

ANONYMOUS, COMPLAINANT, VS. JENNIFER P. VELARDE-LAOLAO, CLERK, MTCC – BRANCH 6 DAVAO CITY, RESPONDENT.

A.M. No. P-07-2404 (Formerly OCA-I.P.I. No. 05-2097-P). December 13, 2007

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TINGA, J.:

This administrative case originated from an anonymous letter[1] dated December 2003 questioning the status of Jennifer Velarde- Laolao (respondent), who was employed as a regular court employee while enrolled as a regular nursing student.

The undisputed facts, as culled from the records, are as follows:

Respondent was employed as Clerk III at Branch 6, Municipal Trial Court in Cities (MTCC) of Davao City presided by Judge Antonio P. Laolao (Judge Laolao) in August 2000.[2] In June 2002, she enrolled and took up nursing at Brokenshire College in Davao City[3] until March 2004 when she transferred to North Valley College where she finished her course.[4] On 27 July 2002, she got married to the son of Judge Laolao.[5]

In December 2003, an anonymous letter was sent to then Chief Justice Hilario Davide, Jr., stating that respondent was employed at the MTCC and concurrently enrolled as a nursing student in Brokenshire College. The letter is reproduced in full, thus:

December 2003

The Hon. Chief Justice Hilario Davide
Supreme Court of the Phils.
Manila

Dear Sir[:]

We are employees of the Supreme Court based here in Davao. We would like to report an important matter that should reach your good office. We have here an employee of MTCC Branch 6, Davao City by the name of Jennifer Velarde Laolao, holding a clerk position in the office of his father-in-law.

What we are questioning is her status now because she is enjoying the privilege of a regular employee and at the same time a regular nursing student. Her co-employees are questioning her status, because according to her she asked permission from our head office in Manila. What about her absences, [sic] our office is very strict about tardiness and here comes a privileged employee. She is now a third year nursing student, who reports for work once or twice a week and even wears her nursing uniform during office hours. At times[,] she sends somebody to do her job[,] a salesgirl from their drugstore. What is disgusting is the presiding judge of MTCC Branch 6 his [sic] father-in-law is very unreasonable and unfair to his employees, even in court sessions the said judge is very unbecoming. We challenge you sir to look into this matter for we can no longer allow such abuse of power being exercised in our Hall of Justice, for this is a common knowledge to everyone. For more information here are the details of the said employee[:]
JENNIFER VELARDE LAOLAO/ [sic] JENNIFER VELARDE DID NOT CHANGE HER STATUS FROM SINGLE TO MARRIED, CLERK OF MTCC Br. 6, 3[rd] YEAR NURSING STUDENT AT BROKENSHIRE COLLEGE, MADAPO HILLS DAVAO CITY

WITH TELS. NOS. 0822275706/0822214483. MARRIED TO THE SON OF PRESIDING JUDGE OF MTCC BRANCH 6, ANTONIO P. LAOLAO, SR. THANK YOU.[6]

In the 1st Indorsement dated 20 January 2004, the Office of the Chief Justice referred said letter to the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) for appropriate action.

On 29 January 2004, Deputy Court Administrator Christopher Lock (DCA Lock) wrote to Mrs. Ruby M. Uy, dean of nursing of Brokenshire College, requested that he be furnished the details of respondent's enrolment in the school.[7]

The dean confirmed that respondent was enrolled as a third year nursing student, with classes on Mondays from 2:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Tuesdays from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Saturdays from 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.[8]

On 10 March 2004, a spot audit on MTCC-Davao was conducted by Civil Service Commission–Regional Office No. 11, Davao City (CSC-Davao). It found that respondent incurred a total of 190 days tardy and 194 absences from January 2002 to February 2004. For the months of October and December in 2002, January, March, April, June, August, September, October and December in 2003, and January and February in 2004, no leave application was filed.[9]

CSC-Davao observed that the absences incurred by respondent caused a backlog in her work. To cope with the workload, respondent asked her cousin, Cecille Villaflor (Villaflor), to perform her job during her absence. Villaflor was allowed to work twice a week in the afternoons, despite absence of any document authorizing her to have access to official documents.[10]

Furthermore, CSC-Davao found that respondent worked during Saturdays and Sundays to lessen her work backlog. It was noted that the daily time records of respondent were duly certified by the branch clerk of court and not by Judge Laolao. The applications for leave of absence on file with the office of the MTCC Clerk of Court do not show whether they were approved or disapproved. CSC-Davao could not determine whether respondent still had leave credits because the MTCC-Davao did not maintain the leave records of its employees.[11]

In the 1st Indorsement[12] dated 14 May 2004, DCA Lock required Judge Laolao, the clerk of court of MTCC-Davao, Br. 6, and respondent to comment on the CSC-Davao findings.

On 28 May 2004, the Office of Administrative Services furnished the OCA with a certification on the absences and tardiness incurred by respondent.[13]

In response to the 1st Indorsement of OCA, the Clerk of Court of MTCC-Davao, Branch 6, Nicanor M. Elumbaring (Elumbaring), claimed that the audit findings of CSC-Davao that respondent incurred a total of 112 days tardy[14] contradicted the records of the MTCC consisting of the daily time records, photocopies of application for leave of absence and photocopies of the Daily Logbook of Attendance which reflected only 82 counts of tardiness.[15]

In her Comment[16] dated 10 June 2004, respondent claimed that she sought permission from the OCA to pursue further studies as evidenced by a letter dated 3 June 2002 and indorsed by Judge Laolao in his 1st Indorsement dated 5 June 2002.[17] However, she did not receive any response from the OCA. She admitted that she enrolled in a two-year nursing course at Brokenshire College as a regular student. She contended that the audit findings regarding her tardiness and absences were inaccurate and that the CSC-Davao had no basis in considering her to be on absence without leave because she religiously complied with the requirements for the filing of application for leaves of absence. She denied the allegations that she allowed Villaflor to docket criminal cases. Respondent clarified that Villaflor merely assisted her in simple tasks such as photocopying, carrying heavy bundles of records, sorting and arranging disposed cases and typing warrants of arrest. She claimed that she enlisted the

services of Villaflor for the benefit of the court and not for her own convenience.[18]

In his 2nd Indorsement[19] dated 18 June 2004, Judge Laolao complained that the spot audit was sudden and swift; it was conducted immediately after his court session in the morning and in the absence of respondent. Consequently, all documents pertaining to the relevant factual matters were not properly produced by the branch clerk of court.[20] Judge Laolao explained that when respondent informed him that she had availed of the two-year nursing course in Brokenshire College, he advised her to seek the approval of the Supreme Court. He also advised respondent not to take subjects scheduled within her regular working hours after the first semester of school year 2002-2003. According to Judge Laolao, respondent had not been remiss in her duties because she had been rendering overtime work on regular working days; she even worked on Saturdays and Sundays to keep up with her workload.[21] Judge Laolao refuted the audit findings of CSC-Davao, particularly the number of absences and tardiness of respondent which were allegedly not covered by applications for leave.[22]

In its Report[23] dated 21 January 2005, the OCA recommended that the anonymous complaint against the respondent be referred to Executive Judge Paul T. Arcangel of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Davao City for investigation, report and recommendation.[24]

On 6 June 2005, this Court referred the present administrative case to Executive Judge Renato A. Fuentes (Judge Fuentes), who was the designated Executive Judge of RTC Davao that time.[25]

Judge Fuentes conducted three separate hearings[26] in which respondent, Judge Laolao and Elumbaring appeared.

In his Report of Investigation,[27] Judge Fuentes made the following findings: (1) that respondent, who was permanently appointed as Clerk III in Branch 6, MTCC-Davao, enrolled in a nursing course in June 2002 without informing Judge Laolao nor the OCA; (2) that when she so informed the presiding judge, she was instructed to secure a written authority to study from the OCA; (3) that without waiting for authorization from the OCA, she proceeded with her studies; (4) that because of her studies, she spent most of her time in school than in the office; (5) that her cousin, Villaflor, not being an employee of the court, worked as her substitute; (6) that despite knowledge of respondent's enrollment, Judge Laolao and Elumbaring failed to report this matter to the OCA. Judge Fuentes recommended that respondent be dismissed from service after finding her guilty of violating her duties as a court employee and committing acts of deception. He also found Judge Laolao and Elumbaring guilty of gross negligence and recommended that they be suspended and fined, respectively. The pertinent portions of the Report are reproduced as follows:

Accordingly, with all the foregoing, the undersigned, on the basis of the written statements and admission voluntarily submitted, finds Ms. Jennifer P. Velarde-Laolao, Clerk III of MTCC Branch 6, guilty of gross violation of her duties and performance of her official function[s] through [the] fraudulent act of deception contrary to Supreme Court rules and regulations and formulated code of conduct of employees in the [J]udiciary, with recommendation of her outright dismissal in the service to give [sic] example to everybody in the government, particularly in the [J]udiciary, to consider their employment with the Court, with utmost honesty without selfish and ulterior motive of personal enrichment but with efficiency and dedication.

For Judge Antonio P. Laolao, Sr., it appears in his own admission, he is guilty of gross negligence in the supervision of his employees[,] even has the temerity to first declare he had no knowledge about the study of her daughter-in-law in nursing course but by Jennifer P. Velarde-Laolao herself, and the Clerk of Court, Mr. Nicanor M. Elumbaring, certifies [sic], the Presiding Judge knew of said fact, but failed to inform the Supreme Court about it.

Moreover, it is clear as testified by Jennifer P. Velarde-Laolao about somebody taking over her work in Court, without prior authority from the Supreme Court and the City Government of Davao, is a patent and gross

violation of Judge Laolao's duty of diligently supervising his employees in strictly carrying their duties and official functions.

The undersigned recommends, Judge Antonio P. Laolao, Sr. for gross negligence, and in allowing Jennifer P. Velarde-Laolao, his daughter-in-law, to continue her employment as Clerk III, as Criminal Records In-charge, while at the same time taking nursing without prior authority from the Supreme Court, will be suspended for a period of time as the Supreme Court will decide.

In the case of Nicanor M. Elumbaring, aside from his poor management of the court personnel under his direct supervision, it appears during the investigation in this written statement, he deliberately hid material fact, of his personal knowledge. Apparently, he wanted to support the defense of Judge [Laolao] and even wanted to hide material and important matters, to cover up the responsibility and liability of Jennifer P. Velarde-Laolao, but later, due to the firm questioning of the undersigned, he admitted, what he repeatedly tried to hide and cover, revealing what actually appears the truth against Jennifer Velarde-Laolao, including Judge Antonio P. Laolao, Sr. in the charge against them.

The undersigned finds Mr. Nicanor M. Elumbaring, Clerk of Court, MTCC, Br. 6, Davao City, guilty of gross negligence, in the strict compliance of his duty as direct superior of Jennifer P. Velarde-Laolao, by covert act, of trying to cover up his failure to report what happened, with the Supreme Court, through the Office of the Court Administrator, is recommended, to pay a fine, in the amount as the discretion of the Supreme Court, will consider.[28]

Prefatorily, it bears stressing that the conduct and behavior of one connected with an office charged with the dispensation of justice is circumscribed with the heavy burden of responsibility. This Court cannot countenance any act or omission on the part of all those involved in the administration of justice which would violate the norm of public accountability and diminish or even just tend to diminish the faith of the people on the judiciary.[29]

With this principle in mind, we find that respondent has transgressed the established norm of conduct for court employees.

Respondent does not deny that she was enrolled in a regular two-year nursing course starting from June 2002 to March 2004. Her classes usually start at 8:00 a.m. or 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and her afternoon classes start at 4:00 p.m. up to nighttime.[30] In fact, her schedule for the second semester of October to March 2004 required her to be in school on Mondays from 2:00 pm to 7:00 p.m. and Tuesdays from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.[31] Clearly, her studies coincide with the court's regular working hours of 8:00 am to 4:30 p.m. This constrained her to be absent or late on the inclusive dates.

From June 2002 to February 2004, respondent had incurred a total of 194.5 days of absence and 136 counts of tardiness. For the second semester of 2002, respondent should have been considered habitually tardy as she reported late for work 12 times in July, 11 times in September and 10 times in December.[32] This infraction is punishable by reprimand for the first offense.[33]

Civil Service Memorandum Circular No. 23, Series of 1998, applies without distinction to all government employees. It provides:

Any employee shall be considered habitually tardy if he incurs tardiness, regardless of the number of minutes, ten (10) times a month for at least two (2) months in a semester or at least two (2) consecutive months during the year.

In the month of July 2003, respondent incurred 13.5 days of absence and was late 5 times. In fact, she was present and on time for only one day for that month. The following month, she was absent for 12 days and was 4 times late. Worse, she was never on time for even a day. In September 2003, she was absent for 12.5 days and 7 times

late. Likewise, she never came on time. Respondent was absent for 15 days in January and 13.5 days in February 2004. While these absences and tardiness may have been authorized, we are appalled by their frequency. This leads us to the inevitable conclusion that respondent had been remiss in her duties. Absenteeism and tardiness, even if they do not qualify as “habitual” or “frequent” under CSC Memorandum Circular No. 04, s.1991, shall be dealt with severely.

Court officials and employees must strictly observe official time.[34] As punctuality is a virtue, absenteeism and tardiness are impermissible.[35] By reason of the nature and functions of their office, officials and employees must be role models in the faithful observance of the constitutional canon that public office is a public trust. Inherent in this mandate is the observance of prescribed office hours and the efficient use of every moment thereof for public service, if only to recompense the Government and ultimately, the people who shoulder the cost of maintaining the Judiciary.[36]

Respondent claimed that she sought the OCA’s permission to study through a letter[37] purportedly addressed to then Court Administrator Presbitero J. Velasco, Jr. The OCA, however, denied having received a copy of said letter.

While the Court does not deter one from pursuing further studies to enhance his or her professional growth, such studies must not prejudice the rendition of public service. The Court observes that it is not uncommon for employees to do everything in their power to better their lot. However, one's pursuit of personal development and improvement, without regard to the demands of ethics and utmost responsibility in the public service, should never be countenanced by the Court.[38]

Respondent rationalized that she had been rendering overtime work on weekdays, as well as on weekends to compensate for her frequent absences and tardiness. Consequently, she had been able to cope with her workload. This justification was backed by Judge Laolao.

The law requires that all officers and employees of all departments and agencies, except those covered by special laws, to render not less than eight (8) hours of work a day for five (5) days a week or a total of forty (40) hours a week, exclusive of time for lunch. As a general rule, such hours shall be from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on all days, except Saturdays, Sundays and holidays.[39]

Thus, respondent cannot use her overtime work to justify her frequent absences and tardiness. The civil service rules explicitly prohibit the offsetting of tardiness or absence by working for an equivalent number of minutes or hours by which an employee has been tardy or absent, beyond the regular or approved working hours of the employees concerned.[40] The rationale behind this rule is concomitant to the policy on efficient, effective, economical and honest use of government resources to avoid wastage in public funds.[41] The same principle applies to the case at bar wherein respondent sought to justify her frequent absences and tardiness by working overtime on weekdays and weekends. By rendering overtime work on weekdays and weekends, respondent is in effect using government resources to make up for her shortcomings.

Section 5 of Canon 3 of the Code of Conduct for Court Personnel provides:

The full-time position in the Judiciary of every court personnel shall be the personnel’s primary employment. For purposes of this Code, “primary employment” means the position that consumes the entire normal working hours of the court personnel and requires the personnel’s exclusive attention in performing official duties.

It must be stressed that all employees of the judiciary must devote their official time to government service. They must exercise, at all times, a high degree of professionalism and responsibility, as service in the judiciary is not only a duty, it is a mission. Moreover, the image of a court of justice is necessarily mirrored in the conduct of the

men and women who work there, from the judge to the last and lowest of its employees.[42]

Neglect of duty is readily apparent from the circumstances in this case. Simple neglect signifies a disregard of a duty resulting from carelessness or indifference.[43] As a consequence of her enrollment in June 2002, respondent's attendance had tremendously suffered for two years causing her to seek the assistance of her cousin to be able to keep up with the workload. Simple neglect of duty, as a less grave offense, is punishable by suspension of one (1) month and one (1) day to six (6) months for the first offense.[44]

The act of respondent in requesting Villaflor, who is not an employee of the court, to perform her official duties is highly improper. Villaflor did not undergo the appointment process prescribed in the civil service rules consisting of selection, appointment, receipt of commission and taking of the oath of office,[45] hence, she cannot be considered an employee of the court. As Villaflor was not officially connected with the court, respondent should not have asked her to file court records for bundle, photocopy documents, and at one instance, transcribe a warrant of arrest.[46] Records of cases are necessarily confidential, and to preserve their integrity and confidentiality, access thereto ought to be limited only to the judge, the parties or their counsel and the appropriate court personnel in charge of the custody thereof.[47] The Code of Conduct for Court Personnel prohibits court personnel from disclosing to any unauthorized person any confidential information acquired by them while employed in the judiciary, whether such information came from authorized or unauthorized sources.

The acts of respondent thus constitute a violation of the Civil Service Law and the Code of Conduct for Court Personnel, which acts are punishable by suspension of one (1) month and one (1) day to six (6) months.[48]

Pursuant to Section 55 of CSC Memorandum Circular No. 19-99, if the respondent is found guilty of two (2) or more charges, the penalty to be imposed should be that corresponding to the most serious charge and the rest shall be considered as aggravating circumstances. Section 54-c of the same Memorandum Circular provides that the maximum of the penalty shall be imposed where only aggravating and no mitigating circumstances are present. Since in this case, the penalty is the same for the two offenses and the offense of habitual tardiness is only punishable by reprimand, the maximum of the penalty for the graver offense which is suspension for six (6) months may be imposed on respondent.

As for Judge Laolao, he testified that he had no knowledge of the fact that respondent had enrolled in a nursing school until he was informed thereof three months later. He alleged that he advised respondent to seek permission from the Supreme Court, not knowing that the letter solicited no response. His statement is contradictory to the 1[st] Indorsement[49] sent to the OCA which he himself signed, recommending that respondent's request to study be granted. Said indorsement was dated 5 June 2002, thus debunking Judge Laolao's assertion that he learned of respondent's enrollment only three months later, supposedly in September 2002. Moreover, we find it hard to believe that Judge Laolao was not aware that respondent started schooling in June 2002. Respondent's absences and tardiness since that date could not have escaped Judge Laolao's attention for these are authorized leaves, approved by the clerk of court. Judge Laolao sought to mislead the investigating judge when he testified that respondent was enrolled only for two semesters when in fact respondent had already completed two (2) years or four (4) semesters in Brokenshire College.

As the presiding judge, Judge Laolao exercises supervision over the conduct and performance of the court personnel, who are primarily employed to aid in the administration of justice. He has the duty to take or initiate appropriate disciplinary measures against lawyers or court personnel for unprofessional conduct of which he may have become aware.[50]

Clearly, Judge Laolao failed in this regard. Furthermore, being related to respondent by affinity, he should have been more circumspect with respect to the attendance of respondent to avoid any suspicion of bias in the latter's

favor.

The clerk of court is the administrative officer of the court, subject to the control and supervision of the presiding judge.[51] Among his duties is the exercise of control and supervision over all court records, exhibits, documents, properties and supplies.[52]

The responsibility in ensuring the smooth and efficient flow of business in court falls primarily upon the shoulders of the presiding judge and the branch clerk of court.

We both find Judge Laolao and Elumbaring liable for simple neglect of duty. Simple neglect of duty is a less grave offense punishable by suspension of one (1) month and one (1) day to six (6) months. However, it appears that this is their first offense, and consistent with current jurisprudence on the subject, the Court deems it best to merely penalize them with three (3)-month suspension and a stern warning that a repetition of the same or similar act will be dealt with more severely.[53]

Public service requires integrity and discipline. For this reason, public servants must exhibit at all times the highest degree of honesty and dedication to duty. By the very nature of their duties and responsibilities, government employees must faithfully adhere to, hold sacred, and render inviolable the constitutional principle that a public office is a public trust; that all public officers and employees must at all times be accountable to the people, serve them with utmost responsibility, integrity, loyalty and efficiency.

WHEREFORE, respondent Jennifer Velarde-Laolao, Clerk III, MTCC Davao, is hereby SUSPENDED for a period of six (6) months and given a STERN WARNING that a repetition of the same or similar acts will be dealt with more severely. Judge Antonio P. Laolao and Clerk of Court Nicanor Elumbaring are found GUILTY of simple neglect of duty and are each meted the penalty of SUSPENSION from office for a period of THREE (3) MONTHS without pay. They are also STERNLY WARNED that a repetition of similar infractions will be dealt with more severely.

SO ORDERED.

Quisumbing, (Chairperson), Carpio, Carpio-Morales, and Velasco, Jr., JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 7-9.

[2] TSN, 21 July 2005, p. 2.

[3]Id. at 3.

[4] Id. at 5.

[5] Supra note 2.

[6] Rollo, pp. 8-9.

[7]Id. at 23.

[8] Id. at 24-25.

[9] Id. at 27-28.

[10] Id. at 28.

[11] Id. at 29.

[12] Id. at 36.

[13] Id. at 41-43.

[14] As per Court's computation, the actual tardiness incurred by respondent as marked by the spot audit report is 133 days.

[15] Rollo, pp. 73-74.

[16] Id. at 395-399.

[17] Id. at 401-403.

[18] Id. at 395-399.

[19] Id. at 71-72.

[20] Id. at 71.

[21] Id. at 72.

[22] Id. at 37-38.

[23] Id. at 1-6.

[24] Id. at 5.

[25] Id. at 694.

[26] Hearings dated July 20, 25 and 27, 2005.

[27] Rollo, pp. 700-708.

[28] Id. at 707-708.

[29] AWOL of Monsanto, A.M. No. P-06-2183. June 27, 2006; Re. failure of Jose Dante E. Guerrero to register his time in and out, A.M. No. 2005-07-SC. 19 April 2006.

[30] TSN, 21 July 2005, p. 8.

[31] Rollo, p. 25.

[32] Id. at 27-28.

[33] CSC Memorandum Circular No. 19 (1999), Rule VI, Sec. 52(C) (4).

[34] OCA v. Cunanan, A.M. No. P-05-2050, 10 March 2006, 484 SCRA 235, 237.

[35] Re: Violation of Administrative Circular No. 14-2002 by Mr. Geminiano P. Perez, A.M. No. 2005-20-SC, 23 March 2006. 485 SCRA 130.

[36] Re: Habitual Tardiness of Mrs. Natividad M. Calingao, A.M. No. P-05-2080, 5 October 2005; Habitual Tardiness, Rosemarie B. Pe, Statistician II, Regional Trial Court-Office of the Clerk of Court Cebu City, A.M. No. 04-6-298-RTC, 6 October 2004, 440 SCRA 116, 119.

[37] Rollo, p. 402-403.

[38] Re: Dishonesty and/or Falsification Of Official Document Of Mr. Rogelio M. Valdezco, Jr., FMBO, A.M. No. 2005-22-SC, 31 May 2006, 490 SCRA 27, 37.

[39]Re: Anonymous Complaint Against Ms. Rowena Marinduque, Casual Utility Worker II, Assigned At Philja Development Center, Tagaytay City, A.M. No. 2004-35-SC, 479 SCRA 343, 348.

[40] Civil Service Commission Resolution No. 91-1631 (1991), Rule XVII, Sec. 9.

[41] Republic Act No. 6713, Sec. (a) entitled Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees.

[42] Concerned Litigants v. Araya, A.M. No. P-05-1960, 26 January 2007, 513 SCRA 9, 20.

[43] Sps. Blanquisco v. Atty. Austero-Bolilan, 469 Phil. 487, 495.

[44] Civil Service Commission Memorandum Circular No. 19-99, Rule IV, Section 52B.1.

[45] THE 2002 REVISED MANUAL FOR CLERKS OF COURT, Vol. II, pp. 677-685.

[46]TSN, 21 July 2005, p. 11.

[47] Gordon v. Navarro, A.M. No. RTJ-00-1564. 26 July 2001.

[48] CSC Memorandum Circular No. 19-99, Rule IV, Section 52B.4.

[49] Supra note 17.

[50] CODE OF JUDICIAL CONDUCT, Canon 3, Rule 3.10.

[51] MANUALS FOR CLERKS OF COURT, Chapter II, Sec. B(1).

[52] Id. at Chapter VI, Sec. D(1.2).

[53] Saga Design, Inc. v. Cabahug, A.M. No. P-06-2244, 6 December 2006, 510 SCRA 21, 26-27.

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