

THE GLEANERS

By Kip Cassino

Excerpt from the book I'm writing now!

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When you reap the harvest of your land, moreover, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field nor gather the gleaning of your harvest; you are to leave them for the needy and the alien.

Leviticus 23:22

Prolog

Sixty-six Million Years Ago

Ca worked feverishly, steering the vast rock he stood upon toward the sanctuary before him. That globe glistened benign radiance, promising a bed of shielding atmosphere and abundant life beneath. His visual receptors, had they been human, would have colored the world blue.

He and his kind had drifted on the rock for uncounted ages, stranded since their desperate escape from the malignant almost-star. Their supplies were long since gone, their only source of sustenance each other. Even now, Ca ripped open the carapace of another young one, projecting his child's animating energy as a jet to alter the rock's course—aligning it to collide with the planet that loomed so close. Te and the others toiled beside him. They had to find shelter on this cool world—shelter and nourishment. Otherwise, what few of them remained clinging to the great slab of stone would eventually weaken and die as it wandered the void.

Scores of smaller lives perished before their alignment seemed certain. Had they sacrificed too many? The few who looked upon each other could not know. There were only seven of them left—the oldest and strongest. Still, those who remained could sense rich vitality emanating from the world they now fell toward. If they survived descent, they would feast.

Already, their rock heated as it touched atmosphere, glowing red and then incandescent white. Sounds assailed them, which the emptiness of space had not allowed—the roaring, howling rage of intrusion. The seven clawed their way to shelter, as the beckoning globe filled their sky. The rock tore through the thickening gas below it at a high angle, needing almost no time to reach the world's surface. Millions of tons of molten stone mauled the planet's northern hemisphere, carving a crater that stretched for almost one hundred miles from the center of its impact.

The seven cowered in their disintegrating iridium refuge, riding out the terrible upheaval their frantic assault had caused. They were battered but unharmed, and would soon rise to gorge themselves on the life around them. Millions of years later, the place they had landed would be called Chixilub.

Chapter One

The Day After Tomorrow

Darkness pervaded the room, challenged only by a single desk lamp. Its light fell upon a hand, holding a pen which scribbled notes to a journal. Elizabeth Wyler frowned with concentration as she wrote, trying to capture the thoughts pouring from her mind. Short, dark hair and luminous grey eyes marked her pale, even-featured face. She was dressed casually beneath her lab coat, and wore sensible shoes. As always, her full attention was on her work, not her appearance. A knock on her office door altered her frown to one of frustration. “Come in,” she called, hoping somehow the door would remain shut.

It opened, and a tall man stood silhouetted against the hallway’s brightness. “Doctor Wyler?” he asked, in a hoarse baritone.

Beth laid down her pen, pulled up and adjusted her COVID mask, turned her chair to face him, nodded. “Please, come in,” she said. “Sit down and tell me why you’re here.”

The man advanced into her office, found a chair and sat—swiveling to face her directly. Above his mask, his dark eyes were piercing, minatory. Policeman or cost accountant, she guessed. He wore a rumpled suit and smelled of cigarettes. “My name’s Ray Saldano, doc,” he said. “LAPD. My office called you earlier. We need your help.” He flashed a badge from his belt that labeled him a lieutenant. He leaned forward in his chair, examining her eyes with concentration.

“There’s a patient here. A cop,” Saldano continued. “his name’s Leo Moore.”

Beth nodded again. “I know the case,” she said. “He’s been here about a week. Unconscious for several days. Badly burned.”

“They tell me you’re the best psychiatrist on staff, Dr. Wyler,” Saldano said. “We’d like you to talk to him. We need your opinion.”

“My opinion? About what?”

“Moore’s partner has been missing since the incident where he got burned. A rookie named Jack Bratelle. It was a big fire at a chemical plant, probably arson. Their patrol car was a total loss. Somehow, Moore got thrown free—or maybe he wasn’t in the car when the factory blew. We need to know what happened.”

Beth was immediately wary. “The man’s been awake for three days now, lieutenant. Why don’t you ask him yourselves?”

“We have, doc. Over and over again. At first the stuff he said was crazy, didn’t make any sense. Now, he won’t talk to us at all—claims he can’t remember.”

“LAPD has its own staff for situations like this. I know some of them. They’re good, competent people.”

Saldano nodded. “We do. Leo’s been on the job fifteen years. He knows our people. Won’t respond to any of them.”

Beth shrugged, her shoulders slumped in grudging acquiescence. “So what do you want me to do, that your people can’t?” she asked.

“Just talk to him,” Saldano said. “Try to find out if he really can’t remember, or if he’s lying. More important, give us your judgement on his mental state. Tell us if you think he’s crazy.”

“Why would you think that?”

Saldano stood and leaned closer to Beth. “Like I said, when he first woke up, Leo talked a lot.” He nervously ran his fingers through his short-cropped hair. “He said the fire reached out and ate his partner, like a goddamn French fry.”

A few hours later, Beth found herself in Leo Moore’s room, approaching his bed. The man lay motionless, eyes open and staring. Heavy dressings wrapped his chest and upper arms. A Christmas tree of medications dripped into his veins. Moore was a big man, at least six feet three inches tall, she judged. His hairless head, the rich color of old mahogany, turned to face her. He did not smile, nor did his eyes.

She spoke as she drew nearer. “Sergeant Moore, my name is Elizabeth Wyler,” she told him. “I’m a psychiatrist here, and I’ve been asked to talk to you.”

Moore frowned. “Look, doc,” he said softly, “you might as well turn yourself right back around. I got nothing to say to you—nothing I ain’t told everybody I’ve talked to. I don’t remember nothing.”

Now at his bedside, Beth pulled up a chair and sat down. “Are you sure, Sergeant Moore? Perhaps if we talked ...”

Moore shook his head furiously, his eyes squeezed shut. “No!” he said angrily. “No! I don’t remember nothing! Not a fucking thing!”

Beth worked to keep her voice mild and calm. “Wouldn’t you like to remember?” she asked. “Wouldn’t you like to know what happened?”

Moore frowned deeply. "People been asking me all week what happened at that damn chemical plant, ever since I woke up here. I told 'em all the same. I can't remember nothing!"

He looked away, then back at Beth with growing suspicion. "Why are you here anyway? I already talked to the shrinks from the department."

"Leo, I've got nothing to do with the LAPD," Beth told him. "It's your recovery we're worried about here, and that's all. You've had serious trauma. Your mental state has a lot to do with how well and how fast you heal. I'm only here to help you."

"You sure?"

"My word. Whatever we discuss stays between us."

"So ... what you gonna do?"

"I'm going to try to help you remember, Leo. Maybe some hypnosis ..."

Moore rose in his bed. "No need for that, doc. I remember. Everything. I wish to God I could forget."

"Want to tell me?"

"You and nobody else," Moore said with great emotion. "You tell Saldano, or any of the rest of them, I'll swear you're lying."

Beth held up her hands, nodded. "Okay, Leo," she said. "Your rules. I won't take notes. There'll be no recording. Just you talking to me. You have my word."

Moore nodded, sat up straight in his bed, and lowered his voice. "It was night. Jack and me, we responded code twenty to a factory break-in," he told her. "We pulled up, and there was this crowd of people tearing down the chain-link fence in front of the place. Big crowd."

"Leo, I've got to tell you, there's no record of any of this," Beth said.

"I know," Moore said, nodding. "Why do you think I shut the hell up? No record of the other patrol car either, I bet."

"There was another car?"

"Yeah. Both cops were dead. Checked 'em myself. That's when it started."

"What started?"

Moore looked around him, as though he were seeing it all again. "Them people," he said, his eyes widening. "The crowd. They was dancin', singin' ... I couldn't hear the words. Couldn't

see ‘em real good either, with all the glare and smoke. Some of ‘em were big, though. I mean awful big! And wearing them funny hats ...”

“Hats?”

“Yeah. Kinda like, you know, an Indian headdress—all big and feathers and all. Like that.”

Beth was engrossed. It was plain to her Moore believed what he was saying. In fact, he was reliving it before her. “Go on,” she said breathlessly.

“I started backing toward the car. Jack was yelling for me to hurry. He was scared shitless! We both were, I guess. Before I could get there, the factory exploded. Fire seemed like it went everywhere. I couldn’t see those people anymore, just the fire. It got bigger and bigger, like it was alive. Like it was coming for me! I shot at it, over and over. Jack shot too. I remember him yelling.”

“This thing, this fire,” Beth asked, “it seemed alive to you?”

“Sounds crazy, don’t it? I could swear it walked toward me. Not the fire, but something that was part of it—something big ... and hot. Hot as hell. It got to me. I dropped my shotgun, covered my face with my arm ...” he looked at his bandaged arms in wonder.

“So that’s when you lost consciousness.”

“No, doc,” Moore said sadly, “but I wish I had. Something picked me up, held me for a second, threw me aside. Then it went for Jack. I heard him yell when it got him.”

“Got him?”

Tears began streaming down Moore’s face. “It ate him, doc,” the veteran cop sobbed. “Him and all those other people. Nothing I could do. Took the life from ‘em, then threw what was left away.” The big man turned from Beth, buried his face in his hands and wept.

Chapter Two

The Next Day

The following day was not pleasant for Beth. From morning until evening, it was a day of meetings—most of which were marked by argument and frustration. Her last meeting was with the hospital's chief of psychiatry, Dr. Albert Warren. She sat in an overstuffed leather chair near his desk, as afternoon turned to dusk through a nearby window. "Has there been a formal complaint?" she asked him.

"Of course not," her supervisor and mentor replied. He was an older man, his full beard and mustache as silver-grey as his hair. He wore a beautifully cut tweed suit today, she noticed. "I can assure you that if there had been, it would have been vigorously opposed," he went on. "Vigorously! No one values your work here more than I do, Elizabeth."

"Then what's the point, Albert? Why am I here? I must be missing something. I'm tired." Beth put her face in her hands.

"Aha!" Warren said. "That's the point, Elizabeth. My point exactly! You're tired, too tired by far. You've been working much too hard."

Beth looked up, frowning. "Wait a minute," she said. "I thought we were talking about Saldano, the police. What has that got to do with my workload?"

"Everything! Don't you see? If you weren't so tired, you would never have talked to him and his people the way you did."

Beth sighed. "Fatigue had nothing to do with it," she said, shaking her head. "Those people wanted information I couldn't give them, without violating a patient's trust. I told them all they needed to know, and that's the end of it."

"They don't believe you."

Beth stood, and faced Warren's desk. "Leo Moore is as sane as I am," she said. "He's a damn good cop, as well. Saldano should be glad he's willing to go out on the street again, after what he's been through."

"What about those stories he told them?" Warren persisted. "Are those credible, in your professional opinion?"

"Albert, you've worked in this field far longer than I have. You know that anyone can suffer from hallucinations. I'll stand by my diagnosis. Saldano can piss up a rope."

Warren raised his hands in surrender. “What I really wanted to talk to you about, Elizabeth, are your hours—the time you’re putting in.”

“It’s the same as others on staff,” Beth said as she returned to her seat.

Warren shook his head. “It’s not your regular hours I’m referring to, young lady, and we both know it,” he said gently. “It’s the extra time, the time you’re spending with the county patients—the indigents.”

“They need my help,” Beth replied, “more than most of the patients on the wards.”

“They’re not admitted for psychiatric care, Elizabeth,” Warren insisted. “If they were, I wouldn’t mind so much. Then at least the hospital would be reimbursed for the time you spend with them.”

Beth set her jaw stubbornly. “It’s my time,” she said. “I can spend it however I want.”

Warren shook his head. “You can’t work twenty hours a day and do your proper job for me,” he said. “Dammit, Elizabeth, I’m trying to help you. Can’t you see that? You’re exhausting yourself for people who don’t care, who don’t want or need your help. I want it stopped.”

Beth stood once more. “Has there been a complaint about my work, Doctor?”

“We’re right back where we started, aren’t we? No, Dr. Wyler, no complaints. I sincerely hope that situation continues.”

“I’ll do my best not to disappoint you, doctor,” Beth said over her shoulder, as she strode from his office.

Hours later—long after her workday should have ended—Beth talked to a county patient named Carl. He sat on his bed, fiftyish, cadaverously thin, with long wispy hair and several missing teeth. Clothed only in the flimsy gown issued by the hospital, he was recovering from a septic leg infection he’d contracted while living on the streets. The day before, Carl had begun wrapping one of his grimy hands in a loose cover of aluminum foil.

“You promised to tell me,” Beth said.

Carl gave her a sly, sidelong glance. “Maybe I should make you guess,” he said.

“Then I might be wrong, Carl—and then I wouldn’t be able to talk to you about it. Now Carl, you promised.”

“Okay,” Carl agreed. “Okay, but only if you swear not to tell. If everybody has one, it won’t work anymore.”

“You have my word,” Beth told him. “I can’t tell anybody about whatever you say to me, unless I have your permission.”

Carl nodded as he stroked his foil-covered wrist with his other hand. “It’s for the saucer people,” he confessed. “Shorts out their circuits. Makes them go away.”

Beth nodded seriously. “When do you see them?” she asked.

Carl looked around the room, then back at Beth. “Mostly at night,” he said, “when everybody’s asleep. Everybody but Steve and me.”

“Who’s Steve? You haven’t told me about him.” Beth worried about Carl’s mounting delusions.

“Steve’s my special friend,” Carl said proudly. “He only talks to me, most of the time—but he’s usually nearby.”

Beth looked around the room. “Is Steve here now?” she asked.

Carl smiled broadly. “He sure is,” he said. “He’s hiding under the bed. I snuck him in when the nurses weren’t looking.”

“Do you think Steve would talk to me?” Beth asked, trying to keep her voice calm and steady.

Carl frowned as he tried to think the situation through. “I don’t know, doc,” he finally replied, shaking his head. “Mostly, he only talks to me. Hold on, I’ll go ask him.” Carl pulled back the sheets of his bed, got up and walked around to its far side—favoring his heavily bandaged leg. He crouched, whispered into the sheets hanging from the mattress, then rose and clambered back on the bed again.

Beth wondered what Carl’s explanation for Steve’s silence would be. His answer surprised her. “He said he’ll talk to you,” Carl told her, nodding his head. “He won’t say much, though. He’s real shy. Mostly, he just talks to me.”

“Carl, I can’t hear him,” Beth said. “Is Steve talking now?”

Carl laughed and slapped a bony kneecap. “No, doc!” he explained. “You have to ask him something. Then he’ll talk to you. You’ll see.”

Beth nodded, determined to bring this charade to some conclusion. “Okay,” she said, “I see. Steve? How are you today, Steve?”

The immediate response from another voice made the psychiatrist jump to her feet. “I’m fine,” the new voice said. “How are you?”

“Jesus!” Beth exclaimed, looking wildly around. “Did you hear that?”

Carl laughed. “Of course I did, doc,” he said. “That’s Steve.”

Beth quickly moved to the foot of Carl’s bed and threw back the sheets and mattress. There she found a very small, shabbily-dressed man with a full heard, reclining beneath the bed, resting his head on a pillow. The little man couldn’t have been much more than five feet tall. He smiled at Beth and nodded his head. “Hi, doc,” he said as he waved a petite hand.

Beth jumped back from the bed. “Carl, what is this guy doing here?” she asked heatedly.

Carl continued to smile. “It’s Steve, doc. Just like I said.”

“But ... he’s real!”

Carl frowned, twisting the aluminum foil that wrapped his hand. “Gee, doc,” he said, “of course he’s real. How else could I talk to him? You think I’m crazy or somethin’?”

Chapter Three

Six Months Later

Sergeant Leo Moore was back on the street once again. His patrol car moved slowly through a run-down industrial section of central Los Angeles, near Union Station. The makeshift shelters and tents of the homeless were everywhere. What people could be seen lay on the pavement, sat despondently on outdoor chairs, or shuffled aimlessly down the street—oblivious to where they were. Few wore masks against the continuing pandemic. Their concerns were more basic and immediate. Moore turned to his partner, Ed Lonnegin, who drove their patrol car. “Your first tour of the neighborhood, Ed?” he asked.

Lonnegin grimaced. “First and last, Leo,” he said between clenched teeth. “I’m calling up my old watch commander as soon as this shift’s over. I’m gonna beg him to give me another chance. I’ll do anything the sumbitch says, if he’ll pull me outta this toilet.”

Moore smiled ruefully. “Come on, Ed,” he said. “This ain’t so bad. I been here since before the COVID. Seems downright peaceful today.”

“What’d they do to you in that hospital, Leo?” his partner grumbled. “Remove your fuckin’ nose? This place stinks. If I ever get outta here, I’m gonna have to burn every uniform I got! And these people ...”

Moore laughed and slapped his thigh. “They is a tad threadbare, ain’t they? That’s what comes from living on the street. These guys haven’t seen porcelain for a long time! None of them! I tell you ...” he stopped his soliloquy in mid-sentence to stare out the car’s window, then abruptly pulled on his partner’s shoulder. “Stop the car,” he said. “Back up!”

Lonnegin complied, frowning. “What’s going on, Leo?” he asked. “What’d you see?”

Moore adjusted his mask, opened his door, and jumped from the patrol car. “Somebody who shouldn’t be here, Ed. Stay put and wait for me.”

Elizabeth Wyler, the person Moore had noticed, walked down the shabby street in her white lab coat—seemingly without care or concern. He caught up to her from behind, grabbed her by the shoulder, and turned her around. “Let go!” the surprised psychiatrist exclaimed as she struggled. “What do you ... Leo! It’s you!”

Moore bent over, put hands to his thighs, fighting to catch his breath. “Doc!” he gasped. “Sorry to come up on you that way, but what are you doin’ here? This ain’t no place for you.”

Beth chuckled beneath her mask. “Thanks for your concern, Leo,” she said, “but I’ll be just fine. Most of these people are harmless.”

“Some of ‘em, not so harmless, doc. Why do you think we patrol this place? There was a murder here, not two days ago. It ain’t the first, either.”

Beth looked around, as though suddenly aware of where she stood. “I get your point,” she said, nodding. “Look, maybe you can help me, Leo. I’m looking for two homeless men ...”

Moore couldn’t help laughing. “That’s all we got down here, doc,” he said. “Anybody special in mind?”

“A tall, skinny man who calls himself Carl,” she said. “He’ll have a bandaged leg, walks with a limp. He’s always with a smaller man, a man with a beard ...”

Moore snapped his fingers. “Steve!” he said. “I know ‘em both. They’ve set up housekeeping about a block from here. Come on, get in the car. I’ll take you there myself.”

Once in the car, Moore directed Lonnegin down a grimy side street—its sidewalks thickly lined with tents and other shelters of various kinds and sizes. The patrol car stopped in the middle of the block, by an anonymous warehouse.

Moore left the car and opened the door for Beth. “Here we are, doc,” he told her. “Last time I saw ‘em, Carl and his little buddy were holed up in that lean-to over there.” The psychiatrist immediately began walking toward the little structure he’d pointed out. Moore held her arm to stop her.

“Whoa!” he cautioned. “Just a minute. What’s so important you have to come all the way down here to find these guys?”

Beth reached into the pocket of her lab coat, pulling out an amber plastic vial of pills. “I started Carl on these when he was in the hospital,” she explained. “He’s stopped coming back to refill his prescription. Some of our staff don’t treat homeless people very well.”

Moore nodded. “I know what you mean,” he said. “Folks let their sense of smell get in the way of that Hippocratic Oath.”

“If Carl stays on the medication long enough, he’ll start to get his head clear,” Beth explained. “I think he could begin to put his life back together.”

Moore shrugged. “You’re the doctor,” he said, as Lonnegin yelled from the patrol car. “How much longer you gonna be, Leo?” his partner asked loudly.

“You got a social engagement to attend, Ed?” Moore replied. “Hold your water. This won’t take long.”

He turned back to Beth. “You stay behind me, doc,” he told her. They both crouched and entered the lean-to. Its cardboard and plastic sheeting fronted a ragged hole in the warehouse wall. Moore shined his flashlight into the building’s interior.

“I guess these guys got more living space than I thought,” he said. He climbed through the large opening and helped Beth after him. “Watch your step,” he told her.

The two looked around. They stood in an enormous space, dimly lit by dirty skylights more than fifty feet above. Row after row of anonymous crates and boxes stretched into the shadowy distance, finally disappearing into the gloom. Moore cast the beam from his flashlight around them.

“Wow,” Beth said, and heard an echo.

“Yeah,” Moore agreed. “Some penthouse. Hey doc, you sure you want to go any further?”

Beth shrugged. “We’ve come this far,” she said, “but I don’t have time to search this whole place.”

Moore continued to search the rows of crates to their front with his flashlight. “I know what you mean,” he said. “They could be hidin’ anywhere. Look, why don’t you try callin’ to ‘em? If they’re around and they want to see you, they’ll come out.”

Beth nodded and cupped her hands to her mouth. “Carl?” she shouted. “Carl? It’s Doctor Wyler, Carl. I need to see you! It’s important! I’ve got some more medicine for you. Carl?” The pair listened for a few moments, but heard nothing. The psychiatrist sighed in resignation.

“I guess it was a silly idea,” she said, “like trying to find a needle in a haystack.”

“Hey, doc,” Moore consoled her, “you did the best you could. Most folks wouldn’t have tried at all.” He turned to leave. “Come on, let’s go,” he said.

Beth turned, took a step, and almost knocked over Steve. The little man had appeared behind them, out of nowhere. “Jesus!” she exclaimed.

“You always say that when you see me,” Steve said. “Are you religious?”

“Steve, do you know where Carl is?” Beth asked, ignoring the small man’s question. “It’s important that I see him.”

Steve nodded. “Sure I do, Dr. Wyler, but he’s busy right now. Can you come back later?”

“No, Steve,” Beth said firmly, “I need to see him now. I have some more of his medicine for him.”

Carl's small companion remained silent for a moment, struggling to make up his mind. "Well, alright," he finally said. "Those pills you got him helped Carl a lot. He hasn't seen the saucer men at all, for a while now."

Steve walked closer to Beth, and drew her head down to his. "Does the policeman have to come?" he whispered loudly.

"He's more than just a policeman, Steve," Beth said as she straightened up smiling. "He's a special friend."

"Besides," Moore noted, "I got the flashlight."

Steve nodded and led the two further into the dark warehouse, several hundred feet down a long row of crates. Then he halted, and darted from sight. "Wait here," he called.

"I don't like this much," Moore said, as he shined his flashlight around them. "If he's not back pretty quick ..." Steve, now accompanied by Carl, appeared at his side before the completed thought escaped his lips.

The two homeless men walked quickly to Beth. "Hi, doc," Carl whispered. "Steve said you've got some pills for me."

"Yes, Carl. I ..." Beth began. Before she could finish her sentence, both men raised index fingers to their lips and signaled silence.

"I brought you some more of the medicine you were getting," Beth continued, whispering now. She pulled the large vial from her pocket and handed it to him. "Why are we whispering?" she asked.

"I don't want to wake the man back there," Carl whispered to her. "He's hurt. He needs to rest."

"Maybe you should let me see him," Beth said quietly. "I am a doctor. Maybe I could help."

Carl shook his head. "We promised we'd keep his secret," he continued. "He said not to tell anybody."

"You know I keep your secrets," she told him. "I promise, I won't tell anyone."

Steve grabbed her arm. "What about him?" the little man whispered, motioning to Leo.

"Look," Leo said to him, keeping his voice very low, "I'll stay right here. That way, your secret's safe."

The homeless men held whispered conference for a few moments. Finally, Carl nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Come with me, doctor.” Beth followed him between two large stacks of crates. The warehouse became silent. Leo lit a cigarette and sat on a box to wait.

A few minutes later, Beth appeared again. “Leo,” she called, “get in here quickly. I need your help!”

Moore threw down his cigarette and hurried to push his way between the crates. He emerged in a large, cleared area—where light streamed from a skylight that had been cleaned to transparency. Boxes there had been arranged to create rude furniture on a tarpaulin-carpeted floor. Beth stood awaiting him, standing near Carl and Steve.

“We’ll need you to help carry him,” Beth said. “He’s too heavy for me to manage.”

“Carry who?” Leo asked, as he drew closer. “What are you talking about, doc?”

He walked further, then saw the man lying on the concrete floor.

“What’s that smell? Is that sulfur?” Leo suddenly wondered, looking around. “Where did I smell that before?” His flashlight revealed the man in front of him more thoroughly now. He was tall and slim, dressed in dark military-style clothing. His right trouser leg was split open from thigh to knee, revealing a severe wound—still bleeding slowly below a grimy tourniquet. The man’s clothing and face were sooty and blackened, as though he’d recently been near a fire. His respiration seemed labored. At the sound of Leo’s voice he stirred, moaned softly, and opened his eyes.

“Smelled it before?” the wounded man said. “I hope not, buddy. That’s brimstone. Straight out of hell.”

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