

OUT TO LUNCH WITH THE GIRLS

"If you live to be a hundred you'll never be like your father!" Hannah blurted out to Sammy who stood toweling dry his hair. Not angry at first, too stunned, he just stared at her, his raised arm frozen. Everyone around the pool quit talking and, not believing what they'd heard, turned to look at Hannah.

Hannah was upset, more than upset, finally lashed out at her son. That's the way it all started, Hannah thinks, sitting alone. I told him I wanted to leave, how many times did I have to say it? I'd get home on my own if I could, but no, I have to ask. Years ago I should have learned to drive, now it's too late. For everything.

From her deck chair Hannah gazes at silhouettes etched against the sun, stretching like paper cutouts along the sand bar, a ribbon in the sea. No, not the sea; *its* waters are turbulent, as youth; the Gulf flows calm, still as the aged, as Hannah. Outlined by throbbing heat, children dig, fat ladies, bent forward, search for sea-shells, their big bottoms full moons spurning Hannah; side-view, men with hilly-bellies supervise, or stare at the horizon into the sun, legs apart, feet planted, arms akimbo, wings. Hannah takes it all in.

Well, that's when the *argument* started, a few hours ago; actually the whole unhappy affair began early this morning when Sammy, her eldest, called.

"Ma? I'm coming by to pick you up. The kids're coming over, you'll spend a few hours."

As she reflects back on the day Hannah sighs, the chronic sigh of swells carried shoreward in slithering licks toward the beach line. Nothing stays the same, she thinks, looking down at fingers once long and fine; knotted and misshapen now from "arthur itis" they can barely hold a pencil, though she still writes letters asking for donations, *Save The Children*, the words shaky, running downhill. She's proud she can manage.

What a glorious day, remarkable, Hannah whispers; no matter what's happened since this morning. A warm breeze cools her old body. She's seventy-eight, eighty-one really. She tells friends: My sons guess ... seventy-eight, eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two ... They think the older I am the better I'm doing. Go figure it out, at this age. When she met Al fifty-six years ago -- thirteen years he's gone now -- it wasn't so good marrying an "older" woman, so she made up she was younger. *Three years, he never knew, it didn't hurt him.*

At one time, when she and Al were young, Hannah's hair fell over sloping milkwhite shoulders in long chestnut-brown curls kissing the slope of her breast, all very feminine; her dresses, gauzy and flowing, brushed her ankles. Now the *hair* is milk-white; shoulders stooped, she has shrunk, is frail where once she'd been imposing, threatening in middle-age, no longer. She strokes her slacks at the thigh and smiles at the thought of herself, an old woman in track-soled running shoes, holding onto her son's arm, *her* arm trembling on his, a cat's purring. At this age Hannah avoids mirrors; her nose, its large nostrils flared back, has spread more, appears even longer, flatter, and the lines alongside thin straight lips have deepened, dig sharply down to the jaw so that when she speaks her mouth and shortened chin open and shut like a wood dummy. How silly-looking she's become!

This is the woman people see, but Al, if he was living ... "You're still some sexy babe!" he used to say. "Just like the first time I spotted you with your friend Tillie in the Hot Shoppe ... Nate --

you remember him? -- an' me walked in, cruisin' around ..." Oh, he was naughty! Hannah laughs to herself. Gave me a little slap on the bottom when he talked like that -- not in front of anyone! -- and chuckled and puffed on that smelly fat cigar I hated. My children, Sammy and Martin, see only what they see.

But no one can call her slant *eyes* an old woman's: half-moons, lucid green, hot ice. When she sets her lips in obstinacy fleshy cheek bones rise and underline eyes gleaming with an inner hotness like those of a zealot. Al used to say they were the eyes of the devil. No, that much about her is not foolish.

"That would be nice, Sammy," she replied this morning. What else could I say? she asks herself. How could she tell Sammy she'd miss *2 Live Crew* on *Face the Nation*? She had waited all week to hear Miss Florida confront them on this Women and Pornography issue ... Rappers they're called ... rappers, rapping ... so many strange new words ... And then Sammy phoned.

Each week after *Face the Nation* everyone gathers in the common room for *Sing Along With Ernestine*; by the time that ended Josephina would be back from Sunday Mass and they'd all go out to lunch. That had been Hannah's plan, but she couldn't tell that to Sammy; she's forever complaining she doesn't see him and the children enough.

Oh, she *did* tell Sammy in her own way, Hannah remembers. He picked her up at ten this morning. If she managed things right she could be back by one o'clock in time for lunch. "I want to leave now, Sammy," she'd said after two hours had gone by. Hannah had said that very clearly: "I'm tired."

She wasn't tired. Not at all. The truth is she didn't want to sit any longer at Sammy's observing others DO, while she, Hannah, watched, doing what she'd always done, listen to Sammy, Grace, the grandchildren, go along, devote her attention to them as if she had no life of her own. Well, it's my own fault, she chastises. Hasn't she always given herself to the children? Her time, thoughts, precious possessions, wanting as much as she had, her children's love? The samovar brought from Romania, her sister's Victorian bar pin, swatches of fine lace crocheted by Hannah's grandmother ... Hannah had enjoyed the giving, the look on their faces. But where, where all those years after Al died was the return?

They were busy. All children are busy. Sammy lived so far away, Alberta before he and his family moved to Florida, and Martin not so far, Ottawa. Martin's a business man, *a macher*, always on the run -- drives into the city from the Gatineau, flies to New York, Chicago, Vancouver. Used to "drop in" to Toronto four-five times a year on his way from one deal to another. Stayed a few hours and ran. Oh, they called ... How are you, Mom? We're fine, the kids're doing good ... and on about their work, the weather, one of the children with a cold, but she didn't want that, she wanted letters. Letters meant the writer took the time. *Letters I can read over and over*. But Martin said people today use the telephone, nobody writes letters anymore.

The sun cuts its path, a laser, through the waters of the Gulf as if allowing Hannah, like Moses, to walk to the horizon and disappear into the heavens. It's a wonder God didn't take me long ago, she thinks. How is it I'm still here?

Hannah's been asking since Al died but God never answers. Sammy, Martin, her friends, don't answer either. But she doesn't mind, it's what she *feels*. Al did me dirty, she tells them. When I can't sleep -- two, three, four in the morning -- I talk to him. Why did you desert me? I ask; not so much any more.

Never in all her days did she think she could get along without Al. But after thirteen years she's come to like deciding things for herself, spending her own money, signing checks ... even buying groceries. Al had done that too, she didn't drive. Who would've thought she'd have this new life?

Her question hangs in air, eternal and unanswered as the crash of ocean breakers, carried with them out to sea. All those years with him. He'd been ill for so long, six years -- the Big C-word Hannah still can't bring herself to say -- and she'd seen him through, never letting on how serious it was. *Did he know?* He never said, but his eyes told all that words could never.

Where were the children then? With their own families, what did she expect? Letters, maybe. Paper children. And after? Years of silence, talking to Albert at two in the morning, *Who gave you the right to go first? These long hours, what will I do with them? Nobody should know such loneliness. Where are all the people we did so much for?* the clock's pendulum swinging, its ticks and tocks making time something Hannah could grasp, something solid. Hannah listened for Albert's voice but there was only the silence and the tick-tocking. She'd done her share of crying where no one saw or heard. "Oh, Honey, you'll never know, it's no fun getting old, alone," she told anyone listening.

It was her sons' idea to move. She'd been angry at first; after so many years without Al she'd eventually grown used to it, developed her own life rhythm. Snoozed part of the day, something she never let on to *anyone*, watched *ABC, NBC, CBC*, read magazines, wrote asking for donations to *Save the Children*, and met friends at *Fran's* for lunch. But they began dying off, her eyesight wasn't so good anymore and she'd fallen once or twice, lost her balance walking; too old to be living alone, that's what Sammy and Martin said, and so they packed up her things while she cried, made empty despairing noises, *Why am I here? How come God let me live this long, I should be dead, with Al; I never wanted to be a burden*, and fussed over years of accumulated precious junk: faded sepia snapshots in shoeboxes grown dusty in the closet; the black velvet beret that had been so stylish; paint-by-number clowns Al did when he'd been sick ... what was she to do with all this, who would want these things? Who wanted *her*?

Now, in the December of her life, instead of barren trees Hannah drinks in lush waxy palms. Remarkable, just remarkable, she says aloud as if seeing them for the first, or last time, and knowing it. Living near her eldest son, she is contented here. *The Second Chance Retirement Community*. Hannah calls it *The Last Chance*, thinks that more accurate. Sammy and Martin chose this place so she could be near Sammy, and because she could afford it ... Well, Sammy and Martin have to help. She hates that, having to take from them, ask for money to buy a gift, a dress, get her hair done; she isn't used to asking anymore. What went wrong?

Sammy thinks her new companions strange. Who is *he* to say? *He's* strange, a queer duck. But Hannah's new friends, strange as they are, have accepted *her*, that's the important thing, and Hannah has *chosen* to accept them. It hadn't been Hannah's wish to leave Toronto and all she loved: lunches at the Art Gallery with Hadassah women -- oh, the music she'd heard in its grand vestibule -- piano, flute, harp -- and the great curving sculpture outside, smooth and round and open, *feminine*, the children climbing up and around and through ... Not *her* idea to move after eighty years in the same city to an unknown place, beautiful as it is, leave old friends, make new ones. She could have gone to *Baycrest*. Now she's here in Florida. She was told to make a new life, and she has. With Josephina, Pat, Gertrude and Bertie.

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They are seated around their table at breakfast in the Retirement dining room. Hannah picks over her food, oatmeal cold, bread stale, coffee from the bottom of the pot. Her frizzed head jutting into Hannah's face, Josephina grins, a wide gummy gap between her front teeth, beagle brown eyes pleading, a soulful hag. "Want to see my ring? It's from my sister, the nun," thrusting her hand under Hannah's nose, pointing to the gold body of Christ circling her finger. Hannah barely looks down; she's seen the ring a hundred times before. "Very nice," she says dryly.

There's not much humour in Josephina, or Bertie for that matter. Bertie's too high-strung. Sometimes when Hannah finds her in the television parlor, Bertie stares, not at the set, but someplace no one else sees. Her high cheek bones intimidate -- this is someone on the edge -- push against stretched pale skin and below pale lost eyes. But other times Bertie is all twittery and her eyes burn and she talks excitedly, up close, nose to nose. Still, they have some good laughs together.

A cigarette between Bertie's fingers curls smoke into the air, bothers Hannah. As if that, Josephina's annoying drivel and the pasty oatmeal aren't enough, Gertrude lets out a resounding belch.

"Uh, I'm sorry, Hannah don't like me to burp," she says, glancing at the others.

"I don't think it's right. After all, we're trying to eat," Hannah snaps.

"I can't help it," Gertrude says. Her face has a characteristic twisted look, her body lumpy although not unduly large, and the whole of her bears an awkwardness as if in putting the parts together someone's made a mistake in the assembling. "It just comes out," she finishes.

"If she was in India," Pat offers, "it would be a compliment."

"Yeah?" Gertrude asks, pleased.

"Well she's not in India," Hannah counters, "She's in Florida."

"So? They don't belch in Florida? They're all from Philly and New Jersey," Pat remarks, "They ain't so hoity-toity."

"And Canada," Bertie adds very seriously.

"*They're* too polite for that," Hannah says.

"She don't like my snorin' either," Pat says to Gertrude. The words come from small heart-shaped lips, rouged, moving in the midst of doughy flesh pale as flour, three-hundred pounds, a sack. Crochet needles momentarily stop their flurrying. "Last night I fell asleep in here watchin' the TV and next thing I know I feel a WHACK and hear somebody screamin', 'YOU'RE SNORING! STOP IT!' It's her, Hannah. She threw her slippers at my back! You scared the hell outa me!" Pat says to Hannah.

"You're always falling asleep in the TV room. I couldn't hear my program," Hannah defends herself.

"I can't help it," Pat says.

"But my goodness, it's so loud! How can a person hear?" Hannah demands.

"Well, you do somethin' you think I don't know, but you do it!" Pat, smiling, winks at the others. "You give it out ..."

"From the other end!" Gertrude exclaims, catching on. Hannah's breath catches and her eyes, sheepish, look up from half-closed lids. She starts to respond but not knowing how, stops. "At least mine comes out the good end!" Gertrude finishes, satisfied.

"Yeah, you really send 'em up! You think I'm sleepin' when I'm not and I hear you! WHOMP!" Pat accompanies this with an upward thrust of her fist and massive arm.

"Fat Pat," Hannah whispers under her breath. But they all laugh, and laugh and laugh, Hannah included. She feels like a *real* person, not Hannah, Albert's wife, Sammy's mother, Hannah, *Grandmother*.

"Well never mind, we'll all go out to lunch. After Josephina gets back from Mass. We'll get George to take us in the van to Denny's." Pat returns to her crocheting.

That was at breakfast before Sammy picked Hannah up, one thing led to another and she hurled awful words at her son. By the time she got back from Sammy's Josephina had returned from Mass and they'd all left, without Hannah. Instead, she sits on the red-striped deck chair, alone, an old

woman in slacks and running-shoes, staring out at the Gulf, watching the sun drop in the sky, turning over in her mind the day's events.

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At her son's home, a Florida-style ranch on a canal, Hannah, her daughter-in-law Grace, grand-daughter Mary and husband Joe gather around the pool. It's hot. Hannah sits tight-kneed in a canvas deck chair under the patio umbrella, dabs at her neck and throat with a linen handkerchief and periodically checks her watch. She plans to stay until noon then leave just in time for lunch.

Mary and Joe's four-year old, JB, tilts back onto the heels of new rattlesnake cow-boy boots, clumps about, a storm of energy, showing off. In tight jeans, his lean little-boy's body swaggers, runs, twists, falls; furtively he raises eyes bright as polished rock, a lustrous brown-gold cat's-eye, checks who's looking, scoots back up, on the move again. Hannah is exhausted watching, and loses her heart.

"Come on tigh, thiats enough, naow," Joe drawls as he sweeps JB into his arms. "Let's get yew into thiat there pool."

"Can I get you anything, Mom?" Grace asks. Grace always asks Hannah, very solicitous.

Grace has been especially kind to Hannah since her move to Florida, Hannah has to admit, very warm and generous. Grace is that kind of person. But she and Hannah had had their problems; no doubt Grace still remembers, memory like an elephant, never lets go. It's not healthy to be like that. Al said things he probably never should have, but Grace claims he made accusations Hannah can't recall. *What's the matter, Sammy, you gotta marry this girl? She trap you into somethin'?* Why wouldn't her Albert be upset with the marriage? Hannah's eyes flash even now, so long after. He and Hannah were never synagogue-goers, but a *shiksa*?

It was Grace, it's true, who asked Hannah about Rosh Hashonah, Yom Kippur, Channukah, Passover, and Grace who asked for the Jewish Cookbook. That's where Hannah made the mistake. Hannah didn't know that much about the holidays from the *Torah* point of view, but she ought to have given Grace her copy of *The Theodore Herzl Hadassah Group's "Fiddlin' in the Kitchen."* Hannah sighs ... It's all *my* fault the girl became anorexic; not a spot of flesh you could noodle. Although, Grace *is* somewhat better now; put on a little weight, the bones not so alone.

Since that time in the beginning when Al made those slurs -- maybe he *had* gone too far -- not everything ran smoothly between Grace, Sammy and Hannah. Still ...

"Mom? Can I get you anything?" Hannah hears Grace repeat, interrupting her thoughts.

"No, no dear, I'm just fine," Hannah replies with a wave-like gesture of her hand and a glance at her watch.

Grace goes into the kitchen to prepare some lunch; Hannah did not want lunch, she was going *out* to lunch. At one time she would have jumped to help Grace in the kitchen. Not anymore. Hannah's learned. Sometimes she offers, she *asks*. "I don't mind," Grace once responded, "I think I've finally convinced myself your helping isn't a criticism."

Hannah's relieved Grace has come to that. Feeling useful's important to Hannah, that goes without saying. Can she sit and not *do* when she could be in the kitchen making blintzes? Frankly though, Grace's sense of Hannah's disapproval is not unfounded. Grace's housekeeping *is* disastrous. Not *so* bad now she's restricted her hobbies to the bedroom. What a room! Forget it! Mak-up, sticky candy wrappers, paperbacks, newspapers, needlepoint, dried flowers, recycled paper, scissors and glue, hairbrushes sprouting tangled strands, strewn blouses -- bright yellow and green flowery affairs - - shoes everywhere ... Hopeless, that's all Hannah can say.

By the pool Hannah's grand-daughter Mary smokes while watching her son JB in the water, his chest plopped across a rubber inner-tube, thrashing his arms in front, kicking his legs inside the

doughnut's center. Mary's a chain-smoker, a dirty habit; Hannah wishes she'd stop, but she keeps her mouth shut.

"Joe's going to school to learn a trade, grandmom, did you hear? Installing heating units." What kind of *lemmishkeh* learns heating in Florida? Hannah bites her lip -- *Once the milk's spilt ...*

"Driving the truck kept him away too much," Mary goes on. "We're getting married soon, did Daddy tell you? Joe wants it. JB's four now. It'll be the Sunday after Christmas."

"That's nice," Hannah smiles, checking her watch, thinks: A *grand-daughter*, talks like it was an immaculate conception, that's what the *goyim* call it. So much *goyishe!* *Goyishe* mess, *goyishe* cooking, *goyishe* names ... And Mary's got a *goyishe kop!* Hannah knocks her own head as if talking aloud. How did Sammy allow all this?

"We're being married in our home, grandmom," Mary tells her.

She's not getting the family sterling, certainly not! Hannah stews. There used to be a name ... *Mistress!* What can I say? *Sorry dear for being late with my gift, time flies so. No sooner's the baby born it's time for a wedding present!* Ridiculous!

"Not in church?" In front of the Christmas tree and under the picture of Mother Mary and Baby Jesus? "By a Rabbi?" Hannah asks aloud, pointedly, she can't help herself.

Hannah long ago became resigned to her son having married Grace, one of *them*, but she's never forgiven Sammy for the way he and Grace brought up the children, she out of ignorance, he out of spite. Just one queer duck, that's what my son is, she tells others with a wry twist of her lips. Do my grandchildren know anything about Channukah or the High Holydays, or about *kosber?* We always mixed meat and dairy, Albert and me, but do Sammy's children even *know* they're not supposed to? Hannah's youngest, Martin, told her to M.Y.O.B., Mind Your Own Business.

"No, not by a Rabbi, by an Ecumenical Minister," Sammy puts in. "What're you checking your watch for, Ma?"

"I'm getting tired, Sammy, I want to go," Hannah answers.

"You're always complaining we're running off. Where're *you* running? Sit a little, I'm going to take a quick dip. Here I come, JB, Grandpop's coming, yes I am!" Sammy shouts in his singsong reserved for children.

Hannah's going to be late. Josephina will be getting back from Mass, then she and the others will wait a few minutes and leave without her. Hannah taps her track-shoed foot and, unseeing, flips through the pages of one of Grace's glossy women's magazines. Hannah will have to hold her annoyance in check; how can she tell Sammy all this nonsense about children and fathers and weddings has become tiresome and she wants to go out to lunch with the girls?

Hannah fidgets her body, looks once again at her watch and drops the magazine onto a table. "I want to go, Sammy, I told you I'm getting tired!" Toweling his hair dry, water dripping from his peppery beard, Sammy says irritably, "Okay, okay, Mom. Don't be in such a rush."

He was paying no attention. Just the way Al used to be. She told Al throughout their marriage: We don't *need* another new car, you just bought this one! Didn't *want* to take a trip to Montreal before he died, didn't *want* to be dragged all over the place. I'm too old for that, she told him. He hadn't listened. In the end she always did what Albert wanted, gave in, no sense fighting it.

Neither does Sammy listen. Not my younger son Martin either, she thinks. And I shouldn't have listened to *them*.

"Look, Ma. About your building going Condo ... I'm not letting you buy in, and *I'm* not putting money in, it's too risky," Sammy had said. "Just go on renting the place, let somebody else put their own money up."

That was a while back, after Al had been dead ten years, but Sammy and Martin treat her the same today. She pictures Martin nodding in agreement with Sammy, hears him.

"Frankly Mom, I don't have time right now to look into it. Sammy's right. Rent."

"I've got my own money, I can do it without you," Hannah remembers saying stubbornly. She's angry just thinking about it, clenches her fists, her chest expands. Hannah's bosom has grown larger over the years, she doesn't know how it got so big.

"No, Ma, you don't have enough. Listen to us, we wouldn't steer you wrong."

Well, she doesn't care *what* Martin said, she'd been too old to worry about being forced from her apartment.

And now she wants to leave. She wants to go out to lunch with the girls. Maybe Al hadn't listened about a lot of things but he *was* attentive. Romantic, a gentleman. Remember Hannah, remember the time Al hid money under the rug, it made such a lump you tripped over it? He was saving for a present he said, a surprise. What a guy!

No, Sammy was not like his father *that* way. He'd never have his father's charm, the way he used to make her laugh, *Do you want to see the moon, Hannah!* jokingly, scowling, pretending anger over something she'd said. Sammy doesn't see her enough as a woman, a real person, to tease like that.

And so, these thoughts piling one upon the other as she fidgeted, tapped her foot, flipped through her magazine and checked the time, Hannah had gotten mad and that's when she blurted, "If you live to be a hundred you'll never be like your father!" That's when Sammy's arm stopped in mid-air, he went pale, stared at Hannah, and everyone fell silent.

"What's wrong, grandmom?" JB's high-up voice cut through, "Daddy, what's wrong with mom-mom?"

Hannah set her lips. She had nothing else to say.

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Staring out onto the darkening gulf, its waters moody purple, Hannah twists her handkerchief, her hands trembling, pushes her legs firmly together. She admonishes herself: Such a foolish old lady! A second chance, truly, new friends, Fat Pat and crazy Josephina, Sammy and Martin so good -- *and* Grace -- a grand-daughter near-by, little JB ... To walk outside anytime, feel the sun on her bare arms, see the shimmering Gulf, the beach, palm trees ... Remarkable. She is very lucky. Yes. That's what she tells everyone. Why then does she feel this way? Tears well up, she twists the handkerchief tighter.

The still-glistening path through the water narrows to the sun; the last chance, Hannah whispers. At this low slant it washes palms and beach, the few remaining figures along the sand bar and Hannah herself with deep gold making the world around her achingly mysteriously beautiful; idyllic -- unicorns and white stallions.

It's turning chilly. The tide is out. Dark and wet and muddy where the water had been sea-gulls stand their one-legged guard over pebbles, shells and driftwood, small sculptures. The sun at the horizon burns red-orange, its embers consuming clouds drifting across it, the sky an inferno. Soon the sun will drop off the edge, disappear.

Sammy had driven her back, neither of them speaking. I must have hurt him, Hannah admits. Why didn't I just tell him, "I have someplace to go"? It should have been simple enough. But she didn't, she said she was tired; she *had* to say one thing to get the other. Never mind, Sammy should have listened at the beginning and she shouldn't have to explain anything. These thoughts nag at her.

Hannah *thinks* Sammy knows why she's angry, but she's not certain. He seemed so defenseless, an injured bird, banded sea-gull. His eyes, *her* eyes, slanted and icy green, looked

innocent, confused, and Sammy, her son, looked tired and old. His face clay, sparse hair and beard white, lips thin like Hannah's, the lower receded as if the gums had given out, shoulders sloping, none really, his middle paunchy; on the whole, wearing down. When she closes her eyes Hannah sees Sammy putting on his shirt, buttoning it, his long slender fingers trembling.

I didn't apologize, no, and I won't say I'm sorry because I'm not, Hannah says vehemently. She imagines herself at Denny's with Josephina, Pat, Gertrude and Bertie; it's crowded with young couples and noisy children. Pat digs into a stack of syrup-soaked pancakes.

"That don't look like no diet to me," Gertrude digs.

"You're not one to talk," Pat answers and shoots a look at Gertrude's heaped plate. Gertrude shuts up. With a sly glance at Hannah she makes a show of stifling a belch. "See, Hannah, how good I'm bein'?"

Bertie is all fluttery and lights another cigarette; her eyes dart from table to table. She's not used to all this commotion and worries aloud they'll miss the van back. Josephina shows her ring to the waitress, tells about her sister the nun. And they all ask Hannah about *Face the Nation*. "You're the intellectual, Hannah," they say, and to herself Hannah marvels, *ME!*

Her thoughts return to Sammy. And Grace, and the grand-children. Hannah strokes one misshapen hand over the other, then dabs at her eyes; her heart aches so ...

I wanted ... why is it so difficult? ... I wanted to go out to lunch with the girls.

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