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# Nothing of Substance

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For when all has passed.

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## New York 1986

“When you’re strange...”

### The Doors

Lately I’ve been dreaming about Mexico. I wake wracked by the pointlessness of it, the stupidity, and I’m left with a deep sense of waste. As I get closer to the end the dreams are becoming more frequent, more vivid. In the dreams Joan looks fine and well, the way she looked before tequila and salt made her strange, before the bullet in her brow.

Joan was kind of plain looking, her straight hair bedraggled. She wore faded flower-print dresses and always seemed to be barefoot. She always seemed a little high too, whether it was drink or something else I don’t know. Joan had used Benzedrine inhalers for years, sometimes ten a day, according to Lewis. They were difficult to get in Mexico so she weaned herself off them and onto tequila. She drank one and a half, maybe two, bottles a day—Billy Jnr. and Julie were left to run wild.

That day, at Healy’s apartment, where I’d been staying waiting for Lewis, we were sober—Joan was maybe a little drunk. And Bill? I never could tell with Bill. Joan and Bill came by late in the afternoon and she had brought a drink from down stairs; cheap Mexican gin mixed with Limonada, which is like dark green 7Up, in a high-ball glass. Healy wouldn’t let Joan put tequila on tab.

Joan and Bill were a strange pair. She was highly intelligent; every bit Bill’s equal—if not his superior. They would argue and debate, sometimes long into the night, she would match him wit for wit. They didn’t seem to be in love, not in the accepted sense of the word. I never saw Bill show affection for Joan—apart from him calling her *Joanie*; she was interesting to him, in some way, that’s all. They had had a physical side, a sexual side; Joan once told me that Bill was a skilled lover, the best she’d ever had, and with him being a fruit! Bill made no secret of his liking for boys. I remember him remarking about sex with women, I can hear that tedious drawl: *women are like tortillas*, he’d said, *they keep you alive, nourish you, but what you really want is steak*. Bill had been living on tortillas for a week, on account of being flat broke.

Healy’s apartment was above the Bounty Bar and Grill, a rundown place on the corner of Monterrey and Chihuahua. It was still hot that September in Mexico City. The windows were open but there was no street noise. Everything was so still, just the whir of the ceiling fan. Then there was this whistle, from a knife sharpener as he rode past on his route. It cut right through. I didn’t recognise the tune, but it has somehow stuck with me.

Healy was downstairs working the bar at the time. Bill wanted to use Healy’s place to sell some of his hand guns and didn’t want the buyer to know where he lived. Bill also wanted witnesses, in case the deal went bad. There was something sinister about Bill; something I could never quite get. I always felt he was a bad influence on Lewis, all that talk of guns and dope. Bill had been running around after Lewis for a while; they’d just come back from a trip together, Ecuador or somewhere. I’d known Lewis for many years, from back in Jacksonville, and had never seen him go with a man; he’d never talked that way about men, at least not to me. But Bill had this power, this strange influence, over Lewis. I never understood that.

Joan must have been aware of Lewis and Bill's situation. In fact, she and Lewis had been real good friends too. She was older than him, twenty eight; he was twenty one. Lewis once remarked to me that he found Joan attractive in a *low-key sort of way*. Joan would have known this right from the outset, what with her being telepathic and all. They played these games, Joan and Bill, these mindreading games. Sometimes it was eerie, the way she seemed to know what was going on inside other people's heads.

After I dream about Joan I can never get back to sleep. I fix myself a drink and look out at the city; its electric miasma blinding the stars. I can't remember the last time I saw stars. The city's in constant motion, turning, its wheels grinding, round and round. A sodium haze bleeds through the night, infecting my perception; I can feel corporeal terror oozing through the walls; the machinery of the night will keep on turning with or without me—with or without Joan. When you know it's over all fear dissolves and you're left with a kind of calm, more than that, relief, and you simply accept what's coming, step off the machine, out of the fray.

When Bill and Joan arrived at Healy's she was walking with a cane; she'd had polio as a child and it had recurred. The booze had bloated her features and her hair was thinning, she had sores, and some of her upper teeth were missing. She looked terrible, but it didn't register at the time. There was a kind of awful smell hanging in the air too, greasy and acrid, meaty and sour.

We sat, the four of us, together around a coffee table—Bill next to me, Joan opposite and Lewis in an armchair. Bill was talking about going back to Central America, how he'd live off the land, hunt wild boar. Joan, as she often would, began to mock him, in front of everyone. She laughed and said that if she and Julie and Billy Jnr. had to rely on Bill to hunt for food then they'd starve. There was a silence, a charged silence. Lewis began to say something but Bill spoke over him, and taking a .38 auto from his carry-all bag Bill said to Joan: *Nonsense! Come on Joanie, let's show the boys what a fine shot old Bill is.*

I remember looking at Lewis who was looking at Bill and thinking how crazy it sounded. Joan emptied her glass, turned kind of side on to Bill, and sat up straight. She placed the highball carefully on her head. What she said next—which I thought nothing of at the time—has come to haunt me. The look in her eyes, they seemed to have no depth at all. They looked artificial. And that half smile on her raw face... it still sends me cold. She stared right at me and said: *Hey Eddie, I'd better not look. You know I can't stand the sight of blood.*

I saw Bill raise his arm and take aim. I was within reach of him and I did nothing. I saw Bill lick his lizard lips, narrow his damaged-marble eyes and steady his breath. I did nothing. I saw Bill squeezing the trigger. I still did nothing. I saw Bill shoot Joan in the head. But Bill didn't kill her; Joan Vollmer Burroughs was already dead.

I fix myself another drink and shuffle back to the window. I look down at the street, at the hustlers and the hookers and the cops and the crazies. Could I have stopped Bill? Should I have stopped him?

It was as though Joan knew Bill would miss the glass. Like I said, she had telepathic abilities that I could never explain. It was as if she'd given up: on Bill, on Julie and Billy Jnr., on herself; the way a wounded animal separates from the herd and lays down. Did she read Bill's unconscious mind? I don't believe that Bill purposely killed Joan, I mean, it would've been a pretty elaborate double bluff, to do it in front of witnesses. But maybe, on some deep

level, Bill wanted her out of the way. I don't know. Maybe Lewis had got in between Bill and Joan. Maybe Bill was jealous. After all, he was crazy for Lewis.

After the shot Joan slumped in the chair and the glass fell to the floor. It didn't smash but rolled round and round on the lino. We thought, at first, that Joan was just kidding, but when we saw blood... I'll never forget the sound that Bill made, a kind of low howl, and he went to Joan and held her in his arms repeating her name over and over. Healy came upstairs to see what was going on. He called for the Cruz Roja and they came, and that was that.

The sun's coming up, casting long shadows west. As I stand here looking out New York is born again, bathed in new light from an ancient sun; Selene gives way Helios. I see ghosts everywhere, spectres and angels, phantoms and fiends on the—how did Ginsberg put it?—*negro streets... looking for an angry fix*. I slump back into my armchair. My room is dead still, silent and musty. I let my eyes close and I drift; drift on the sea of salty slumber hoping to catch a glimpse, in the depths, of Joan, barefoot, faded flowers, her long bedraggled hair floating, ebbing and flowing, like strange seaweed.

### **Unintentional Poetry (with apologies to John Burnside and Peter Fraser)**

Is this political art, then? I want to be perverse and say that it is, for the reasons given: it returns us to the wild, to the vivid, to the erotic qualities of everyday life, and so separates us, for a time, from the realm of the mundane, where everything is governed. That the separation is temporary is neither here nor there: what matters is that it is exemplary. For a moment, we have remembered how to look – that is, how to be attentive to the quotidian – and that could make all the difference.

### **The Happiness Machine**

My raw wanting soul  
The flesh of the lamb  
Rubbing and crumbling  
I am falling apart  
Your porcelain symphony  
Your hand on my skin  
Your flesh against mine

## ‘Dam Kids

Straight out of Schiphol, no duty free bag to mark me out as a tourist, Amsterdam Central by train and out into the bright sunlight of the city. By the time I negotiate the wild intersection of bus lanes, tram lines, bikes weaving in and out and scooters with pillion passengers I can’t work out whether I’m at a taxi rank or a newsstand. But a cab pulls up anyway and we’re off into the traffic and I lean back in my seat and enjoy the thrill of the streets of another city speeding by, suggesting possibilities and maybes, and the vicarious naïve thrill of other people’s lives seen for just a blurred instant.

People on bikes negotiate the confusing mass of choices while looking almost serene on old-fashioned sit-up and beg bikes. I assume that everyone here is off to work at a white-walled contemporary gallery or perhaps the suitably distressed semi-industrial interior of a cutting-edge architect’s office. The whole place just seems to somehow blend a bohemian sensibility with a purposeful sense of financial security.

I meet Elliot sitting outside a coffee shop, not the kind with backpackers discussing Thai temple balls and the optimum GSM Rizzla for conical rolling but a flash artsy spot with massive semi-erotic, semi-abstract and probably more than semi-valuable paintings visible through its tall ground floor windows. Good looking waiting staff in casual Prada black police the tables ensuring everything is ‘just so’. Elliot is wearing dark sunglasses and some kind of expensive looking linen ensemble. Ruffled hair, a leather satchel and a half-finished bottled beer in front of him and I can’t help thinking he looks kind of sophisticated. European. Maybe even cool? I have to watch from a distance for a minute or two, marvelling at how he seems to have been infected by his surroundings, how his whole attitude, his whole demeanour have been adjusted upward to accommodate a new improved version of himself.

It takes only seconds for the illusion to slip once I sit down and it becomes clear to me that he hasn’t slept for a day or two and the shades hide wild eyes and even wilder ideas. It’s only then that I clock the fact that the elegant Prada clad café Police are also eying him suspiciously and probably have been for a while, waiting for an inevitable scene of some kind.

“Elliot, what the fuck are you doing? Why are we here? There had better be some kind of good reason you have dragged me to Amsterdam at a day’s notice. I had things to do. I *have* things to do. The flight cost a packet at short notice, why are we here, what is so urgent?”

Elliot takes off the glasses and cleans one lens with the tablecloth. He then holds the lens up to one eye like a monocle and views me carefully. His other eye is scrunched closed and a look of intense concentration warns me he’s about to unleash a monumental amount of bullshit in my direction any second now.

“Seriously Elliot, don’t feed me any more fucking nonsense now. What is this about?”

He thinks better of whatever his first gambit was going to be and starts speaking slowly and he is emphasising arbitrary words as if sharing details of some kind of secret pact to be established between the two of us. The whole thing markedly increases my suspicion rather than reassures me.

“OK, so I am very grateful you came here at short notice. Very grateful. I am also aware that I have probably made it all sound a little urgent, maybe even a little clandestine? And there’s good reason for that.” His overly measured tone and peculiar manner begins to really piss me off, when suddenly he sits back in his chair for a moment, possibly to create a sense of tension, possibly because he’s lost his thread. Either way he then lurches forward and continues, now making disturbing blood-shot eye contact and gripping the sides of his chair as he leans in to reveal the next piece of the story in clipped fast bursts.

“You are about to become a part of rock and roll history. A bit part player in something that will reverberate down the decades. This meeting right now will be mentioned in articles in Q magazine in the future as a critical moment in bringing about the whole thing. Obviously, you are more likely to just be identified in the notes under a photograph sitting next to me, rather than be in the main body copy, but you could be there all the same. Epstein, McClaren, McGhee, the great Svengalis, Lambert, Loog-Oldham, Rhodes, the finders and shapers...err...Fuller...”

“Fuller! You cannot list Simon Fuller alongside all the others.”

“Fuck off I don’t want a copy of the Socialist Worker, I was simply trying to emphasise the magnitude of not only artistic significance you are party to, but also the possibilities to accelerate your current status.”

“But Fuller...?”

“..and let’s face it, your status needs some fucking jacking up right?”

“Elliot, you must have been jacking up, just stop talking shit and tell me why we are here. And order me a beer while you are at it.”

“You’ll have to order your own beer, the beers are about twenty Euros a pop here. I’m broke. I got thrown out of my hotel this morning and they didn’t even give me my passport back”

“Jesus Elliot, what have you been doing? You were supposed to be here for twenty-four hours checking out some band who you claimed weren’t even old enough to gig without chaperones? Have you been taking acid?”

“And there’s the point you see!” He is genuinely excited. Sufficiently so that I can tell that behind the slight mania, behind the disturbed eyes, behind the bullshit, there really must be something exciting going on here.

“Those kids. They are fucking geniuses! They are plugged in to something so fresh, so pure and new, so, so...”, and he just tails off, unable to find a word powerful enough to communicate the idea in his mind.

And now I am actually starting to lean in to hear more. The failure of Elliot’s patter actually seems to make a more powerful point than all of his familiar gibberish. Has he really found a band that matters after all these years? A band that might really be his magic-carpet ride away from the Poundland end of the business and into something a little bigger. Something more rewarding?

“Right, so they were good then this band? Remind me what were they called?”

“Good?”, he splutters, spilling beer on his nice new leather satchel. “They aren’t good. They are fucking amazing! Amazing. They are spectacular. A band that will have a generation of people swearing allegiance to them. Bedrooms will become shrines, their gigs will be legendary.” Elliot pauses and looks out at the traffic for a moment, “they could actually”, he pauses, “make-a-difference”, he says reverently. Not sure himself what he means, but nodding emphatically to ensure I know this is serious.

I spot a map sticking out of the beer spattered satchel. Not so odd for a visitor, but I notice that it is a map of the surface of the moon. I pull it out of his bag while he continues talking about his new find and sure enough, it is a highly detailed map of the lunar terrain.

“Elliot, why the fuck do you have an ordnance survey standard map of the moon in your bag? What possible reason could you have for needing to know the exact location of the Sea of Tranquillity or some other crater while on a trip to Amsterdam”?

“Listen up. We are charting new territories here. That’s the whole point. Throw away the maps, or at least acquire new maps, like this one that I stole from a book shop near the Leidseplein. Or rather the bassist in the band gave it to me last night, he said he’d stolen it in order to help them develop some new material. Things are moving fast. I need to sign these kids somehow. I NEED to secure them before some other bastard gets to them. WE need to get right on to it NOW”. Elliot is pretty much shouting now and the café staff are looking dangerously close to coming over.

“Shhhhhh...Ok Elliot, OK. I get it. I get it. Great band, unsigned great band. We have to act. This is a big chance for you. I get it. But what am I here for? What can I do? You know I’ll do whatever I can – you’ve been waiting for this for a long time. I’m happy to be a part of it if I can be. What do you want me to do”?

“I need some cash”, he says, so quickly that even he realises that this one needed a little more build-up and quickly he’s back-tracking to re-position the whole thing in more appealing terms. “What I mean is that I just need someone I trust to check that this is for real. To check that what I’m hearing is actually as special...as important...as fucking spectacular as I think it is”.

“And to lend you some cash”?

“Well maybe that too, but you have got to hear them. They are genuinely spec-tac-u-lar”, he says again, stretching out the word ridiculously like a child might”.

“Ok. So where are they playing? When do we see them? Tonight? Why did I have to come right away”?

“Now”, he says with a half deranged irritating smirk on his face.

“Now? At three in the afternoon?”

“We see them now”!

And all of a sudden Elliot is gathering up his stuff, dropping things, knocking over his beer, trying to get up and get out of here. A tall nervy waiter springs up next to me with a bill for Elliot’s beer, which turns out to actually be three beers and I settle the sixty Euros plus a decent tip, Elliot insists on a decent tip, Something about a misunderstanding earlier, and we are stumbling out into the street looking for a cab.

This time racing through the streets has a completely different feel. I am genuinely excited about what we might hear. Where we might be going. That we might actually be about to witness something special, something significant. Maybe the band are recording in a studio here, or have a rehearsal space in the city?”

“What are they called again”, I ask Elliot when he finally comes off his mobile, though I’m not clear if he has actually been speaking to anyone or just pretending.

“Scoolband”, like ‘School Band’, like ‘S’cool band’, shit, like a crazy play on words or something in Dutch”.

“OK, shit name, but what’s their sound?”, I ask genuinely intrigued by a band that can have turned a cynical old bastard like Elliot into a crazed fanboy in the space of twenty-four hours.

“There aren’t really words for what these guys are doing”, he starts, almost tearing up. “It’s like an epic stadium kind of thing, yet it’s gentle and subtle and beautiful, almost heart-breaking, that’s the main thing, it is just so massive and sad all at the same time. They will blow you away. I guarantee it. You are like Buzz Aldrin to my Neil Armstrong, this is first steps on new worlds...anyway, we’re here, this is it...”

We have pulled up in a very ordinary looking residential street and I can hear music coming from the two-car garage alongside a plain looking house. Just as we are about to jump out of the cab the garage door swings up and a kid of about fifteen waves over excitedly at Elliot. Behind him a bunch of other kids are grinding out a really bad cover version of “Pictures of You” by The Cure.

“This is one of their most amazing tracks he shouts at me, opening the cab door, “Pictures” or something, come on, come and meet the band”, though suddenly he is looking a little uncertain, scared even.

“Elliot, this song they are playing, it is ‘Pictures of You’ by the fucking Cure these are a bunch of fucking emo school kids in a shitty covers band. What the fuck are you talking about”?

But already, before I can properly lay into him, a trashed, come-down misery is crossing Elliot’s face. He knows better than I do what’s happened here. Who knows what majestic music he encountered last night while whacked out and flying. Tripping out on a badly played cover version, impressed beyond measure by some second hand goth riffs played by a bunch of very average looking and worse sounding teenagers. My mind is racing to the insane promises that Elliot will have made to these kids, the dreams he will have stoked and now I am laughing uncontrollably.

I am brought back to reality by the disturbing thought of what view these kids parents might have if they encounter us here, Elliot clearly still half-wasted and promising their clean-cut fifteen year old sons some kind of rock n’ roll nirvana and a bunch of lines and crazy ideas.

“Drive on my friend”, I shout at the confused looking taxi driver as I punch Elliot and throw his moon map out of the cab window, laughing wildly. The thick folded paper half opening as it spins out behind the moving car. A sad looking emo kid stares out of the open garage door at the departing dream.

### **I fuel the hand of god**

I am a colossus  
Bringing the rain  
Corroding my eyes  
I hold Olympus  
In the wind and rain  
This engine of concern  
Bending to your will

### **A Sudden Realisation That I Have known of and Acknowledged for a Long Time but Have Never Accepted.**

I can  
not write  
poetry.

## Hedley Atkins

5-FU, 6-MP, 6-TG, AA, ABC, ABMT, ADR Adverse Drug Reaction, AE, AFP, AIDS, ALAT, ALCL, ALL, ALT, AMKL, AML, ANC, ANED, ANLL, ARMS, ASR, AUC, B-ALL, BAER, BCC, BID / BD, BM Blood Monitoring, BMJ British Medical Journal, BMR, BMT, BNF, BP, BRM, BSA, BSE, Bx C/O, C/W, C1 - C7 Cervical vertebrae (spine eg. C7 = seventh cervical vertebra), Ca Cancer; carcinoma, Call, CAT, cc, CCF, CCR, CEA, CGH, CGL, cGy, CHF, CLL, cm, CML, CMML, CMV, CNS, CPM, CPR, CR, CRA, CRC, CRF, CRO, CSF, CSF, CT Chemotherapy, CTC Common Toxicity Criteria, CTCL, CTO, CTX, CUP, CVA, CVC, CVP, CXR Chest X-Ray, D/C, D/H, D/W, DCIS, DDAVP, DDx, DFI, DFS, DI, dl, DLBCL, DLCL, DLS Date last seen, DLT, DMC, DNA, DNR, DOA, Dx, EBM, EBV, ECG, EDTA, EEG, Electroencephalogram - brain scan, EFS, EJC, EMC, EMUO, ENT, ESR, ETS, F/H, FAB, FBC, FEV, FFA For Further Appointment, FIGO, FISH, FMTC, FNA, Fine Needle Aspiration - a type of biopsy using a thin needle (or FNAB), FU, FVC, g, G-CSF, GA, GCP, GCT, GCT, GFR, GI, GIST, GM-CSF, GPR, GU, GvHD, Gy, H&E, H/O, Hb Haemoglobin, HCC, HCG, HCL, HCO<sub>3</sub>, HD, HDC, HIV, HL-A, HNSCC, HNPCC, HPV, HR, HRT, HTLV, I-131, ICD, ICDO, ICF, ICU Intensive Care Unit, IL2, IM, IMRT, INSS, ITU, IU, IV Intravenous - into a vein, IVP, JCO, K+, kg, l, L1 - L5, LCH, LCIS, LDH, LMM, LMP, LN, LP, LVEF, LVSF, Lx, m, M/H, MAB – mAb, MDR, MDS, MEN, mEq/l, mets, Metastases (where the tumour has spread to secondary sites), Mg, mg, MI, mIBG, ml, MM, mM, mm, mOsm, MPNST, MPO, MRI Magnetic resonance imaging (scan), MRT, MSSU, MTD, MTX, MUD, Mx, N/V, Na<sup>+</sup>, NAD, NBCCS, NBM Nil by mouth, NED, ng, NHL, NK, NM, NMR, NMSC, NOS, NPC, NRSTS, NSCLC, NSE, NSR, O/E, ONB, OS, Overall Survival, PBSC, PBSCH, PBSCR, PBSCT, PD, PDQ, PET, PFS, pg, pH, PH, PLB, PNET, PNS, PR, prn, PSA, PUD, QALY, qid, QoL Quality of Life, RBC, RCC, RCT, RFS, RIGS, RMS, RNA, RT Radiotherapy, RTPCR, Rx, Treatment, SA, SAE, SC, SCC, SCLC Small cell lung cancer, SD, SDV, SGOT, SGPT, SH, SHO, SIADH, SNP, SOB, SSM, T1 - T12, TAMs, TBI, TCC, TCP, tds / tid, TNF, TNM Staging system - primary tumour, TPN, TRK, U&Es, UA, Ug, ULN, URTI, US, UTI, UVR, VEF, VM-26, VMA, VP-16, WBC, White blood cell count, WCC, WM, XRT Radiotherapy (external) YST.

## Chasing ghosts

Snow hits  
And I'm blind  
The warmth of the breeze  
The call to prayer  
I'm Home

## Oscillation

Now then, and again, perhaps. Not that, I could have, never have, said it was unless I wasn't absolutely sure. Absolutement. Absolve-ment. I-Solve-and-meant. If I provide the answer does that necessarily mean that the answer is what I say it is? What if there shouldn't or couldn't or even wouldn't be an answer? Tell me that. Tell. Be sure. Do not waiver. Bend like the reed but do not wave in your assuredness that knowledge is an absoluteness that cannot be questioned. The lines between things. When things stop. And others start. Memory and association create a stream of content that is neither conscious nor unaware but a party of disassociated subjectivity, encompassed all in all in an observer.

So, in concern, they all were keeping on. Some further some less some both some neither and others that were none of the above. But they did, except for the others.

'Am I?'

Yes, no, maybe, perhaps, at least once, never, unsure, don't ask, respectively.

I carried it off quite well, better than before certainly to say that I was making a concerted (for sure) effort to show that I did not know. And before that, when it's always, more or less been before that, to a certain extent (asides aside, it's nice to know that some things [only some of them] never change – it's like I'm still there and never left and as much as I feel it was a definite thing, it never really was anything, a finite nothing. No thing, that never was, that will be with me for ever) I was trying to be positive and felt all the while that I was positively unsure. And now when I try to do that specifically, I don't know if I'm being not knowing enough or whether I'm playing my own game of pretending not/knowing to show how much I know – obviously I do not know!

Some things are, some are not. Although, those that are not are still clearly something (are) or else I would not know that they are no thing. Nothing can make me think of something. But then some thing can make me think of anything. So perhaps nothing doesn't need to exist in order for me to think that it doesn't / does not / does exist.

Well, is this the kind of thing that you were expecting? Did it fulfil expectations? Because you'd already made it (in that circumstance) if you did. And I hadn't even done it yet, nor have you yet (at this moment that I write it, not at this moment as you read it – there are at least two times here present) read it.

'How can it be, then?'

I don't know.

## **Laundry**

I have always hated doing laundry.  
Back and forth  
Back and forth.  
The same thing every time:  
Monotonous  
And the waiting,  
Oh the waiting.  
Sitting in a lobby watching the timer,  
magazine in hand.  
I'm pretty sure hell is a waiting room.  
But I've only a dollar seventy-five,  
    This will be my final load.

## **I Use an Eight Ball**

I'm old school  
I'm an accident waiting to happen  
I'm a Rohypnol love god  
I'm the last man standing  
I'm a bare back rider  
I'm a liar a thief 'n' a cheat  
I'm the one that turned the lights out

Next 28<sup>th</sup> July 2014

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