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### Locale, street, square – a naive theory of the city

“No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection.”

Italo Calvino: *The Invisible Cities*

That a city is a complex object surely passes for a commonplace. However, this has consequences for any purported theory of the city. It entails that it's scarcely possible to conceive of a unitary theory capable of accounting for all its aspects: from physics and geology through topography and ecology to history, cultural history, sociology, architecture and no doubt much else besides.

It does not entail, however, the sceptical claim that it's impossible to speak of such overwhelming hyper-complexity. But it does mean that to speak of it one needs to select one aspect of it and insulate it from others – in something like the way in which the law of gravity can be captured only by focusing on the weight of objects and ignoring other features of their behaviour.

That is what I intend to attempt here. I shall be isolating a phenomenological aspect of the city and I cannot promise that my perspective won't result in the rehearsal of a wealth of banal observations, for it undoubtedly will. All the same, I trust that one or two non-trivial insights will figure among them, or that a few of the more platitudinous will appear in a new and systematized light.

My phenomenological perspective will be delivered by the activity of *walking in the city*, so there is nothing *recherché* about it inasmuch as the majority of city dwellers have to circulate in the street system regularly. It may be argued, I think, that the city walk, and not first and foremost that of the tourist, but that, rather, occasioned by citizens' various purposes, is the phenomenologically primary gateway to the city, even though by no means the only one. I tend to think that reflection on the fundamental structures underpinning this practical circulation will uncover certain basic phenomenological features of the city and shed light on other sides of it too.

I start from the notion of a process within a stable system like that applied in catastrophe theory. On this theory the general picture of many (not all) biological

and semiotic processes is that they are characterized by extended, stable, continuous developmental patterns interrupted by brief, abrupt, catastrophic patterns which in turn transform into other new, gradual, continuous developmental patterns. I suggest that this model lends itself to the conceptualization of many aspects of the phenomenology of walking in the city.

If we were to take a subject and set him or her on a route – a subject only insofar as he or she is in possession of an intention seeking its realization via the street system, and a route only insofar as it is passable for such subjects – then such circulation within the street system evinces the features mentioned: extended stable strata separated by brief, unstable ones. In the extended stable strata one proceeds at a brisk pace while in the shorter ones one pauses, looks about one, makes a choice among several possible routes, has perhaps lost one's way – until one recovers a stable stratum and resumes one's course.

Now what interests me is the fact that the street system's structure makes possible linear passage that mimics this subjective phenomenology. The structure itself with its shifts between the two kinds of strata is surely exemplified by any route followed by a human agent, while the urban street system qua system embodies a potentially infinite number of routes of this nature, inasmuch as it imposes constraints on the subject's behaviour and only at certain marked points does it allow the pursuit of a plurality of possible routes. If we mark out a route within a street system it will inevitably tend to manifest this same character: along a street we have a stable stratum where the route is permitted no deviation (unless of course the destination is one of the buildings or other premises lining the street). At crossroads and in squares we have unstable points where the route bifurcates and a choice among optional roads must be made.

The two routes, the "subjective" and the "objective", are not coincident despite the similarity of their observable aspects. The circulating subject doesn't need to pause wonderingly at every square. He or she may well be familiar with it and can simply cross it unchecked and without hesitation. But squares in their actual manifestation provide privileged points for stopping and looking wonderingly about one. Equally, the converse claim might be made: that the strolling subject establishes a phenomenological square around him- or herself whenever and wherever stopping to contemplate his or her immediate surroundings.

This congruence in formal description – the subjective and the objective – of the individual's route within the street system is what I shall make my point of

departure for the “naive theory of the city” promised in the title. As already noted it is just one aspect that is thus picked out and since I seek to derive a range of implications from it, it must be stated at the outset that there remain a host of considerations that this perspective deliberately and completely neglects. Like, for example, the architectonic and urban planning influences on the historical emergence of streets and squares – by no means unimportant factors – which are here simply phenomenologically bracketed, just as orders of magnitude too are for the present kept out of sight.

Let us trace an ideal-typical route through the city in which the “subjective” and the “objective” coincide. Our strolling subject sets off with a more or less well-defined destination, determined as it is by whatever intention underlies his or her movement. We may already at this point note that the degree of definiteness of the destination influences the density of the stable strata. The more well-defined the destination the more blindly does the subject proceed through the streets of the city and the fewer are the points at which he or she is likely to pause and establish a juncture – a square. This preliminary result offers two different perspectives. It is well known how psychoanalysis establishes that the melancholic – who in his grief work detaches himself from a well-defined object to become enmeshed in affliction, owing to the fact that a large part of the invested libido had as its locus the ego ideal now evacuated – is disposed to aesthetic experience, which is to say is disposed to follow less well-trodden tracks. And it is equally well known how city stereotypes like the *dandy* and the *flaneur* have an affinity with the melancholic and like him, only more literally, roam more or less aimlessly and take up, so to speak, more space than the go-getting yuppie on his way from one office to another.

Without prejudice to this variation in the density of the peripatetic experience we are supposing that our subject has a destination in view. This means that (one aspect of) the place he is presently at, figures as a kind of sign of the goal; the route is the sign function that is to connect the route’s starting point with the destination via the stroll as a more or less executable process of decoding and inference; and the squares are the points at which this decoding process faces several options. This gives the following topology:

[ DIAGRAM ]

and it gives rise to the three fundamental phenomenological categories applicable to

the city: *the locale, the street, the square*.

The locale is basically defined as a more or less permanent stopping-place separated off from the flow of traffic. It can figure both as point of departure and destination – as well as temporary places of residence, intermediate destinations or mistaken destinations (blind alleys) along the way. The locale can indeed figure as a point of reference in relation to other places but basically speaking it is self-subsistent. In the city's concrete manifestation the locale is embodied in the form of possible spaces for spending time in: bedrooms and sitting rooms, dwellings, housing, workshops, offices, bars, shops, industrial plants etc. The locale is of course a relative category inasmuch as a locale is more locale the fewer the number of locales it directs one to; a Utopian locale is, in consequence, a zero-locale which doesn't connect with other locales at all but reposes completely in itself. This is naturally infeasible (cf. the definition of locale as correlative to traffic) but is no less effective as a phantasm; all sorts of paradisaical visions as well as the utopian cultivation of the local have the zero-locale as their extreme. The dwelling is often the empirical locale that most closely approaches it and is in that sense the prototype of locale – complete with concomitant *Heimat*-sentimentality – it is the definitive blind alley, detached from circulation. Detached from practical circulation, currently disposable time multiplies and the blind alley receives ornamentation as a result of, and as a sign of, activity within the locale. The ornamentation of the home – whether it's a case of the showcasing of miniature ornaments or whether it's the few selected designer items and the modish magazines' showing of "truly original furniture we came across in a skip" – has the aim of gracing the home in a way that renders it unique, so that it becomes clear that not just anyone passes through here. The signal amounts to: This is not a public thoroughfare, not a *lieu commun*, but a highly specific locale, irreducible to standard categories. That the ornamentation has this communicative purpose naturally implies the existence of a form of standardization which allows it to be recognized as such, at least by an initiated group, constituted by that shared recognition. And hence the melancholy attaching to the personal locale: it can never be fully personal. Its occupants kneel at the altar of the knick-knack and only if you comply with the rite and compliment them on the interior is your status immediately assured under the auspices of cordial hospitality. If we now turn to the office we have another locale but one already far more marked by the communicating traffic that traverses it. This feature may be inferred from the widespread Kafka-esque topos of the office as localized within an unresolved

labyrinth of corridors (mimicking the street system as well as bureaucratic complexity), and characterized by the formalization which is a feature of every system of transport. Here too the elemental aspect of locale is reproduced, naturally in rudimentary form, by the presence of the wedding photograph on the desk preventing the office becoming nothing more than a thoroughfare.

Another “etiolated” category of locale is constituted by the various more or less public spaces: railway station, bars, cafes, shops, cinemas etc. – each with its more or less specific behavioural codes corresponding to a kind of “street-type” standardization of conduct. These behavioural codes are often seen as linked to specific political ideologies, as in the celebrated myth of the democratic pact where English *coffee-houses* figure as the locales where the private individual emerges as negotiant citizen. It is interesting to note that, in contradistinction to the liberal café, various anti-liberal countermovements identify alternative types of locale as ideal: the neo-conservative Christopher Lasch opts for the tavern – which, as against the cafe, is local and not anonymizing: a point between private and public where, although discussion takes place, communitarian values are also transmitted. To realize that this idealization is remote from the empirical reality of many taverns at least, you don’t need to be roughed up very often in those where you’re not a regular. Alternatively, leftist anti-liberalism often leads to the idea of a “community” centre where a particular subsection of the community known as “the community” supposedly pursues their common purposes, with notions of collectivity linking this idea to Laschian communitarian values. Generally speaking, this intermediate category stretches from slight modifications of the locale (the collective) to almost street-like locales (the railway station, the discount supermarket); between these extremes on the continuum exists a zone where the more or less public spaces constitute a peculiar ‘filter’: in principle they offer access to all but many of them indicate via their (more or less) strikingly domestic-looking interiors a *preferred* public.

This leads us over into the street. The street is the stable stratum in the ambulatory process and is – qua street – first of all functional in relation to that process. The prototypical street is of course the city street with its standardized inventory and localization in a network of other streets. But one rediscovers the marks of the street in segments of buildings and other facilities which receive their determination from transport: the hallway, the lobby, the doorstep, the threshold, the stairs. One moves forward along streets, looking straight ahead; as against the locale the street is

performer formalized since it serves as a thoroughfare for many different subjects. It is standardized vis-à-vis traffic (cf. the Highway Code and the segregation of traffic) and its surface hardened to withstand the volume of traffic (paving etc.). One is thus automatically de-individualized by walking down the street, doing what millions of others have done before one, one steps into the mass – a feature that's most evident in the very busy road, the functionally differentiated thoroughfare; the motorway where decorative elements are restricted to an absolute and cheerless minimum and signposting is subordinated to the functional demands of legibility at speed. Shoppers, children and residents naturally take an interest in countering this aspect of the street by seeking to adorn its functionality, establishing or mimicking locales within its confines; but in itself the street is unornamented and to that extent, commonplace. While both the extremes, the locales and the public square, have clinically designated phobias attaching to them – claustrophobia and agoraphobia, respectively – the commonplace to-ing and fro-ing of the street seems not to be so phantasmatically pregnant. It is in the street that the relation between the subjective and the objective becomes most obvious: the street materially compels movement since it directs it and allows only minor deviations at points along its length. That one, qua subject, is anonymized in the street through this compulsion, doing what thousands have done before, occasions a definition of the strolling street subject that draws sheerly on his or her intentionality though without reference to its content, an 'alienation' that has both euphoric and dysphoric qualities. One euphoric aspect is that of being "at one", part of the flow, submerged in the city's salutary anonymity, successfully circulating and fulfilling one's objectives; its dysphoric element is the sense of being driven by an alien will rather than one's own, by the "daily round" which relentlessly dictates a given route through the street network. But the subject is of course free to resist subordination to street directions and to escape intentionality. The anonymization of the street remains however – and the anonymity of the vagrant without permanent locale evinces both sombre aspects (subjects without the fixed properties and obligations of locales between which they are suspended) and lighter ones (here one is free of the constraints of the directionality of purpose and can momentarily disengage oneself from the commitments that propel subjects along predetermined routes in the street system). Often the two coincide as in the twin aspects of the melancholy and freedom of the dandy and the vagabond: in Baudelaire and Hamsun, in Storm P. and Paul Auster. The constraining character of the street momentarily takes over the guidance of the

subject and this in turn gives his or her movement its sense of historicity; here I enter into a graphic flow, existent long before I came and perhaps before my birth, and this contrasts with the relative detachment of the home and the office from the city as collective process. Only in the street does one become a Copenhagener, a Parisian, a Berliner – or whatever it is one becomes. Thus the street is naturally the topos of generality. In the locale one is unique, in the street one is de-individualized. The classic adage “All roads lead to Rome” harbours a deep truth about the street: it leads potentially everywhere; in the sign language of transportation it can mean anything – hence the de-individualization, since there’s no reading off the aims of the circulating others; they figure, then, without the specificity of purpose – en masse. It could be argued here that Sohn-Rethel’s old Marxist-Hegelian idea to the effect that abstract thought starts with the introduction of coinage (‘if you’ve a coin in your pocket you have an abstract thought in your head’) logically post-dates by far the generality of the street network; the street dissolves the specificity of locale: the street is general in that it does not (only) refer to one locale. If you walk down a street you have an abstract thought in your head. Since animals follow tracks – proto-streets – the correlate to this thesis in the philosophy of nature is that animals too master generality, though naturally this says nothing about their thought content otherwise or their competences. The transposition of locale into street is thus almost certainly a precondition of culture – a memorial to the conceptions which would tie culture closely to the *Boden* from which it springs: culture is always already a connected *system* of locales and therefore never wholly tied to one. Culture does not occupy a locale but a *territory* rather, sustained by connections, “streets” between locales, and so always has a general component which “alienates” the locale by relating it to others. The street is cyberspace’s prime incarnation, as the recurring metaphors used to describe it (“the information superhighway” etc.) reveal.

The public square, by contrast, introduces plurality into circulation, in contrast with the street’s one-dimensional functionality. In the public square one hesitates in the face of options; the square is the place where it becomes palpable that others have been here before me: sufficiently many at least to realize these alternative routes. Its archetype is the bifurcation point of the chreode, the forking path of the fairy tale. I cannot take all roads at once, no single subject can. The public square is unsettling because one is reminded involuntarily not only that the city is a historical construct but also of this construct’s ‘contingency’: the city is the result of absent and manifold intentions which I shall never be able fully to fathom but which are all the

same undeniably present. Here many things have died before me. A subject corresponding to the square is disquieting because impossible: it would be the integral sum of intentions from different times and with different aims. Palle Nielsen's graphics show better than anything the extent to which the public square is the bearer of an ineradicable unease. One remains as anonymized as in the street but can no longer automatically surf along the existent flow because it's here it divides; one now becomes a subject in another sense, a choosing subject. In contrast to the accumulated ornamentation of the home the public square makes plain that that one cannot just adopt what has been passed down but has to make a choice. Just like the many here before me. This is why the public square is the locale of the market and the germ of capitalism; here one can meet with an indefinite number of others with goods to sell – here one can dupe and be duped; here too one must muster a different alertness than elsewhere. The square is also the germ of the public sphere, conceived of as the intersubjective forum for discussion, consensus, dissensus, decision: here political meetings, angry demonstrations and confrontations take place. The square has publicity's ambivalence: both its liberating and threatening aspects. There are more eyes here than anywhere else but their gaze has the aloofness of anonymity; the square is the place for an uncongenial generalized stare which is merciless and which one looks uneasily about one to avoid, only to contribute to it. Anonymity doesn't evaporate as in the one-dimensional flow of the street but it dispenses the city's distinctive, unequalled freedom. However, it's also the freedom to be disengaged from the fates of others and this mirrors a disquiet: they are equally disengaged from mine. The traffic is more intense here than anywhere else and yet the topology of its processing means traffic-free islands emerge, bereft both of the determinacy of the locale and the directionality of the street. Repulsive things pass by unnoticed by the traffic around them. In the square one is not only reminded of the others, present or absent, but also of oneself as a subject and the contestability of one's project – in virtue of the other paths one might, almost equally well, have taken. To counter the uneasiness of the square monuments and statues will inevitably be raised to invest it with meaning by making explicit one of the previous intentions abroad in the city: an equestrian statue, the portrayal of a scientist, an artist, a pioneer of culture, seeking to appropriate the square for that cause. Or, more imposingly, a building, a city hall, a church which seeks to establish a secular or religious authority to domesticate the square's indeterminacy. Here a now deceased person has preceded me but his life



lives on in the work itself. His corporeality seeks to convert the square into 'locale' and to confer upon it the corporeal nature of locale. But as Robert Musil in a splendid essay has observed, statues are cement blocks attached to the legs of the portrayed as they sink into the seas of oblivion. Statues are not powerful enough to surmount the indeterminacy of the square.

The square bears witness too to the city's character of cultural domination. Here trees force their way up through the asphalt, the wind sweeps across the square as a denial of the city's total domination by culture and salient squares often gesture back to the city's founding under specific local topographical conditions. Traffic bottlenecks, sacred sites, markets, courtyards, courts – the public nature of the square leads to self-reflection at the levels of traffic, religious belief, economics, politics, justice which, like that of self-consciousness, must in principle inevitably always leave one aspect of itself unexplored. The city finds itself and becomes self-identical by erecting monuments in the squares – though whether these monuments really constitute any truth about the city is another question. Not that these monuments are very often perceived in terms of their representational content; they are received rather as a symbolic guarantee that this is in fact the city in question, regardless of precisely which king majestically straddles his bronze horse. The square is bound up with the city's identity to such a degree that one of the first things one does in coming to a city is to inspect its principal squares. In one sense one can hardly say one's *been* there if one hasn't gone through this basic anthropological exercise. Have you been to London if you haven't been to Piccadilly and Trafalgar Square? To Paris without setting foot in the Place de la Concorde? To Prague while leaving out Kleiner and Grosser Ring? You could say that you'd been to Copenhagen without having seen Brønshøj which qualifies extensionally as a fully-fledged part of the Municipality, yes even perhaps without having seen the Little Mermaid, but not, surely, without having been to the City Hall Square, Gammel Torv or Kongens Nytorv? The square endows the city with its identity, but only through its generality, by implicitly gesturing towards all the streets that lead out of it and their respective back streets which there's no need to visit. In consequence the square is the locale for signposting: here one can procure information for the further determination of one's course, if it's reliable, for the signs appear separated from their underlying intention.

In the square you're *seen* – by a diffuse and inscrutable gaze, made up of the host of absent intentions and possible present ones, that can squint from every sidestreet.

In the square we can never – as behavioural psychologists assure us we prefer to – sit with our backs to all access roads. That’s why it is difficult to establish locales in a square; the intimacy of locale is immediately cancelled out by the publicity of the square. The chairs and tables of the café have to be arranged very closely together if part of the square is to be annexed so that it becomes a locale. It is under the square’s gaze that you have to make your momentous choice of route, along the next street, or to the next square.

Now the three figures are described as stages in an ideal-typical process. This means of course that in any particular town all sorts of transitional forms will be found which will be further influenced by the concrete configurations of locales, streets and squares. I shall not pursue this tangential line and will instead restrict myself to summing up a bouquet of the subtypes that locale, street and square give rise to:

<i>Locale</i>	<i>Street</i>	<i>Square</i>	<i>Locale</i>	<i>Street</i>	<i>Square</i>
Home	City street				Crossroads
Drawing room/bedroom (doorways)		Stairs/hallway			Entrance (several doorways)
		Tunnel/Bridge			
Zero-locale (the Utopian end)	Plain transport (the means)			Range of options (choice)	
Blind alley	“locale-type” streets: alley, lane, suburban street v. “square- type” streets: spaghetti junctions)			The domesticated square 1) for public ceremonies 2) for trade (market square)	
	<i>Terrain vague</i> - the “untamed” zone, outside the traffic network				

As we've seen, the locale and the square have an affinity which bypasses their intermediate form, the street: the *terrain vague*, the open space wholly external to the system (the common, the building site, the park, the shopping centre are all various manifestations of that category) has affinities with the alley's complete disconnectedness from the system, where neither locale nor circulation guarantees civilization and where refuse blows in the wind and tramps and others can set up their temporary locales.

On a more general level I will assume that these three phenomenological archetypes capture a basic phantasmic schematism – or set of constants of the imagination. Just think of cognitive semantics which operates with source-means-goal structure as one of the basic so-called “kinaesthetic pictorial schemas”: pathway metaphors form one of the fundamental motifs in our thinking, also within conceptual domains remote from that of the city. The human imagination is permeated with pathway metaphors; which is why the three urban stereotypes I have sketched have a validity in their sphere which extends far beyond the particulars of urban plans. It might be anticipated, then, that these phenomenological constants of the imagination could be replicated in the configuration of other areas such as natural sites which we also organize on the basis of this phenomenology. Given Danish topography, such sites will tend to be relatively inaccessible positions not communicant with others: if we were to consider watercourses the marsh would be the archetypal locale. The streets would be river valleys and squares the lakes or the point at which those valleys converge – possibly with several other traffic arteries. A “political” tropology has already been hinted at: the locale as the ossified, reactionary, conservative, regressive as opposed to the – liberal or totalitarian – modernity of the square and its ongoing communication with a host of other locales.

As I have described them here the three categories are plain phenomenological entities and no value assignments are made. Any attempt to apply them critically in town planning, however, would require further assumptions being added, including one relating to proportionality. Could it be the case that the itinerant soul needs a certain density of squares? Perhaps it's here that we should seek some of the explanation for the fascination with medieval town centres and the tenement housing from the turn of the century: they offer the components of the phantasmic schemata in almost undiluted form. I have roamed cities over a number of years and have worn down the streets of Copenhagen as far as the old residential quarters

clustered round the city centre are concerned; but I hesitate to venture as far as the present-day suburbs. And why? A suburb with its functionalistic segregation of traffic means that a whole set of roads is sealed off from the road-user: the urban pedestrian mustn't proceed down the motorway and the motorist mustn't drive on the public footpaths, and he or she frequently ends up in an antennal pattern of cul-de-sacs in a quiet residential district whose drabness derives from the absence of squares or traffic passing through. Here, quite emphatically, nothing can happen, and if one does venture in one is met by resentful stares from the other side of the privet. The anonymity of the street is here so attenuated as almost to constitute a locale where one is unwelcome. Here what in the medieval town was a "virtual space of routes" is corralled and controlled; one is no longer a generalized subject with unspecified business but has been previously designated and demoted by the traffic system. Most of the roads one can walk along there aren't real roads; only the residents have any business being there, and you feel like an alien intruder if you venture down a residential road that aspires to be a locale. The desperate and compensatory attempts of the shopping centres to look like towns complete the indignity: here one is emphatically a *consumer*, for there are no homes, offices, workshops or brothels in this synthetic "town". In consequence the centres turn into grimly eviscerated locations as soon as the shops shut and the consumer definition of the passer-by lapses. The centre ceases to be a pretend town and becomes a zone which shares the square's disquieting lack of directionality but not its traffic. The generalized gaze is absent here and the specific stares that are present are the more disturbing inasmuch as the suburbs also suffer from "space shortage". Options are limited and controlled – here we lose the disquiet of the square but also its prophetic sense of drama. This may explain the weekend invasion of hordes of teenagers out for trouble – to confront their stark destinies in the squares of the inner city or in an outburst of vandalism in the shopping precinct. In the suburbs, no town, just a row of houses which one looks in on only to observe with Per Højholt: "The owner's in the garden, Sir, inspecting his sweet peas" – no one at home. And here we touch upon another oft-featured analogy – the house as body: the locale bears an affinity to the body, and the houses stand, inhabited by impalpable intentions – we call them ghosts – looking down on us.

If any general conclusion should be drawn from this scenario, I'd suggest that functionalist architecture and town planning have neglected important aspects of the town as a virtual space of roads – that is, the square's combination of challenge and

the overcoming of the challenge. In the square you are confronted with a situation of choice and in deciding you appropriate the town through your own project. But if the number of potential junctures of choice is minimized the subject's contact with the city lapses – you simply glide through it without making the bifurcations of the street network your own as moments of electivity. Here functionalism often represents – quite apart from the appearance of its buildings – a reductive and irritating urban aesthetic because it deprives the subject of what the square holds out for considered choice. The tendency of classic functionalism towards monumentalism with few points of ingress has this totalitarian effect; like the segregated traffic minimizing the quantity of options. The urban planner has done your thinking for you, with the diminishing effect of de-subjectivization in consequence. As a city dweller I have difficulty in identifying with the positive aspect of this structure, though no doubt there is one – a kind of relish in the absence of challenges in the suburbs, which form instead a delta of street-locale compromises, a street system everywhere seeking the credentials of locale – finding obvious expression even in the names of suburban roads as parodied by Bent Vinn Nielsen in *Gadehavegårdsvejgården* (“Street Garden Courtyard Road Gardens”). Max Weber once defined the city as a society whose members satisfy their needs in the market and who in consequence experience “incomplete integration”: their actions are not determined down to the last detail. Accordingly, “incomplete integration” is another word for freedom: the atmosphere of the city makes you free. But this anonymity and freedom is threatened by the trend in functional urban planning towards integration, towards the predictability of all activities and their functional segregation in zones (industry, domestic housing, services, entertainment). That is probably why medieval town centres and the nineteenth century's tenement blocks retain their aesthetic fascination: they configure the city as a virtual space of roads.

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## **Litteratur**

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