

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. TEDDY QUINAO, ROLANDO SIDRO AND BALTAZAR ORTIZ, RESPONDENT-APPELLANTS.

G.R. No. 108454. March 13, 1997

Ponente: PANGANIBAN, J.

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PANGANIBAN, J.:

In resolving this appeal, this Court once more stresses these general rules: alibi and denial are weak defenses which cannot prevail over the prosecution witnesses' unhesitating, positive and firm identification of the accused as the persons responsible for the crime; and conspiracy, like any other element of the offense, must be proved as clearly and as convincingly as the crime itself.

Accused-appellants Teddy Quinao, Rolando Sidro and Baltazar Ortiz, together with a certain Romy Pontica who has remained at large since the commission of the offense, were charged with murder by State Prosecutor Bernard S. Razon in an Information[1] dated November 15, 1991, committed as follows:

"That on or about the 14th day of September, 1991 in Valenzuela, Metro Manila, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, conspiring together and mutually helping one another, while armed with bladed weapons and guns, with intent to kill one CECILIO MAGPANTAY Y ATIENZA, did then and there wilfully, unlawfully and feloniously, with evident premeditation and treachery and with abuse of superior strength, attack, assault and shoot the said CECILIO MAGPANTAY Y ATIENZA, on his head, thereby inflicting a mortal wound which directly caused the death of the said victim.

That the crime was attended by the aggravating circumstance of dwelling."

All the accused, except for Romy Pontica, entered a plea of not guilty during their arraignment.[2] They were assisted by counsel de oficio Jesus I. Santos. After trial, the Regional Trial Court of Valenzuela, Branch 171,[3] convicted the three accused of the crime charged in a Decision[4] promulgated on October 5, 1992, the dispositive portion of which reads:

"WHEREFORE, finding the accused Teddy Quinao, Rolando Sidro and Baltazar Ortiz Guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime charged, they are hereby sentenced to suffer each the penalty of RECLUSION PERPETUA.

The accused are hereby ordered to pay, jointly and severally, the sum of P10,000.00 representing the expenses incurred by the wife for her husband's interment and to indemnify the heirs of Cecilio Magpantay the sum of P50,000.00."[5]

Hence, this appeal grounded on the sole issue of sufficiency of the prosecution evidence to prove the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt.

The Facts

Version of the Prosecution as Adopted by the Trial Court

The prosecution presented five witnesses, namely: (1) Teresita Cuevas-Magpantay, wife of the victim and eyewitness to the murder of her husband, Cecilio Magpantay; (2) Rizalito Basa and (3) Reynaldo Ancheta who had seen the accused, two of whom were armed, running from the house of the victim immediately after gunshots were heard; (4) Dr. Juan B. Zalzarriaga, Jr., who had conducted the autopsy on the body of the victim and prepared the post mortem report; and (5) SPO1 Virgilio Villano, who had taken and reduced into writing the statements of the first three witnesses relative to the incident.

Teresita Cuevas-Magpantay testified[6] that at about 6:30 in the evening of September 14, 1991, while she was making paper bags inside their one-bedroom residence located at No. 12. Salud Street, Balubaran, Malinta, Valenzuela, Metro Manila, she heard the sound of a gunshot coming from the direction of their store. Suddenly, two persons, whom she identified in court as Accused Teddy Quinao and Rolando Sidro, barged into their house, calling the name of her husband. Seeing the latter who was then sleeping in the bedroom with its door open, both accused went toward him. Quinao then fired his gun at the face of the victim, hitting his right eye.

The shocked Teresita tried to approach her injured husband but was quickly held back by Quinao and Sidro who both poked their guns at her. At about the same time, two other persons, one of whom was Accused Baltazar Ortiz, likewise came into the house by jumping over piled sacks of rice. With Sidro pointing his gun at Teresita, Quinao exited the house, followed by Sidro, then Ortiz and his companion. Only after the four had left was Teresita able to approach her husband and shout for help. Her husband was brought to the Fatima Hospital where he expired.

Rizalito Basa and Reynaldo Ancheta testified[7] that at about 5:30 in the afternoon of September 14, 1991, after playing basketball, they went to the house of Rolando Delgado, which was only one house away from that of the Magpantays. While seated along the street, they heard the sound of a gunshot coming from the direction of the Magpantay house. This was followed by another; immediately after, four men, among them Accused Rolando Sidro, Teddy Quinao and Baltazar Ortiz, came running out of the Magpantay house. The witnesses scampered away because one of the men pointed his gun at them. They saw the accused run towards Lucas Subdivision. They tried to chase the accused but failed to catch up with them. They subsequently heard shouts for help coming from the Magpantay house. Upon entering said house, they saw Cecilio Magpantay bleeding from a wound on the forehead, between his eyebrows. They carried him into a vehicle which brought him to the Fatima Hospital.

Two other witnesses appeared for the prosecution. Dr. Juan Zalzarriaga, Jr., testified[8] that he had conducted an autopsy upon the body of Cecilio Magpantay in the morning of September 15, 1991. He found a gunshot wound in the right eye and recovered a slug from the left side of the victim's brain. In his Certificate of Post Mortem Examination,[9] he indicated the cause of death as "gunshot wound of the head." SPO1 Virgilio Villano, on the other hand, declared that he had taken the statements, which he identified in court, of prosecution witnesses Teresita Magpantay, Rizalito Bazan[10] and Reynaldo Ancheta, relating their knowledge of the murder incident.

Version of the Defense

Accused Teddy Quinao claimed that on the date of the killing of Cecilio Magpantay, he was with his family in Lapinig, Samar, where he had been staying since the day he left Manila on September 3, 1991, until his arrest on November 27, 1991. He knew his co-accused, Rolando Sidro and Baltazar Ortiz, who were his co-workers at a bakery owned by a certain Joey Reyes, located in Malanday, Valenzuela, Metro Manila. After his arrest in Samar, he was brought by the arresting officers to Manila together with Rolando Sidro, Baltazar Ortiz and two other unidentified persons. He complained that he had been mauled while being investigated by police officers at the Valenzuela Municipal Jail. He denied any knowledge of the shooting incident on September 14, 1991. He

likewise denied having known the victim or prosecution witnesses Magpantay and Basa.[11]

To support the defense of alibi, Trencio Quinao testified that his brother, Accused Teddy Quinao, was at Lapinig, Samar, from September 6, 1991, to November 27, 1991. Trencio stated further that his brother was mauled by soldiers at Lapinig, Samar on September 13, 1991, as a result of which he was confined in Gamay Hospital for two days. Thereafter, he was brought home, but two weeks later, he was taken to the Catarman Hospital. Asked if he had any evidence to show that Teddy Quinao had indeed been hospitalized, the witness showed a "two-way referral slip" issued by the Northern Samar Provincial Hospital which, however, bore the date November 27, 1991. He further testified that he saw the other accused, Rolando Sidro and Baltazar Ortiz, during their town fiesta on May 14, 1991, and that both accused were in their hometown until their arrest on November 26, 1991.[12]

Accused Rolando Sidro testified[13]that he worked as a baker from May 25, 1990, to May 5, 1991, at Joey's Bakery in Malanday, Valenzuela where his co-accused were also employed. He went home to Lapinig, Samar together with Baltazar Ortiz on the latter date to attend the town fiesta. He stayed in their town until November 26, 1991, when he was apprehended by the police and detained at the Lapinig municipal jail.[14] Later that day, Baltazar Ortiz was also incarcerated in the same jail. The following day, both were transferred to the Catarman jail where Sidro allegedly saw Teddy Quinao. The three of them were brought to Valenzuela, Metro Manila on November 28, 1991. He further denied knowing the complaining witness, Teresita Magpantay, prior to his arrest.

Under cross-examination, Sidro stated that since he and Accused Ortiz had gone home to Lapinig, Samar, he never saw the latter again in their hometown. He initially denied having seen Teddy Quinao between May 5, 1991 and November 26, 1991, but later admitted that they saw each other once during the same period although he could not remember the exact date. The witness further alleged that they (Quinao, Ortiz and himself) were prohibited from talking with each other inside the jail.[15]

Accused Baltazar Ortiz testified that from May 5, 1991, to November 26, 1991, he was in his hometown of Lapinig, Samar. He knew his co-accused, having worked with them at the same bakery in Valenzuela, Metro Manila, from May 2 to 5, 1991.[16] He denied having known any of the prosecution witnesses. He was arrested on November 26, 1991, and brought to Valenzuela, Metro Manila by plane.[17]

The Trial Court's Ruling

In finding accused-appellants guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of murder, the trial court gave full credence to the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses who did not only appear convincing with their straightforward answers, "but theirs were the more coherent and believable version," while "the defense of alibi interposed by the accused was weak and enervated." The court a quo further explained:

"Against the positive testimonies were the alibi and mere denials by the accused that they have nothing to do in the killing of Cecilio Magpantay. That they were in their hometown in Putong, Lapinig, Northern Samar. Such bare disavowal cannot overcome the clear and convincing assertions of the eyewitnesses. They were indubitably identified. Prosecution witnesses' testimonies appeared and sounded credible and their credibility is reinforced by the fact that they had no reason to testify falsely against the accused." [18]

The Issue

In this appeal, accused-appellants assign a single error in the trial court's Decision,[19] thus: "The trial court erred in finding the three accused guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of murder."

In support thereof, appellants aver that the prosecution did not establish how eyewitness Teresita Magpantay was able to identify them. There was no police lineup which would have ensured fairness in the process of identification. Accused-appellants also assail the three-week delay in the giving of prosecution witnesses' sworn

statements before the police as indicative that said witnesses might have made a wild guess at the identities of the suspects. They further argue that the testimonies of Basa and Ancheta should not be given weight since they did not see the actual shooting, but merely saw the accused running. Appellants also challenge their common conviction of murder on the theory of conspiracy, which allegedly was not proven beyond reasonable doubt.

The Solicitor General, on the other hand, unqualifiedly supports the decision of the trial judge. He posits that appellants' defenses of alibi and denial cannot prevail over the positive and firm identification by the prosecution witnesses pointing to them (accused-appellants) as the persons responsible for the murder of Cecilio Magpantay.

This Court's Ruling

We affirm the conviction of appellants Quinao and Sidro. Appellant Ortiz is acquitted for failure of the prosecution to prove beyond reasonable doubt his participation in the conspiracy to murder Cecilio Magpantay.

Sole Issue: Sufficiency of the Prosecution Evidence

As a general rule, the factual findings of a trial court deserve a high degree of respect, and will not be disturbed on appeal in the absence of any clear showing that it overlooked, misunderstood or misapplied some facts or circumstances of weight and substance which could alter the conviction of the accused. Having observed the witnesses' deportment and manner of testifying during trial, the trial court judge is always in a better position to determine their credibility.[20]

Indeed, appellants have not given us a cogent reason to reverse the findings and conclusions of the court a quo, particularly insofar as Appellants Quinao and Sidro are concerned. As the Solicitor General points out:

"More particularly telling against the cause of the appellants was the unhesitating, positive and firm identification by the prosecution witnesses of the appellants as the persons responsible for the murder of Cecilio Magpantay. The testimony of Mrs. Teresita Magpantay, who faced the appellants and clearly recognized them at the place of the incident which was well(-)lighted since all the lights were on at that (sic) time the crime was committed, as well as the corroborative identification by Rolando Basa and Reynaldo Ancheta whom the appellants met face to face immediately after the incident, pointing to the appellants as the persons seen at the scene of the crime, satisfy the necessary quantum of evidence needed to support a conclusion of guilt beyond reasonable doubt or that degree of proof which produce conviction in an unprejudiced mind." [21]

Indeed, the flawless and vivid account of Teresita Magpantay on how Appellants Quinao and Sidro barged into their house, and how Quinao shot the sleeping victim point-blank in his face, is credible and sufficient to prove the guilt of said accused beyond moral certainty and to overturn the presumption of innocence in their favor. The relevant portion of her testimony is quoted below:

"Q Now, you stated that while you were making paper bags you heard a shot. From what particular place inside your house did you hear the shot?

A It came from the direction of our store.

Q After hearing that shot in a place near your store, what happened?

A Suddenly I saw two male persons entered (sic) the door of our house.

Q Then what happened after you saw two male persons entered (sic) the door of your house?

A I was about to stand up in order to approach them. But they suddenly approached my husband who was then sleeping.

Q Do you refer to the two persons whom you saw entered (sic) your house through the door?

A Yes, sir.

Q And what happened when they approached your husband?

A I heard them called (sic) the name of my husband and then they suddenly fired at my husband.

Q What was your husband doing when he was suddenly fired at by the accused in this case?

A At that time, he was sleeping.

Q And was he hit by the shot made by the accused?

A Yes, sir.

Q Where was he hit?

A At the right eye, sir.

Q Now, Madam Witness, you stated that while you were making plastic bags or 'supot' the two persons approached your husband. Who among the three (accused) who are present now shot your husband?

A Teddy Quinao, sir. He was the one who actually shot my husband and Rolando Sidro.

Q For emphasis, Madam Witness, it was Teddy Quinao who shot your husband?

A Yes, sir.

Q Now, Madam Witness you stated that you were then making paper bags. How far were you from the place where your husband was sleeping?

A More than two arms' length (sic) away because at that time our door was open so I could see that my husband was sleeping.

Q Are these two places separated by a wall?

A Yes, sir, but the place where my husband was sleeping was visible to me because the door was then open.

Q Now, after a gun was poked at you by the two persons and that the other two persons waited for them, what happened next?

A The two poked a gun at me. While I was being poked with a gun, I did not move. What the two persons did (sic) was to go out of the house. When they went out of the house, the two others followed them.

Q Was your place or your house well(-)lighted at the time the incident took place?

A Yes, sir, all the lights were on."[22]

Considering the proximity of the assailants to the witness and the illumination of her house where the unfortunate incident took place, her assertion as to the identity of the murderers of her husband should be accepted. More so since she had no motive to falsely impute the cold-blooded slaying of her husband to the appellants.

Neither do we find merit in the averment of appellants that their identification by Teresita Magpantay as the assailants is doubtful since a police lineup was not conducted. This argument has no legal basis. Nothing in our legal system requires a police lineup for the proper and fair identification of offenders.[23]

Accused-appellants further interpose the defense of alibi. It is well-settled that alibi is a weak defense, and for it to prosper, the accused must establish the physical impossibility of his presence at the scene of the crime at the time of its commission.[24] The appellants tried, but in vain, to establish that they were hundreds of kilometers away from the scene of the crime at the time the incident took place. Quinao asserted that he had left Metro Manila on September 3, 1991; Sidro and Ortiz, earlier on May 5, 1991; and the three further declared that they came back to Manila only after their arrest on November 26 of the same year. Even though it does take three (3) days to travel between Lapinig, Samar and Metro Manila, as stated by Sidro in his testimony,[25] it was not temporally impossible for the three accused to have gone to Valenzuela three (3) days prior to September 14, 1991, and come back again thereafter.

Moreover, none of the accused presented any witness to prove beyond doubt that they were indeed in Lapinig,

Samar, on the date of the murder. Even Trencio Quinao's testimony that his brother, Accused Teddy Quinao, was confined in a hospital on September 14, 1991, cannot be given credence. The hospital referral slip^[26] offered to prove this point was dated November 27, 1991, and it contained no indication that Accused Quinao received medical attention on another date.

Conspiracy

All the appellants were convicted of murder on the theory of conspiracy.^[27] It is well-settled that conspiracy exists when two or more persons come to an agreement concerning the commission of a crime and decide to commit it. Proof of the agreement need not rest on direct evidence, as the same may be inferred from the conduct of the parties indicating a common understanding among them with respect to the commission of the offense.^[28] It is not necessary to show that two or more persons met together and entered into an explicit agreement setting out the details of an unlawful scheme or the details by which an illegal objective is to be carried out. The rule is that conviction is proper upon proof that the accused acted in concert, each of them doing his part to fulfill the common design to kill the victim.^[29] In such a case, the act of one becomes the act of all and each of the accused will thereby be deemed equally guilty of the crime committed.^[30]

In the case at bench, conspiracy was evident from the coordinated movements of Quinao and Sidro. Both arrived together at the scene of the crime, and simultaneously approached Cecilio Magpantay upon seeing him.^[31] After Quinao had shot Cecilio, both accused prevented the victim's wife from getting near him and rendering assistance, by poking their guns at her.^[32] They also fled together from the scene of the crime.^[33] These acts clearly show their joint purpose and design, and community of interest.

With respect to Accused Ortiz, his participation, as related by prosecution Witness Teresita Magpantay, consisted merely of his presence at the crime scene, via jumping over piles of rice, after the victim had been already shot, and his flight therefrom together with the other accused. We quote relevant portions of the testimony of said witness:

"Q By the way, Madam Witness, how many persons were there inside your house? Did these two persons (Quinao and Sidro) have any companions?

A Yes, sir.

Q How many were they?

A They were four in all who entered our house, sir.

Q You stated that only two persons entered your house through the door. What about the two companions of the two, where did they pass when they entered your house?

A The two (Ortiz and companion) jumped over the 'bigasa(n)' which was inside our store. There was no window in that place.

Q When these two persons approached your husband and shot your husband who after shooting your husband met you and poked a gun at you, what were the two other persons who passed by jumping over your 'bigasan' doing?

A When those persons who shot at my husband met me while I was in the act of approaching my husband, that was the time when the two entered our house by jumping over the piles of rice showed up.

Q And when they showed up, what did they do, if any?

A These two who entered our house by jumping over the 'bigasan' waited for the two others who at that time were poking a gun at me.

Q Now, after a gun was poked at you by the two persons and that the other two persons waited for them, what happened next?

A The two poked a gun at me. While I was being poked with a gun, I did not move. What the two persons did was to go out of the house. When they (Quinao and Sidro) went out of the house, the two others (Ortiz and companion) followed them."[34] (underscoring supplied)

No other overt act was established to prove that he had shared and concurred with the criminal design of Quinao and Sidro. The mere presence of Ortiz, who was not shown to be armed, at the scene of the crime immediately after its commission does not imply conspiracy. Singularity of purpose and unity in the execution of the unlawful objective are essential to establish the existence of conspiracy.[35] Mere knowledge, acquiescence to or agreement to cooperate, is not enough to constitute one as a party to a conspiracy, absent any active participation in the commission of the crime, with a view to the furtherance of the common design and purpose.[36] Conspiracy transcends companionship.[37] The presence and company of Ortiz were not necessary or essential to the perpetration of the murder.

Neither can Ortiz be considered an accomplice. Article 18 of the Revised Penal Code provides that an accomplice is one who, not being a principal, cooperates in the execution of the offense by previous or simultaneous acts. To be convicted as such, it is necessary that he be aware of the criminal intent of the principal and then cooperate knowingly or intentionally by supplying material or moral aid for the efficacious execution of the crime.[38] The prosecution, however, failed to present convincing evidence tending to establish that Appellant Ortiz knew of the other accused's intent to kill Magpantay. Again, his mere presence at the scene of the crime and his flight therefrom with the other accused are not proof beyond reasonable doubt of his participation or conspiracy in the crime.

The quantum of proof required in criminal prosecution to support a conviction has not been reached with regard to Appellant Ortiz. The oft-repeated truism that the conviction of the accused must rest not on the weakness of the defense but on the strength of the prosecution applies[39] insofar as said accused is concerned. He must, therefore, be acquitted on the ground of reasonable doubt.

Killing Attended by Treachery, Abuse of Superior Strength and Dwelling

The trial court correctly found that treachery had attended the killing of Cecilio Magpantay who was then sleeping, totally unaware that he was being assaulted and, thus, was in no position to flee or defend himself. The essence of treachery is sudden and unexpected attack without the slightest provocation on the part of the person attacked.[40] The court a quo likewise rightly stated that, although abuse of superior strength was present, the same was absorbed in treachery.[41]

The aggravating circumstance of dwelling was correctly appreciated. Appellants forced their way inside the house of Magpantay with no other purpose but murder, their sleeping victim not having given any provocation.[42] "He who goes to another's house to hurt him or do him wrong, is more guilty than he who offends him elsewhere."[43]

No Evident Premeditation

The Information alleged that evident premeditation attended the commission of the crime. The trial court did not pass upon this circumstance, probably because the prosecution had failed to offer proof of its presence. For evident premeditation to be appreciated, it is necessary that the prosecution must prove the following elements: (1) the time when the accused decided to commit the crime; (2) an overt act showing that the accused clung to their determination to commit the crime; and (3) the lapse of a sufficient period of time between the decision and the execution of the crime, to allow the accused to reflect upon the consequences of the act.[44] None of these elements could be gathered from the evidence on record.

WHEREFORE, the appeal is partially GRANTED. Appellant Baltazar Ortiz is hereby ACQUITTED and ordered

RELEASED immediately, unless he is being detained for some other legal cause. The assailed Decision is AFFIRMED insofar as it convicted Accused-appellants Teddy Quinao and Rolando Sidro of the crime of murder, sentenced them to suffer the penalty of reclusion perpetua and ordered them to pay the heirs of Cecilio Magpantay the indemnity of P50,000.00 plus actual damages (interment expenses) of P10,000.00.
SO ORDERED.

Narvasa, C.J., (Chairman), Davide, Jr., Melo, and Francisco, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 7-8.

[2] In Criminal Case No. 733-V-91; records, p. 23-A.

[3] Presided by Judge Adriano R. Osorio.

[4] Rollo, pp. 21-40

[5] Assailed Decision, p. 10; rollo, p. 30.

[6] TSN, January 20, 1992, pp. 4-21.

[7] TSN, March 27, 1992, pp. 4-14, and April 20, 1992, pp. 4-22.

[8] TSN, June 26, 1992, pp. 4-13.

[9] Records, p. 70.

[10] "Basa" in all other documents referring to the same witness.

[11] TSN, August 21, 1992, pp. 3-24.

[12] TSN, September 23, 1992, pp. 3-18.

[13] TSN, August 26, 1992, pp. 4-14.

[14] Sidro testified on re-direct examination that he was arrested on November 26, 1991, and not on November 6, 1991, as he had earlier stated during direct examination.

[15] Ibid., pp. 15-23.

[16] Accused Sidro, in contrast, testified that he worked at the bakery from May 25, 1990, to May 5, 1991 (supra). It may be noted further that Ortiz testified that he was in Lapinig, Samar as early as May 5, 1991, notwithstanding his statement that he had worked at the bakery in Valenzuela until that date.

[17] TSN, August 31, 1992, pp. 5-23.

[18] Assailed Decision, p. 8; rollo, p. 66.

[19] Appellant's Brief, p. 10; rollo, p. 52.

[20] People vs. Atad, G.R. No. 114105, January 16, 1997; People vs. Gabris, G.R. No. 116221, July 1, 1996.

[21] Appellee's Brief, pp. 9-10.

[22] TSN, January 20, 1992, pp. 3-7, 10-12.

[23] People vs. Florendo, 230 SCRA 599,.

- [24] People vs. Abdul Haddi Alshaika, G.R. No. 113224, September 11, 1996.
- [25] TSN, August 26, 1992, p. 23.
- [26] Exhibit "1"; records, p. 82.
- [27] Assailed Decision, p. 9; rollo, p. 29.
- [28] People vs. Gundran, 228 SCRA 583, 594, December 17, 1993.
- [29] People vs. Deuna, 227 SCRA 788, 801, November 16, 1993.
- [30] People vs. Gundran, *supra*.
- [31] TSN, January 20, 1992, pp. 6 & 21.
- [32] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- [33] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
- [34] *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9, 11-12.
- [35] People vs. Jorge, 231 SCRA 693, 698, April 22, 1994.
- [36] People vs. Cedon, 233 SCRA 187, 195, June 15, 1994.
- [37] People vs. Manuel, 234 SCRA 532, 542, July 28, 1994.
- [38] People vs. Fronda, 222 SCRA 71, 79, May 14, 1993.
- [39] People vs. Cedon, *supra*.
- [40] People vs. Cogonon, G.R. No. 94548, October 4, 1996.
- [41] People vs. Amania, 248 SCRA 486, September 21, 1995.
- [42] People vs. Canturia, 245 SCRA 275; People vs. Cuyo, 196 SCRA 447, April 30, 1991.
- [43] Viada, 5th Ed., Vol. II, pp. 323-324, cited in Reyes, The Revised Penal Code, Twelfth Edition, Vol. I, p. 336.
- [44] People vs. Layno, G.R. No. 110833, November 21, 1996.

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