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**Bjørn Rasmussen** – Denmark

*Huden er det elastiske hylster  
der omgiver hele legemet (2011)*

The Skin Is the Elastic Covering that Encases the Entire Body

Publishing House **Gyldendal**

### Biography

Bjørn Rasmussen was born in 1983 and graduated from the Danish Playwright School in 2007 and from the Danish Writers' School in 2011. He received the Montana Literary Award in 2011 for *Huden er det elastiske hylster der omgiver hele legemet*, was awarded a three year work grant from the Danish government in 2013 and received the Kultur Bornholms Literary Award in 2014.

### Synopsis

*Huden er det elastiske hylster...* is a coming-of-age novel about a young man looking back on life growing up in rural Denmark; not least his far-reaching encounter with a much older riding instructor, with whom he develops an attachment that becomes a romantic and erotic obsession. Any kind of conventional plot summary would do the book an injustice: bleak teenage years involving drugs and self-harm, identity crises, a dysfunctional family, a first big love, and fierce sexual longings, as well as trying to deal with all of these as extremely as possible. But it's the novel's exceptional language and voice that led the Danish EUPL jury, as well as Danish critics and readers of all ages, to be utterly captured by this debut. The idiosyncratic yet highly assured prose and poetry is wild, untrammelled and defies all taboos. And despite its reckless confrontation with despair, it manages to move, fascinate and shock the reader with its glittering, undeniable beauty. The author brings words and sentences from favourite writers to his tale, yet it remains entirely his own. A combination of prose, poetry, social realism and autobiography that's unprecedented in Danish literature. We await future works from him with bated breath.

*Huden er det elastiske hylster  
der omgiver hele legemet*

**Bjørn Rasmussen**

## ELSKEREN

Jeg var allerede ældre, da en mand en dag kom hen imod mig i hallen til et offentligt sted. Jeg så dit skuespil, sagde han, det rørte mig usigeligt. Jeg genkendte ham ikke, jeg registrerede blot hans bevægelser, denne skrydende gangart, der er bestemt af en opvækst i provinsen, han kunne være hvem som helst. Ryger du stadig, sagde han, her er kvælende varmt, her er så mange mennesker, lad os gå afsides, må man byde en cigaret.

Meget tidligt i mit liv var det for sent. Da jeg fyldte sytten var det for sent. Da jeg var tolv fyldte jeg en sok med sæd, alt, hvad jeg drømte om, var at se op i en mands røvhul og trække et særligt vejr, jeg tænkte kærligheden, en fugls flaksen. Da jeg var femten-et-halvt kom ridelæreren.

Jeg tænker ofte på dette billede, som jeg stadig ser, og som jeg aldrig har talt om. Ridebuksernes læder op ad inderlårerne, syningen i skridtet, rundt om sædet, hud og hud. Den skarpe stank af hestepis, ammoniakken gør halmen rød og tung og sadelsæben, ridelærerens grove hænder. Ja.

Dette ved jeg, jeg striglede hoppen, jeg spiste i et koldt køkken med brødrene, moderen, hendes kæbe: knak knak. Det er det eneste der binder mig til moderen: den kølige tristesse og knak knak, jeg kan ikke komme i tanker om andet, måske det fede fordi. Dette er moderens fede fordi:

Hun vågnede en morgen, og hendes elskede lå ikke længere ved hendes side. Er han ved havet, tænkte hun, er han gået til grønthandleren efter figner og artiskok, er han gået i stalden. Om natten ledte moderen langs grøftekanterne i det mørke land. Hun forestillede sig den elskede blødende, skambidt af ulve, og som en ulv hylede hun selv mod himlen, hun sang og skreg i den frostklare nat. Om dagen indhyllede hun sig i mørkeviolet og bar store blikspande cement ud til de natbesøgte grøfter, som hun fyldte op for at markere, krydse af; her var han ikke.

Lad mig fortælle, at jeg er femten-et-halvt.

Jeg sidder i bus nr. 491 mod Fjaltring.

Jeg har ikke skiftet tøj, jeg skal komme sådan, fastholdt i hestedunst, det står i kontrakten, sådan lyder instruksjonen, tag tøjet af, du stinker af lort. Solen gennem busruden, de flade marker, havet, det er første gang, jeg besøgte ham.

Jeg bor på en statslig kostskole. Jeg spiser, sover, studerer, jeg er sytten år, dette ved jeg. Jeg ved, at moderen har forbindelser, ellers sad jeg ikke her, der findes procedurer i provinsen, der findes præcedens for tilberedning af medisteren. Jeg ved, at jeg blev sendt på en færge, brødrene vinkede fra kajen, moderen græd, først farvel til den elskede, så weimaraneren, nu den lille. Jeg græd ikke. Jeg har ikke grædt, siden jeg faldt

ned fra en gyngende i folkeskolen, asfalten skar et stykke af mit knæ, men jeg fokuserede kun på den lille hudafskrabning på håndfladen, det var den lille dråbe blod på tommelfingerpuden, der gjorde, at jeg skreg.

Brødrene svælgede i knæet, moderen bragte jod.

Familien er konkret, familien er utilsigtet blind, dette ved vi. Familien er til for at minde den lille om, at der findes en rod, og roden gør ondt og roden gør godt, og roden skal værnes om, det er en pligt, og rodens lokalitet skal værnes om, flaget hejses. I dag drømmer jeg om flagafbrændinger i gaderne, jeg savner en større respekt for tekstiler end at dekorere dem med symboler og lort, jeg opponerer mod dekorationen af de nyfødte; her er dit køn, dit navn, dit flag og din familie, må du forsøge at slippe af med det, må du kvæles i dit opkast, må du blive sendt væk.

Nej, han græd ikke på dækket, den lille, han har aldrig grædt over den familie, han har ikke kastet op siden ridelærerens gin og gin, siden han tog ridelæreren til roden i gin og gin, den lille har ikke kastet sig op, kastet sig ind til en anden siden gin og gin, han har ikke trukket det særlige vejr, han kalder kærligheden, siden gin og gin, nu trækker han vejret i en automat i indre by, nu trækker han med fremskudte hofter på parkeringspladser i provinsen, nu smiler han og sejler og væk.

Man har ofte sagt mig, at det var den alt for stærke sol gennem barndommen. Mine udlandsrejser hver sommer med brødrene, vi vendte først hjem til september, skolen var for længst i gang. Kemilæreren lægger en tung hånd på min skulder og presser sin vom mod min ryg, min pik banker i de små shorts, jeg må blive siddende flere minutter, efter at det ringer ud. Jeg sveder sådan om pungen, sandalerne er fugtige, foden

smutter. Jeg prøver at gå ned ad gangen med bunker af papir i klamme hænder, at bære kødgryde, kartofler, råkost og dressing fra glasmontrerne i kantinen og hen til et bord, jeg prøver at finde et frit bord, prøver at sætte mig over for et menneske, prøver at se et menneske i øjnene, prøver at finde et menneske, jeg ikke har lyst til enten at kneppe eller slå ihjel. Man har ofte sagt, at det var øjnene, det var galt med, at jeg havde set for længe op på solen, at det var svært at nå ind til mig på den måde, hvad tænkte jeg mon på, var der ikke noget mærkeligt over min mund. Brødrene blottede tænder alle vegne, de flænsede koteletterne, bed i deres stilehæfter, de lo.

Jeg vender tilbage til moderen. En aften gik hun ind i den elskedes kammer og fandt hans trombone. Hun skilte den ad, samlede kondensvandet og spyttet i et lille bæger. Hun rykkede lange totter hår ud af sin hovedbund, vædede dem i bægeret og spandt elleve, slanke hunde heraf; sølvgrå, elegante. Disse hunde fulgte hende overalt, hvor hun kom. Man opdagede følget på lang afstand. Hende i midten med koret af hunde omkring sig, en oval og brusende fremkomst, hundenes rå fodpuder mod asfalten, de smidige led, kløerne. Den sølvgrå pels glimtede i solen, hundenes savl steg til vejrs som sæbebobler.

Mit livs historie eksisterer ikke. Dette ved jeg nu. Tidligere bildte jeg mig ind, at den lå et sted og vibrerede, min historie, at jeg kunne nærme mig den gennem skriften. Jeg tog fejl. Stol aldrig på et livs historie. Stol aldrig på en mand, der ikke kan lide at slikke pik på en mand, der sætter sig på en stol aldrig på en mand, der ikke kan lide at slikke røv på en kvinde, der sætter sig på en stol aldrig på en kvinde, der ikke kan lide at slikke kusse på en kvinde, der sætter sig på en stol aldrig på

en kvinde, der ikke kan lide at slikke røv på en mand, der sætter sig på en stol aldrig på en pik, der sætter sig på en stol aldrig på en kusse, der sætter sig på en stol på en røv.

Jeg siger det, som det lyder.

Skriv med røvhullet, det er et råd til en ven.

Jeg begyndte at skrive, den dag dyrlægen kom for at inseminere hoppen. Hun tog en lang plastichandske på og gravede store håndfulde lort ud. Så sprøjtede hun hingstens sæd ind i hoppen gennem et tyndt, gennemsigtigt rør. Jeg blev forvirret over de handlinger, over sammenblandingen af lort og sæd og æg, sammenfaldet af de to huller, jeg kunne ikke regne det ud, jeg var grædefærdig. Jeg ville tegne det for at forstå, men jeg kunne ikke, jeg rystede på hænderne.

Nu ser jeg, at jeg, da jeg var meget ung, tretten år, fjorten år, havde et ansigt, som indvarslede det, jeg senere i mit liv har fået af alkohol. Næsens fedt, huden rundt om kindbenene, øjnenes glans. Jeg begærede alt, der kunne gennemstrømme mig, mit ansigt var en åben invitation til vinens gæring i porerne. Man bemærkede dette perforerede ansigt, endnu inden jeg havde smagt en øl, man hæftede sig ved noget anderledes, man kaldte det gammelklogt, ridelæreren hviskede *skyldig* efter en time.

En aften skamferer jeg hans Kiefer-saddel.

Jeg lister en saks op af køkkenskuffen, sniger mig ud på gårdspladsen, ind i laden, tænder intet lys, gennem stalden, ind i sadelrummet, famler mig frem. Jeg hiver efter vejret, hugger til, skærer igennem og sprøjter i ridebukserne, hugger, skærer, sprøjter.

Femten-et-halvt.

Jeg står af bussen.

Der er frost og stærk sol, moderen er ængstelig for, at vandrørene skal fryse til, at hun skal rundt med spande til de tørstende dyr. Jeg er ængstelig for, at han sender mig hjem med den sidste bus, de går kun tre gange på en lørdag. Jeg kan høre havet herfra, jeg ved, at han vinterbader, jeg ved, at hans brystvorter bliver små og hårde, når han vinterbader, at pikken bliver kort og stram og stritter, at forhuden beskytter hovedet. Jeg er tidligt på den, jeg går ind i købmandsforretningen, de har oste og vin, ejerne er lesbiske, dette ved man, de tager sig ikke af, at man stinker af stald. Man bør medbringe noget, man kan ikke komme tomhændet, man må købe en flaske vin til ham, man må købe oste også, man.

Det var i løbet af denne rejse, hvor billedet syntes frigjort, at det kunne have revet sig løs fra helheden. Hvis ikke det var, fordi fordi. Moderens fordi, provinsens fordi, ridelærerens. Jeg siger rejse, fordi bussen, fordi Fjaltring, havet, ham. Jeg føler ikke noget for helheden, jeg kender den ikke, jeg siger indre by og ser intet, jeg siger moderen og brødrene på gården, jeg kan ikke tage det store billede på mig, jeg ved knap, hvad det lille billede forestiller, på den måde er der næppe tale om en frigørelse, snarere en lille pøl af mudder. Sand, grus, lerjord, hvad, skorpe og skred. Da jeg var ti, bad Gud mig om at få alle mine øjeblikke til at holde hinanden i hænderne. Jeg har aldrig brudt mig om bønner, jeg har aldrig brudt mig om Gud. Instrukser derimod, jo det.

Syttent-et-halvt.

Jeg står af bussen.

Jeg finder trappen fra parkeringsdækket og går op gennem færgen, ud til rælingen. Forstanderinden stiller sig ved siden af mig. Hun har en bleg mund, slanke hænder, hun peger ud i landskabet, hendes tunge fingerringe, jade og guld. I mine dagbogsoptegnelser omtaler jeg hende som Værtinden, Damen, Fruen. Jeg skriver sjældent om landskabet. Det flyder ud som blækklatter, jeg har ingen perspektiv i min skrift.

Jeg står altid af bussen, når vi kommer op på færgen, også om natten, for jeg er altid bange, jeg er bange for, at rebene giver efter, at vi skal blive ført til havs. Jeg står ved rælingen og kigger ud i mørket. Jeg er interesseret i druknedøden. Jeg er interesseret i alle tænkelige måder at dø på, men der er noget ved druknedøden, jeg finder særlig sirligt; langsomheden, vandets tavse indtrængen. Ja.

Jeg er iført en kjole af natursilke. Den er slidt, næsten gennemsigtig, det er moderens. Jeg har huset for mig selv, moderen er på jagt med weimaraneren, brødrene er med i deres nyerhvervede oilskinsfrakker, tre numre for store, to grinagtige grønne tvillingetelte, tavse af ærefrygt for jægerne, hundenes instinkt, stanken af krudt og dødt vildt. Weimaraneren er champ, den vinder altid alting, moderen kalder den det grå spøgelse, hun er den eneste kvinde blandt jægerne, mænd er nogle svin.

Jeg går fra etage til etage i kjolen og tager huset i øjesyn, det er som at se det for første gang. Jeg lader mine fingerspidser glide over det kolde granit i køkkenet, krukkerne med sylt i bryggerset, det argentinske porcelæn i vitrineskabet i spise-stuen. Jeg bevæger mig ganske langsomt gennem rummene,



mine bare fødder skriver trægulvet frem, skridt for skridt. Så de orientalske gulvtæpper i pejsestuen, så pejstens åbne krater, asken i mine nye, store hænder.

Jeg kravler ind i pejsen, jeg kan akkurat knække ryggen og rejse mig derinde.

Jeg ser op gennem den sorte skakt.

De kommer hjem med den døde weimaraner i et tæppe. Brødrene græder, vimser om moderen, serverer te. Hun drikker den ikke, hun sidder rank og stirrer ud i luften. Så opdager jeg hendes mund. En kold rystelse slår gennem min krop. Munden: latterlig, grusom. Hun ser ikke på mig, mens hun siger det: Jeg slår dem ihjel. Jeg slår de svin ihjel.

Jeg er indsmurt i sod, jeg har stadig kjolen på.

*The Skin Is the Elastic Covering  
that Encases the Entire Body*

**Bjørn Rasmussen**

*Translated from the Danish by Nina Sokol*

**THE LOVER**

I was already older when a man one day approached me in the entrance hall to a public space. I saw your play, he said, it touched me beyond words. I did not recognize him but merely registered his movements, this boastful gait that stems from an upbringing in the provinces, he could have been anybody. Do you still smoke, he said, it is stiflingly hot, there are so many people, let's get out of here, can I offer you a cigarette?

Very early in my life it was too late. When I turned 17 it was too late. When I was 12 I filled a sock with semen, the only thing I ever dreamed of was looking up into a man's asshole and breathing in a certain kind of air, love, I thought, the flapping wings of a bird. When I was 15 and a half years old the riding instructor came.

I often think of this picture that I still see and that I have never spoken of. The leather of the riding breeches against the inner thighs, the seam in the crotch, circling the buttocks, skin and skin. The sharp stench of horse piss, the ammonia makes the hay turn red and heavy, the saddle soap, the riding instructor's coarse hands. Yes.

This I know, I groomed the mare, I ate in a cold kitchen with the brothers, the mother, her jaw: crunch crunch! That is the only thing that binds me to the mother: the cool melancholy and crunch crunch, I can't think of anything else, except perhaps for the big because. This is the mother's big because:

She woke up one morning to find that the lover no longer lay by her side. Is he by the sea, she thought, has he gone to the greengrocer for figs and artichokes, has he gone out to the stable. At night, the mother would search along the edges of ditches in the dark land. She imagined the lover bleeding, mauled by wolves, and like a wolf she herself howled at the sky, she sang and screamed in the clear and frosty night. By day she wrapped herself in dark purple and carried large tin buckets of cement out to the ditches that were visited nightly and which she would fill to mark, to check off; he was not here.

Let me say that I am 15 and a half.

I am sitting in bus number 491 toward Fjaltring.

I have not changed clothes, I must arrive like this, engulfed by horse stench, that's what it says in the contract, those are the instructions, take off your clothes, you smell like shit. The sun light through the bus window, the flat fields, the ocean, it is the first time I am visiting him.

I live at a state boarding school. I eat, sleep, study, I am seventeen years old, that I know. I know that the mother has connections or I wouldn't be sitting here, there are certain procedures in the provinces, there is a precedent for the preparation of a Danish pork sausage. I know that I was sent on a ferry, the brothers waved from the pier, the mother cried, first goodbye to

the lover, then the Weimaraner and now the little one. I did not cry. I have not cried since I fell off a swing in elementary school, the cement cut part of my knee, but I focused only on the little scrape in the palm of my hand, it was the tiny drop of blood on the pad of my thumb that made me scream.

The brothers wallowed in the knee, the mother brought iodine.

The family is finite, the family is inadvertently blind, that we know. The family exists to remind the little one that there is a root and the root hurts and the root feels good and the root must be safeguarded, that is a duty, and the location of the root must be safeguarded, the flag is raised. Today I dream of flag-burning in the streets, I wish a deeper respect was shown for textiles than decorating them with symbols and shit, I oppose decorating newborns: here is your gender, your name, your flag and your family, may you try to escape it, may you choke on your own vomit, may you be sent away.

No, he did not cry at the pier, the little one, he has never cried over that family, he has never thrown up since the riding instructor's gin and gin, since he took the riding instructor up to the root in gin and gin, the little one has not thrown up, flung himself at another since the gin and gin and he has not breathed in the specific air he calls love since the gin and gin, now he breathes air through an ATM in the centre of the city, now he is hustling with thrusting hips in the parking lots of the provinces, now he is smiling and sailing away and gone.

I have often been told that it was due to the much too strong sunlight of my childhood. My travels abroad every summer with my brothers, we wouldn't return home until September,

school had long since started. The chemistry teacher places his heavy hand on my shoulder and pushes his belly against my back, my prick is throbbing in my small shorts, I have to remain seated for several minutes after the bell has rung. My scrotum is really sweating, my sandals are moist, my foot slips. I try to walk down the hall with a stack of papers in my clammy hands, carrying a cooking pot, potatoes, raw vegetables, and dressing from the display case in the cafeteria over to a table, I try to find a free table, try to sit across from a person, try to look a person in the eyes, try to find a person that I don't want to either screw or kill. It had often been said that the eyes were the real problem, that I had looked at the sun for too long, that it was hard to reach me in a way, it was hard to tell what I was thinking about and wasn't there something strange about my mouth? The brothers flashed their teeth everywhere, they tore the cutlets to pieces, bit into their notebooks, they laughed.

But getting back to the mother. One night she went through the lover's room and found a trombone. She disassembled it and gathered all the condensed water and spit into a small cup. She pulled out large tufts of her hair, moistened them in the cup from which she spun 11 slim dogs that were silver gray and elegant. These dogs followed her everywhere she went. The entourage was noticeable from a long distance. She was in the centre with the chorus of dogs surrounding her, an oval and turbulent apparition, the dogs' raw paw pads against the asphalt, the supple joints, the claws. The silver grey fur shimmered in the sunlight, the dogs' saliva rose into the air like soap bubbles.

My life story does not exist. I know that now. Earlier, I had convinced myself that it was lying somewhere and vibrating, my story, that I could get nearer to it through writing. I was wrong. Never trust a life story. Never trust a man that does not like to lick another man's cock, that sits on a chair never on a man, that does not like to lick a woman's ass, that sits on a chair never on a woman, that does not like to lick the cunt of a woman, that sits on a chair never on a woman, that does not like to lick a man's ass, that sits on a chair never on a cock, that sits on a chair never on a cunt, that sits on a chair on an ass.

I'm telling it like it sounds.

Write with your asshole, that's a piece of advice for a friend.

I started to write the day the veterinarian came to inseminate the mare. She put on a long plastic glove and dug out huge handfuls of shit. Then she injected the stallion's semen through a thin, translucent tube. Those actions confused me, the blend of shit and semen and eggs, the merging of those two holes, I couldn't figure it out, I was on the verge of tears. I wanted to draw it in order to understand but I couldn't, my hands were shaking.

I see now that when I was very young, 13 or 14 years old, I had a face that would foretell what I would later get due to alcohol. The fat of my nose, the skin surrounding my cheek bones, the lustre of my eyes. I desired everything that could flow through me, my face was an open invitation to the fermentation of wine in my pores. This pocked face of mine had been noticed before I had had my first taste of beer and it had been registered that there was something different about it which was called precocious, the riding instructor whispered *guilty* after an hour.

One night I ruin his Kieffer saddle.

I sneak a pair of scissors out of the kitchen drawer, tiptoe out to the yard, into the stable without turning on the light, go through the stable, enter the saddle room, groping my way. I gasp for air, strike down hard, cut through and squirt into the riding breeches, strike, cut, squirt.

Fifteen and a half.

I get off the bus.

It's freezing and the sun is bright, the mother is worried that the water pipes will freeze, that she will have to bring buckets of water to all the thirsty animals. I am worried that he will send me home on the last bus, they only run three times on Saturdays. I can hear the ocean from here, I know that the polar bear swims, I know that his nipples will grow small and hard when the polar bear swims, that his cock will grow short and tight and jut out, that the foreskin protects the head. I am early, I go into the grocery shop, they have cheese and wine, the owners are lesbian, that is a known fact, they don't mind if you stink of shit. One ought to purchase something, one cannot arrive empty-handed, one will have to buy a bottle of wine for him, one will have to buy cheeses also, one will.

It was during the course of this journey, where the picture seemed to be liberated, that it could have broken loose from the whole. If it hadn't had been because, because. The because of the mother, the because of the provinces, of the riding instructor. I say journey because the bus, because Fjaltring, the ocean, him. I feel nothing for the whole, I don't know it, I say the centre of the city and see nothing, I say the mother

and the brothers on the farm, I cannot take the big picture upon me, I hardly know what the little picture is depicting, in that sense there is hardly talk of a liberation but rather a pool of mud. Sand, gravel, clay soil, what-have-you, crusts and landslides. When I was ten, God asked me to make all of my moments hold hands. I have never cared for prayers, I have never cared for God. Instructions on the other hand, well that's something else.

Seventeen and a half.

I get off the bus.

I find the stairs from the car deck and go up through the ferry, out to the railing. The principal comes over and stands beside me. She has a pale mouth, slender hands, she points toward the landscape, her heavy finger rings, jade and gold. In my diary entries I refer to her as the Hostess, the Lady, the Wife. I hardly write about the landscape. It all flows out like ink stains, my writing has no perspective.

I always get off the bus once we're aboard the ferry, even if it is night, because I am always afraid, afraid that the ropes will give way, that we will get lost at sea. I stand by the railing and look out into the darkness. I am interested in death by drowning. I am interested in many forms of death, but there is something about death by drowning that I find particularly methodical; the slowness, the silent penetration of the water. Yes.

I am wearing a dress made of real silk. It is worn, almost transparent, it is the mother's. I have the house to myself, the mother is out hunting with the Weimaraner, the brothers



are with them in their newly acquired oilskin jackets, three sizes too big, two ridiculous green twin tents, silent in their veneration of the hunters, the instincts of the dogs, the stench of gunpowder and of dead game everywhere. The Weimaraner is the champ, it always wins everything, the mother calls it the grey ghost, she is the only woman among the hunters, men are such pigs.

I go from floor to floor in the dress and inspect the house. It is like seeing it for the first time. I let my fingertips glide over the cold granite in the kitchen, the jars with jam standing in the scullery, the Argentinian porcelain in the display cabinet in the dining room. I move very slowly through the rooms, my bare feet writing forth the wooden floor, step by step. Then the oriental rugs in the room with an open fireplace, then the open damper of the fireplace, the ashes in my new big hands.

I crawl into the fireplace, I can just manage to stand up in there if I bend my back.

I look up through the black shaft.

They return home with the dead Weimaraner wrapped in a carpet. The brothers cry, bustling about the mother and serving tea. She doesn't drink it, she sits with her back straight staring into space. That is when I discover her mouth. A chill runs down my spine. Her mouth: ridiculous and cruel. She does not look at me as she says these words: I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill those bastards.

I am smeared in soot. I am still wearing the dress.



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**Bjørn Rasmussen** – Denmark

*Huden er det elastiske hylster  
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