

'The Shark Cage': the use of metaphor with women who have experienced abuse

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The 'Shark Cage' metaphor offers a conceptual and practical tool for understanding and reducing re-victimisation in abused women within a counselling context. The Shark Cage is congruent with theoretical feminist and human rights frameworks, whilst offering accessible, concrete and hopeful strategies for change in women's lives. It reworks the often difficult-to-grasp idea of boundaries, and learning to recognise boundary violations, into concepts women can visualise and relate to. Women struggling to understand why abuse is so prevalent in their lives, and the counsellors struggling to help them, will find the Shark Cage a useful tool.

In my early years as a counsellor and psychologist I came to dread a question from women who had experienced abuse in their lives. It went like this: *'Is there something wrong with me?' 'Have I got a sign on my forehead that says come and abuse me?' 'Why does this keep happening to me?'*

Tricky question. Why *do* some women experience repeated abuse more than others? As a feminist practitioner I would locate their experience of abuse in a socio-political context, let them know the prevalence rates, and emphasise that this is a structural problem created by the power inequities of a patriarchal society. I would reassure women earnestly that this was not an individual problem—abuse of women and children is a widespread social problem.

All this is true. Why then did my clients and I not seem fully satisfied with this explanation? Or to be politically incorrect, why did this not feel like a helpful explanation for a woman who wants to take control and do something to change this undeniable pattern of abuse in her life?

Ironically, this feminist explanation often doesn't feel empowering for the woman *or* the counsellor. Whilst this

explanation might help the woman begin to entertain the idea that she is not alone and not to blame, it might also feel that the problem is just too big and removed. An air of helplessness and despair can creep into the counselling room.

Research shows that women who have experienced early abuse in childhood are more likely to be re-victimised in later life (Classen, Paley, & Aggarwal, 2005). The women are right. Abuse *does* happen to them more often than it happens to women who haven't experienced abuse in their early life. This is where it becomes uncomfortable. If I start wondering why this keeps happening to *this* woman, am I heading down a path that leads to victim-blaming? Is there an explanation for re-victimisation that can sit comfortably alongside feminism and, at the same time, make sense to the women? Most of all, can this explanation offer hope for change that enables women to attain or regain a sense of agency and control in their lives and relationships? *'The Shark Cage'* concept, developed out of my clinical work, may meet this need.

The Shark Cage concept, and the associated interventions and tools

used with it, are simple and skills-based. Despite this simplicity, many clients, colleagues, supervisees and students have a 'light bulb' moment when presented with the Shark Cage explanation of re-victimisation. For ease of writing, the most common presentation of an abusive heterosexual relationship—where the abuser is male and the victim is female—is used. The Shark Cage explanation can be adapted easily for male heterosexual victims or same sex relationships.

Practical applications of feminist theory that can be used as tools and interventions in counselling with women are often missing in feminist writing about violence against women. To ensure the effective application of *The Shark Cage* concept, detailed examples of psychoeducational content, and interventions and tools used, are provided. It is intriguing and inspiring to observe the many creative ways that counsellors and clients have developed the basic Shark Cage concept. The concept captures the interest and imagination of women, sparking animated responses and creative collaboration. For this reason, every conversation about the Shark Cage will be different because of the material

the client brings. So if it seems that the client's voice is absent from the following dialogue, this is because this article aims to communicate the

Unfortunately, not all of us are lucky enough to have had caregivers who were able to help us build a 'top of the range' Shark Cage. This might

themselves, so they didn't know how to help us build one. Most of us have Shark Cages with missing bars that need work. That is OK because we can work on and repair our Shark Cage at any time. We just need the right blueprint, assistance and tools.

So there is nothing wrong with *you*. You just need to do some work on your Shark Cage and I can help you with that if you like. Let me give you an example of the difference a good Shark Cage can make.

Imagine there are two girls in a bar. Sally has a strong Shark Cage with a good alarm system. Chantelle has a Shark Cage with lots of missing bars, rusty weak bars and a dodgy alarm system. There is a shark in the pub,

Once the bars are in place, sharks bang up against them and find it harder to get close enough to take a bite and hurt us.

information and tools the counsellor needs, not because the client is a passive recipient in the process.

Presenting the idea of the Shark Cage to clients:

Responding to "Why does this keep happening to me?"

The Script goes something like this: There is nothing wrong with you. You don't have a sign on your forehead. You aren't asking to be abused. Of course you don't go looking to be abused. Try and think of it like this. The world is a big beautiful ocean. There are lots of beautiful, colourful, harmless, friendly fish and there are sharks too—lots of them! They are more present in some waters than others, but they are everywhere. They are predators and they are dangerous. To survive in this ocean you need a good Shark Cage.

Where do we get our Shark Cage from?

People aren't born with Shark Cages. It is up to the people around us when we are young to help us build a Shark Cage. Our caregivers and everyone we come in contact with in childhood contribute to the type of Shark Cage we build. Let's think of each bar in the Shark Cage as a boundary, or a basic human right. If we are taught that it's not acceptable for people to shout at us or call us names, that's one bar in the Shark Cage created. If we are taught through words and actions that it is not acceptable for people to hit us, then that's another bar in the Shark Cage. If we are taught in words and actions that it's not acceptable for people to touch us in ways that make us uncomfortable, that's another bar. Once the bars are in place, sharks bang up against them and find it harder to get close enough to take a bite and hurt us.

be because someone in our childhood was abusing us. Building a Shark Cage when it has already become normal to have sharks biting at us is really hard. Some of us might have had caregivers who have never had a good Shark Cage

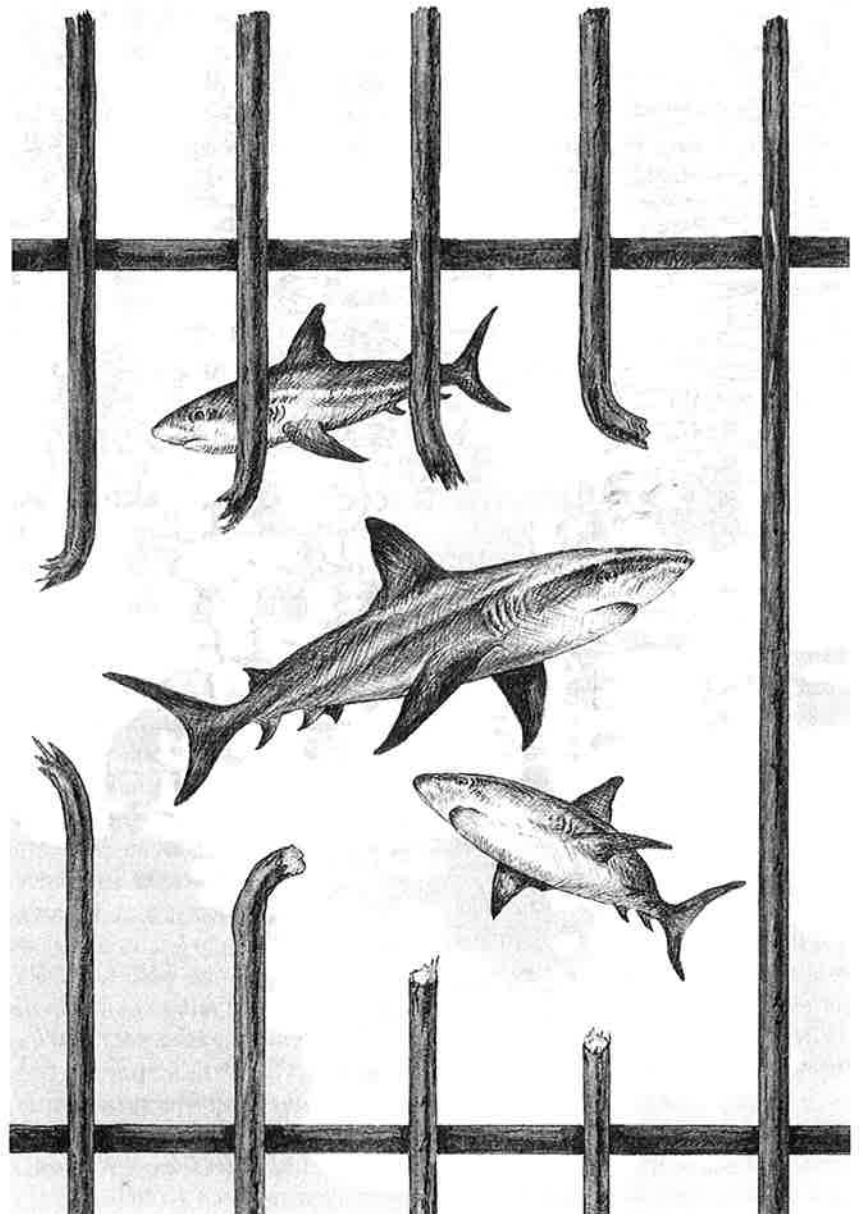


Illustration: © Savina Hopkin

and he's hungry! First of all he notices Sally. He says to the bar staff:

"Midori & lemonade for the lovely lady over there."

The shark then approaches his prey, snakes his arm around her waist letting it linger on her bum and says:

"Lovely set of tits you've got there sweetheart. How about you drink your drink, then you and me go to the local steak house and then back to my place to watch some 'Top Gear'?"

Now Sally's Shark Cage alarm system has been going berserk. The noise in her head and gut is deafening! Sally's Shark Cage has picked up six boundary violations:

- this man assumed she wanted a drink without consulting her;
- he has chosen her drink without consulting her;
- he has touched her physically without her permission;
- he has touched her in a sexual way without her permission;
- he has objectified and sexualised her by talking about her breasts;
- he has already decided where they would go on a date without consulting her.

Why is this lack of consultation a big deal? Because it clearly demonstrates that this man does not care what Sally thinks, wants, likes, feels or needs. His sexual behaviour towards her demonstrates that he is not interested in her as a person, only as a sexual object. Sally knows all this—her Shark Cage and its alarm system have given her all of this information.

Sally removes the man's arm, pushes the drink away and says:

"No thank you. I'm not interested."

The shark starts thrashing around after receiving such a sharp knock on his nose. He bares his teeth and snarls something like:

*"Ah you f***** cobweb c***! You're a f***** dog anyway!"*

He stomps away and scowls into his beer until he notices Chantelle at the other end of the bar.

What happens when our shark turns his attention to Chantelle? He goes through the same routine he went through with Sally—orders her drink, puts his arm round her, comments on her breasts, and tells her what she should do with him that evening.

What's going on with Chantelle? It's very different to what was going on with Sally. Chantelle's Shark Cage doesn't have the right bars to sense all the boundary violations that were sensed by Sally's Shark Cage. No alarms are triggered. Silence. No red flags pop up. Chantelle is thinking;

"Oh, he's bought me a drink. He is saying nice things about me. I can't be rude to him, even though I am feeling a bit uneasy. I should go out with him because he seems to like me and is being nice."

The story below tells what could happen once Chantelle goes out with him.

Chantelle has sex with him because he insists, even though she doesn't really want to. The next week he turns up on her doorstep with his bags because he's been kicked out of his place. Chantelle lets him move in because she doesn't feel she can leave him on the street. Soon after he refuses to wear condoms, because *"it feels like wearing a raincoat in the shower"*, and Chantelle falls pregnant.

As the pregnancy progresses his controlling behaviour gets worse and he starts punching walls and shoving Chantelle around. Chantelle wants her baby to have a father. She hopes he will change. The baby is born and his abusive behaviour gets worse because he is jealous of the attention the baby gets. Chantelle feels so alone. He has stopped her having contact with family and friends, and she has no one to turn to for support.

He tells her the abuse is *her* fault. Chantelle believes him because that is what she was told when she was a kid, while getting hit, sworn at and sexually abused. She thinks of leaving but he tells her he will kill her and then himself if she does. Chantelle is forced to claim single parent pension because he doesn't work and spends all his unemployment benefit on booze, Foxtel and computer games. He says he will dob her in to Centrelink if she tries to kick him out. Chantelle feels powerless.

Women relate to the story of the two girls in the Bar. Despite the tragic theme, there is some humour. We have fun with it. I let them know I'm exaggerating to get the point across. But they recognise Chantelle. They know they are wide open to sharks,

not because they go out of their way to attract them, but because when they inevitably bump into them in shark-infested waters, they don't have a good Shark Cage to protect them. They want Sally's Shark Cage. I let women know that they can have a Shark Cage like Sally's, but it will take work and time. I let them know we will need to work on it in each session and I will give them homework in between sessions. The steps involved in helping women to build a good Shark Cage are outlined below.

Building a Shark Cage

1. Knowing what bars to put in

Each bar represents an important boundary for emotional, physical and sexual safety. These bars closely resemble a *'Bill of Rights for Women'*. Versions of these are located easily in the domestic violence literature and are usually a feature of all domestic violence support group materials. Go through these rights in detail with women and discuss their relationship with, and experience of, each right. What gets in the way of them believing they are entitled to these rights? Are their daughters entitled to these rights? Other women? Well if they are, then so are they. Reassure women that it will take time and practice to integrate these rights into their self-concept, which is what is needed to assemble the foundations of a solid Shark Cage. Another excellent resource for creating the bars in a Shark Cage is the *'Relationships'* booklet available for free download from the Domestic Violence Resource Centre's website (www.dvrcv.org.au). It outlines clearly what a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship looks like. The essence of the message is that healthy relationships are based on mutual respect. A respect checklist in the booklet lists *'Rights'* individuals have in a relationship, which tie in with a broader Human Rights charter. Counsellors can go through this booklet with women in sessions page by page, encouraging thoughts, discussion, questions and exploration of examples of friendships and other relationships from their life.

It can also be useful to link women into Childhood Sexual Assault or



Domestic Violence support groups if the counsellor assesses they are 'group ready'. In my experience, the most helpful groups are grounded in a feminist model, worker-facilitated and have a psychoeducational emphasis. Group work can reinforce the work the counsellor is doing with the woman. It provides strong evidence that this is not an individual problem and that bad things happen to good people. Women are forced to face the fact that if the women surrounding them in the group are in no way to blame for abuse, then the same rules apply to themselves. This presents a serious challenge to the accuracy of the deep-seated belief and message that they are to 'blame' for the abuse in their life. The support, acceptance and understanding women receive from other women in a group can often be more powerful than years of individual therapy as powerful feelings of self-blame, self-loathing and shame that act as heavy shackles in the move towards healing are broken down. In addition to providing opportunities for viewing oneself differently, groupwork provides opportunities for connection with the broader community. This can decrease isolation and feelings of being different and, at the same time, increase social confidence.

Knowing when a bar has sustained a hit (installing an alarm system)

A first step is learning to recognise boundary violations, even if the woman cannot do anything initially to attempt to repel the boundary breach. This is like installing an alarm system in the

This fleeting unease was an echo of connection to self that women need to make bigger and louder so it can inform and guide them.

I often ask women to spend five minutes three times a day (after meals is a good prompt) tuning into their

The more situations women can bring to counselling that are real examples of boundary breaches in life, or anticipated boundary breaches, the better.

Shark Cage. In addition to knowing their 'Rights/Boundaries', I talk to women about paying attention to their bodies and their feelings. When abuse happens early, women learn to disconnect from their bodies and feelings. This is an excellent coping strategy that helped them survive when they were a powerless child. This coping strategy isn't serving them so well now. They need to reconnect with their bodies and feelings to know when someone is doing something that violates their boundaries.

A woman's gut instinct is never totally extinguished. Remember Chantelle was aware that Mr. Shark made her feel a little bit uneasy?

bodies and feelings. Do a body scan. Is there any tension? Pain? Where? What are they feeling? Relaxed? Tired? Anxious? Happy? Briefly reflect on any possible relationship between body and feelings, and recent thoughts, interactions or events.

Practice is the key. Like riding a bike, tuning in to our bodies and feelings takes lots of practice to become automatic. Women may need some tutoring in feelings to broaden their understanding of their internal processes. Using a stack of laminated 'feelings' cards can be useful. A woman's knowledge and relationship to each 'feeling', and when and how she experiences it, can lead to rich and

enlightening therapeutic discussions.

A written homework exercise can be useful. Ask them to:

- describe a situation in the last fortnight that threatened to breach a boundary;
- describe what the boundary or 'right' was and how they knew it was being threatened;
- describe how they responded;
- think of a possible protective/repelling response if they were not able to do this at the time.

I let women know that their Shark Cage will always be a work in progress and will require constant maintenance. We are not working towards perfection. Self-worth and the effectiveness of their Shark Cage will fluctuate depending on what is happening in their life and how they are feeling. If they keep working on their Shark Cage they will find that the 'average' effectiveness of their Shark Cage on any given day will far exceed what they started with. This reflects the gradual increase in self-esteem and decrease in self-blame and self-loathing that is inevitable once women start to think of themselves as having rights, and acting and responding to others in ways that support self-worth.

It is important that the idea of the Shark Cage is not just restricted to intimate sexual relationships. Women need to assert and defend their boundaries in *every* relationship in order to build self-worth and minimise exploitation.

Knowing how to respond to an attempted Shark Cage breach

This part of the process is basically assertiveness training. They still don't believe in their rights enough to defend them. I talk to women about 'faking it till you make it'. I talk about the fact that thoughts, feelings and behaviour are all connected (yes, good old CBT can be a useful tool in feminist therapy if it is used within a broader systemic framework). Feelings are hard to change directly, but by influencing thoughts (reminding ourselves of our rights) and behaviour (defending our rights through our actions) we can influence feelings. If we act like we have good self-worth eventually it will affect our self-worth. If we demand that others treat us with

respect, and we treat ourselves with respect, we will eventually find that we respect and value ourselves. Roleplay is an important tool in this part of the process. The more situations women can bring to counselling that are

she is being selfish. We explore what being 'selfish' actually means. I draw the continuum and put self-care in the middle. This is the behaviour we are aiming for. Making choices that don't disregard the rights of others,

As women speak up more, friction increases in the relationship and abusive behaviours may escalate.

real examples of boundary breaches in life, or anticipated boundary breaches, the better. Have fun with the roleplays, let women experience the role of the boundary-pusher as well as the defender. Talk about common attempted breaches where some standard rehearsed lines are a sufficient response. Common breaches might include the sister who always expects you to mind her kids, the friend who always needs to use your car, the mother-in-law who constantly invites herself over, and the adult child who always needs to 'borrow' fifty dollars.

Women often find this part of the process very anxiety provoking. They worry they will be considered a bad person, a selfish person, a 'bitch' if they don't agree to all demands made upon them. They can believe they are behaving in a selfish way if they don't give when they are asked. This is where it can be useful to introduce the continuum of selfish and selfless. I let women know that by always putting others' needs and feelings before their own they have been behaving in a 'selfless' way. Over time this means they become disconnected from their own wants, needs, and feelings with the result that they feel they don't know who they are. They become 'self-less', and this feeling is often associated with depression. We explore the fact that the worst insult to throw at a woman is that she is 'selfish'. We explore the messages in society that result in women being so vulnerable to this insult. Messages about women, especially wives and mothers, always being responsible for harmony in the family, a 'good' woman will always put others first. If a woman cooks a meal and doesn't give herself the burnt chop,

but at the same time don't disregard her own rights. This can be a difficult concept for women to grasp and lots of examples and discussion is needed.

Fifteen years ago when I was presenting the *selfish-self-care-self-less* continuum to a Domestic Violence support group, a seventeen year old girl in the group frowned as she struggled to understand the difference between the three concepts. Kylie presented a situation with her boyfriend from the night before. She asked if she was being selfish in wanting to keep half of her pizza for breakfast the next morning. Her boyfriend said she was being selfish. He had eaten all of his pizza and then wanted to eat the half she wanted to save for her breakfast. Kylie eventually understood that if two people each have a pizza, it is their right to decide what they do with their pizza, but they don't have the right to dictate what the other person does with their pizza. For Kylie, this was a light-bulb moment. Kylie had her handout of the continuum laminated and then used it as a placemat on the kitchen table. Often I tell women about Kylie and then encourage exploration of situations in their life when they haven't been clear about what constituted 'selfish' behaviour and what might have been 'self-care'. The more roleplays that relate to real situations in women's lives the better. This is skills training.

Recognising sharks: Evaluating current and potential new partners

Often women are in a relationship when they are wanting to do Shark Cage work. In many cases the work will bring the woman face-to-face

with the uncomfortable fact that her current partner is a shark. Women will typically try to avoid this reality. They may come to one session full of anger and stories of abuse, and then in the next session everything is fine. This is the cycle of violence in action and also a process of loss and grief. Facing the unpleasant truth then escaping into denial until eventually the woman accepts that this man is abusive, it is not her fault, she cannot change him, and in order to heal and develop into all she is capable of being, the relationship needs to end. Shark Cage work can accelerate this process because women start to recognise everyday boundary violations and inequities in their relationship that previously had gone unnoticed, and had silently contributed more weight to the heavy feelings of unworthiness and depression. As women speak up more, friction increases in the relationship and abusive behaviours may escalate. This can provide opportunities for the counsellor to talk about the only two solutions to abuse in a relationship:

1. the man can take responsibility for his behaviour, enrol in and complete a Men's Behaviour Change Program, and stop using abusive and controlling behaviours;
2. the woman can leave.

Women will almost always try for the first solution. It is then a matter of time and processing as the woman observes her partner evading responsibility, and excuses are made about no money, no time, waiting lists, etc. And then the cycle of violence goes around again and denial becomes harder and harder for the woman.

Once women have left an abusive relationship and have started major works on their Shark Cage, they will begin to think of possible future relationships. Women are often worried they won't recognise a 'shark' in time before being bitten and dragged under. In addition to going over what women value in a relationship and what constitutes a 'respectful' relationship, I use an additional resource for this piece of work. I have designed a '*Clues sheet*' for recognising early warning signs that a man may be abusive. I go through this with women and encourage them to think about each of the questions,

THE CLUES

Tick the box if the answer to the questions below is 'Yes'.

1. How does he talk about women? Does he comment on their body parts in front of you? For example, "She's got great tits", "Look at that fat arse". Does he talk about women as objects?
2. How does he talk about his ex's? Are they all money-grabbing, lying sluts who have done him wrong?
3. Ask about his parents. Better still observe him with his parents. Is Dad the boss? Does Dad push Mum around, put her down, ignore her or treat her like a servant? Are there indications that his Dad was/is abusive to his Mum?
4. Does he listen to you? Is he interested in what you are saying? Does he always seem distracted or interrupts you when you talk?
5. Does he make all the decisions without asking you? For example, does he decide which pub you are going to, or what 'take away' or video you are going to get?
6. Does he want to be with you all the time and get moody, sulky or angry if you have other plans or visit friends or family?
7. Does he check up on you during the day? Ask what you've been doing and sounds suspicious?
8. Is he critical of you? How you look, what you say, what you believe?
9. Does he think in some circumstances it is OK for a man to hit 'his woman'?
10. Has a woman ever had an intervention order (IVO) against him?
11. Does he drink heaps everyday and/or go on drug binges?
12. Is everyone else to blame for everything that has gone wrong in his life? Is everything always someone else's fault, never his? Does he never take responsibility for anything?
13. Does he usually go out with girls who are a lot younger than him?
14. Does he pressure you to have sex with him before you are ready?
15. Does he talk about your body or sex life with his mates?
16. If you ask him to wear a condom, does he try not to?

(* The full resource of 'The Clues' is available from WestCASA.)

not only for potential new boyfriends but also in relation to other past and present men in their life, so they became skilled at uncovering and recognising the information they need to make an informed decision.

I emphasise to women that it is important to be firm with boundaries and not to get too involved before all questions are answered, and they

have a minimum of four weeks data collection. I spell out important initial boundaries to make clear to potential new boyfriends. For example;

1. Tell him to always call and ask if it suits before 'dropping in'. This discourages men from considering your home to be a drop-in centre and leaves you with control over your environment, space and privacy.

2. Never lend him money or your car. Don't give away power or resources!

A snapshot of 'The Clues' document is provided. Women are encouraged to run if a man gets more than three ticks! It can be useful to encourage women to think of other clues they might add to their list.

The steps involved in building an effective Shark Cage are seldom as linear and straightforward as I have documented. In my experience it is more like weaving back and forth between re-presenting the idea of the Shark Cage and continually revisiting the steps involved in building a good Shark Cage. The more weaving back and forth using real situations from the woman's life, the thicker and stronger the 'mesh' will be that forms the building material for the Shark Cage. Be prepared for women to miss a couple of 'sharks' during the process. This is all part of the learning.

Typically women will recognise and get these sharks out of their life more quickly than they have done in the past. These experiences are trial runs that test and refine the Shark Cage and its alarm system.

The Shark Cage does not provide a complete answer or cure to questions of abuse and re-victimisation, but it can be a useful tool in feminist counselling if it is embedded within a systemic framework and a supportive, respectful and collaborative counselling relationship.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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