from the moment of my birth, the only time I was whole, a complete entity, not separating from myself.

My drawing and my mothers drawing are very close in the sixties, often overlapping, creating the knots that bind us even now.

I have already told you about walking to my primary school. This is a drawing I will remake about 975 times over 5 years. It's very strange to run my pencil over streets that I haven't visited in over twenty years, not knowing if they've changed, remembering the friends that lived along the route and the strange collection of interesting stones I filled my pockets with from those streets.

My first visits to central London have already happened and I am unable to pinpoint them in time. I am denied the ability to tell you the first time the line of my drawing traced the route of Charing Cross Road, a road I feel I've known all my life.

[Animation of All the streets... Berlin –2m38s]

But I am able to tell you that I first walked down Friedrichstrasse, in the middle of Berlin, on the afternoon of Sunday 28 October 2001 and that is because Berlin is offering me the opportunity of recording each new street I come across, and of watching the drawing of this section of my life develop.

Getting to know Berlin is what I imagine getting to know London is like. You explore the area around where you are based and then make excursions out to different areas. Being transported on trams or tube trains or any form of public transport, doesn't count as a line for me because there is something about taking a tube to an unknown part of the city, emerging into those streets, walking around and plunging back down again that represents a kind of lack of consciousness about that journey. It's rather like being Captain Kirk beaming down onto a planet, not being aware of the journey, only the arriving. It may take years before one realises that those little explorations congregating around the tube exits are starting to join up and form a complete knowledge.

I have heard that London taxi drivers' brains are changed by learning 'the knowledge', that the acquisition and use of that geographical knowledge is neurologically identifiable and in the posterior hippocampus. I like to think of those synapses reaching out across cellular space exactly as the routes are joining up across the space of a city and I hope that this is happening in me. And one day I hope to explore more scientifically these neurological and virtual meetings but maybe more of that much later.

[pause the tape – EJECT! should end on time!]

## **Correspondences and Co-incidences**

The maps that have been on the blackboards since the lecture began are part of my research.

In the discipline of psychology it is pointed out that the only way we can imagine the future, or the unknown (the dark matter, if you will), is by projecting what we already know onto it. I can feel this happening to me as I walk around certain parts of Berlin and am reminded of London, and I remember doing this the first time I came to Bristol, interpreting it in terms of the other cities I knew.

We are all familiar, I think, of trying to give someone an impression of somewhere by telling them things like "It's like St Paul's but bigger", "It's like Clifton but without the views", "It's only about as far as from here to the Cube..." . Or you may find yourself thinking this reminds me of Bedminster, of Nottingham, of Manchester as you wonder round an unfamiliar city.

And so one of the things I have been doing is tracing, like Walter Benjamin, my own personal maps of cities.

Obviously you need the maps to be the same scale – these ones happen to be 1:25,000 but you also need to agree a point in each city that will make a sensible correspondence with each other, otherwise they float about over each other like Laputa in Gulliver's Travels.

I have decided to use the notion of the centre to define those points. In my maps, Trafalgar Square is the Brandenburg gate which is in turn the fountains on Broad Quay, at the bottom of Park Street in that direction.

Using these maps we start to build up a complex picture of all the associations we take around with us: the camera obscura in Clifton is built on the side of Park Lane and overlooks Speakers corner, not the suspension bridge, and is a station called, aptly enough, Bellevue in Berlin. The Royal Academy on Picadilly is Queen Elizabeth's Hospital school on Brandon Hill and the bell tower in Tiergarten. Waterloo Bridge rises in Castle Green, behind the Broadmarsh shopping centre and spans Unter den Linden.

My accident with the Ford Escort mk 1 in 1974 took place in the middle of a wood near Koepenick and the middle of a field outside Bath but more of that later.

## **Story 2 Piccadilly Circus 1984**

I should like everyone to bear in mind, as I talk about an incident that happened to me in Piccadilly Circus when I was 18, that in Bristol, the site in question, if the maps are overlaid as I said, is not far from here, at the top of Park Street, on the patch of grass just outside the University building on Park Row.

[Blanket maps under camera layered in order 1960's 1990's 1980's]

Piccadilly Circus has been through a number of different configurations as city planners have attempted to cope with the traffic flow and the strange but undeniable wish of tourists to get up close to the statue of Eros, properly called the Shaftesbury Monument, presumably to have their photo taken in front of it.

Today, by the way, this piece of pavement is continuous and various other changes have been made to the traffic flow. Originally the traffic flowed right round the monument, making it a kind of roundabout but by the eighties it had been moved a few feet nearer the pavement outside the Criterion and Lillywhites and had been incorporated into this island with better access.

Claire, my first girlfriend and I had come up to London to be in the centre of things. I can't remember the real reason now, but I speculate that it was because we wanted to see an exhibition at the Royal Academy which is in this direction, on Piccadilly itself.

We probably came from the east, from Leicester Square and were walking west until we came to this traffic island and trotted across the last section of Shaftesbury Avenue which is where the tip of my left foot met the vertical side of the kerb, arresting the progress of the bottom half of my body and pitching the top half of my body towards a cast iron lamppost.

I should like to pause the development of the narrative here, with my face inches from the inevitable lamppost while I explain some research I have done and play the video of Berlin I promised.

[Berlin video edit to 2m31s]

Like the white Ford Escort story, I've been telling this one for many years and a few years into the telling I used to say to people that I'd face-buffed a cast-iron dolphin. I thought that the lampposts in Piccadilly were of the type you get along the embankment in London that have two intertwined dolphins or porpoises at about face height. If I was feeling particularly corny, I'd say that the only reason my nose didn't break was because it saw the porpoises coming and miraculously sucked back into my face. This is clearly ludicrous and there is no place for that sort of nonsense in this scientific establishment. Two years ago I researched the street furniture of Piccadilly Circus and found out that the lampposts hadn't had their design changed throughout the seventies to the present day. On re-visiting Piccadilly Circus with the honest wish to get to the bottom of it all, I found that the dolphins were no where to be seen and that the lampposts in question are of a rather dull, neo-classical design but with a very important feature. I shall now demonstrate this feature using a template which I have reproduced from measurements taken of the relevant lamppost.

[video should end. Change over to camera and EJECT]

[template on face]

We can clearly see that my nose was saved that day by this accidental aspect of it's design, only to be broken a couple of years later in a theatre safety demonstration of how to take down a scaffolding-type lighting tower. But that's another story.

### **3 These fragments I have shored against my ruins**

As we enter the third and final part of the lecture, I can see that I have left some threads literally and metaphorically dangling. Some of which I shall attempt to tie back in before we have to leave each other but some, like the title of this section, I will leave to you.

#### **Sewing & knitting**

At various stages in my childhood I was taught to knit by my Grandma and taught to sew by my mother. These skills have always been important to me, even if I don't practise them very much anymore. Their domestic, predictable and repetitive actions strike me as a direct opposite of the scary, accident-frequented streets outside. I think of countless generations of knitters and sewers stitching records of their patient hours into each sampler. Yet even here, the accident is encountered, for who can forget the stabbing of the needle, the painful discovery of the hidden pin?

[Sit down and Pick up needle and thread from blanket]

I remember becoming anxious and a little neurotic about needles as I sewed, fearing the possibility of their accidental prick more perhaps than was sensible. At times like this I tried to diffuse their power by stroking them the wrong way, showing that I could handle that dangerous point without misfortune. I don't think I am alone in acting like this, using this unconscious magic to tame objects that might otherwise harm us. It is in the common practise of testing a sharp knife with a nail or fingertip, or of the absent minded purposeful pricking of a pin into finger.

### **Prophylactic prostheses**

We have already established that I haven't had many accidents in Berlin. Not having any health insurance, I fear them very much and would like to guard against them.

And so I have embarked on the construction of a series of objects which embody this desire to tame. It is to these that I should now like to turn.

I should like to return, as I said I would, to the wood near Köpenick, outside Berlin

[video of Köpenick – edit to 3m]

You can see from the video that the wood is pretty densely planted and in straight lines. I had my compass with me and I could see that these lines ran in the same direction as the A2 which I had walked along 975 times on my way home from school.

I had marked place that corresponded to the accident location in London but it was hard to tell where exactly it was in the wood. It took a number of tries, and a lot of walking about before I was happy that I'd done all I could to locate the correspondence accurately.

What I was also looking for was something to stand in for the Ford Escort bumper, something that I could take a mould of and later cast in plaster and make a kind of stamp that could press into my body in a controlled, premeditated way, to make a mark on my body, however temporarily, that I chose.

It's hard to get a sense of, but it was a freezing day and the mould making material, which is the stuff dentists use to take impressions of your teeth, began to freeze and I was very concerned it wouldn't set.

It did set however and earlier on in the lecture you saw the plaster cast of that section of log from the wood in Köpenick on the outskirts of Berlin being strapped into my side, at about the spot that the car hit me in 1974.

One of Freud's late encounters was with the victims of shell shock from the first world war and he postulated that their neurotic compulsion to re-live the bombardment was a way of trying to accustom themselves to the shock of the sudden event, a kind of after-the-event preparation, a way of putting yourself through that which was forced upon you.

Like stroking the needle the wrong way and testing the knife, my objects try and answer the need to control the accident, to incorporate it into one's life as if it is one's own material and not the dark matter from whence it came.

[stop video – EJECT!]

It is not always one's own accidents however that are the most memorable, and not always one's own accidents that leave the biggest impression.

### **Story 3 Wall of Smoke**

[sit down, line up fish fingers]

Once upon a time I lived in Clerkenwell, before property prices rocketed and my house was bought by the Knights of St John

One day I decided to go for a walk

I walked down my stairs and out of my front door and turned

Left, south, towards the river

I went on a walk around the city, around some of the usual sights that I had come to know since I lived there

Walking around the city is something that I like to do often

If I'm feeling a bit unsure of myself or if I just want some fresh air

There was nothing unusual about that day or so I thought then

I had been out about half an hour and decided to return to my flat

I turned right into the road that led onto my road and was met by a wall of smoke

There wasn't any other clue about what was happening in that road but as I walked through the smoke I noticed that there were people standing, all looking in the same direction.

They were looking slightly up, some with their mouths open and they were staring at a second and third floor window opposite them

I stopped too and looked in the direction they were looking and I saw that this is where the smoke was coming out from

The upper stories of a building above a café that's still there today, last I looked

There were I could see several men at the window in the lower of the two stories of the café and they were sheltering from the flames that were arcing above their heads

One man I remember shielded his back with his leather jacket, putting it over his head.

Another man couldn't take it any longer and jumped

I didn't see him land because as he was in mid air I decided that this was too much for me

I decided that I couldn't do anything to help

I decided that it was wrong for me to see anymore

So before he hit the ground I turned and walked through the smoke, into my street and went home.

It also equates to this School in Bristol, on ?? street, Montpelier where I found these objects and have made these blinkers.

[newspaper article]

Man denies murder in sex cinema blaze

Times 21 March 1995

A deaf man thrown out of a pornographic cinema club in London after a row with the doorman took his revenge 30 mins later by setting it alight with petrol and killing 11 men, the Old Bailey was told yesterday.

David Lauwers who had been drinking, allegedly set fire to the New City cinema in Smithfield after an argument over the entrance fee. People in the audience leapt out of windows, climbed onto ledges and jumped on to a lorry parked outside.

Mr Lauwers, a pattern cutter in a clothing factory and of no fixed address, was accompanied by a sign-language interpreter in the dock.

He has pleaded guilty to 3 counts of murder on February 26 1994 and 2 of arson. The case continues.

# Epilogue

[light the candles]

In the days after the fire, they put scaffolding up the building and people left bunches of flowers taped to it. Flowers like you get taped to railings or lampposts where some fatal accident has happened and for a while that stretch of road, that lamppost becomes a wayside shrine, a place where people silently, reverently approach to read the cards, if present, or wonder who died there. In a few weeks the flowers wilt, the cards fade and the Sellotape loses its stickiness, the votive objects become rubbish and are cleared away in the early mornings, some of them may even be incinerated in waste disposal plants to provide a millisecond of energy for our traffic lights and kettles.

These sad little tokens attest to a more obscure history, of countless mishaps that have intruded into our lives and for some and briefly, made odd street corners or disused shops, numinous.

These countless sites make up the fabric and texture of cities, just as much as the statues and blue plaques. My own mishaps and accidents have left their mark on me but like all those others, refused to make their mark on the landscape, except to my eyes and those I have told about them.

I have shared some with you tonight, accidents that have hijacked the plans of my life at different points and without my asking, changed me to a greater or lesser extent. Accidents I take with me and map on to new street corners or the middle of inexplicable woods. Accidents I know I am unable to guard against, accidents that lead to the greatest opportunities of my life.

Just before we leave each other, and our drawings scitter off in different directions, I want to play you one last thing: In the last few days I've been going to the locations in and around Bristol that correspond to the events I've been talking about. The tape firstly shows the field overlooking Bath. This is where I had the accident with the Ford Escort mk 1 one school day in 1974.

Then I went to the corner outside the Mill youth centre on Lower Ashley Road, opposite the Greek church, just round the corner from the start of the M32.

## Letter to Bristol - (on video)

Dear Bristol,

I address myself to your views, your high green places looking over the downs, your industrial wastes, your gritty gutters, your useless centre. It feels strangely natural to write to you and yet I know that I don't know you well enough to be intimate. There are times I've shared with you - passionate, moving times but I don't know if you were present.

Did you turn away as I limped past the hospital, distraught and in tears? Were you looking when we danced under the observatory?

For how can your attention be everywhere, us who are like barnacles on your great whale's back?

I address myself to you who was Bristol before any human called you this – to the Bristol that will remain after humans have left – this brief blossoming of crusty efflorescence a puzzling memory of a city born on your slopes, a fleeting concrete curiosity.

To you who endure so far beyond human timescale that seasons become an indistinct blur and the presence of our tiny passions, meaningless.

But I find myself comforted by your scale – you absorber of bouquets, discarder of plans, recycler of monuments. Comforted by the idea that the flowers taped to the railing are as important as the traffic schemes of the most corrupt and despotic city councillor.

And now that I have walked around you, in body as well as in writing, I find my work done, your attention elsewhere, my body already anticipating its removal from you unless you somehow claim it. But before I go I have to tell you a story, even though you have no means to hear it.

My Grandfather, a London boy, raised in the impoverished terraced houses of early 20th century Fulham and surviving a war which claimed so many of his Boys Brigade friends, became a part of Somerset one August day, after his heart stopped beating three months before I came into the world.

# Appendices

## Object list

Needle and thread

Notebook

Pencil

11 fish fingers

11 birthday cake candles

Cast of a section of log in woods near Köpenick

Cast of a section of lamppost outside green space near Reichstag, Berlin [not used in final performance]

Two parking tickets from Linien Straße, Berlin [not used in final performance]

Transparent film with tracing of London

OS map of London scale 1:25000 in three sections

Transparent film with tracing of Berlin

Map of Berlin scale 1:25000

Transparent film with tracing of Bristol

Map of Bristol scale 1:25000

Template of lamppost from Piccadilly Circus, London

3 Blanket maps of Piccadilly Circus, London, made originally for Artsadmin Bursary performance, London.

DV camera

Edited and partially edited Mini DV tape

Tripod

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