

Announcer: None of the voices in this series are ongoing patients of Esther Perel. Each episode of Where Should We Begin is a one-time counseling session. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, names and some identifiable characteristics have been removed. But their voices and their stories are real.

Her : To be honest, I'm waiting for him to make a decision because obviously I can't.

Esther Perel: Nine months ago, this woman found out that her husband had reconnected with a childhood girlfriend in his hometown where he went to visit his ailing mother.

Him: I remember that first night. I went to the bathroom and I looked at myself in the mirror and I was like, "Listen." I was like, "We're good. You've got this. This is fine. I have this under control."

Esther Perel: It's been nine months that they're grappling with the ravages of this infidelity, but also decades long of acting out on his part preceding.

Her : Little did I know that he had been going online to all these different chat rooms.

Him: At first, I kind of wanted to seek the solace of strangers. It happened over time.

Esther Perel: A decision needs to be made because the other relationship is not over, contrary to what the wife thought. But she wants him to make the decision and his decision would be not to make a decision.

Her : He's still just hedging his bets all the time. He won't commit.

Her (Start of S...: I feel like sometimes I'm living with a time bomb. He's been telling me he loves me and he wants to be with me and this is where he wants to be. And then at the same time, he's still been in communication with this other person. I don't trust. I don't trust what he's telling me. Over the past nine months, he said these same things and saying these things to this other woman at the same time. He's like a chameleon, pleasing whoever he's with based upon what he needs.

Esther Perel: Tell me, that sentence that you just gave me, "He pleases everyone he's with," that's new or that's the man you've known?

Her : Yes, he's definitely a perfectionist and definitely someone who goes above and beyond to make people happy or to do well at work. He's there 110%. I've always known that. I've always seen that. I've loved that. But I didn't know what disappointment it was giving him maybe internally when he wasn't pleasing somebody. He can't let it go. He can't let it go. That-

Esther Perel: Fair?

Him: Yeah. I think that's probably accurate. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Esther Perel: Say more. She knows you well, but say more.

Him: I grew up in, it was just my mother and I. I think I was always in a position of having to prove. I think I was driven early, almost to kind of prove that I more than belonged.

Esther Perel: I very quickly get a sense that this man has a story and he repeats the story to himself, this child of the single mother, the only child of divorce and his school. But at the end of the story, he still doesn't really understand why he's doing what he's doing.

Him: I can't. My behavior's not completely explainable. I don't know if it was a midlife crisis or what was happening. We're so much farther along in these nine months. She says in these nine months that I've said certain things and then done things to negate the things that I've said.

Esther Perel: You can talk to her.

Him: I think in many ways I've been trying to figure it out, but on my timeline. While I've been trying to pull away, I haven't pulled away, exclusively been able to really cut the cord. But I'm working on it. I know that doesn't sound right, but it's really all I could do at this time.

Esther Perel: No. I don't think so.

Him: No?

Esther Perel: No. I think part of why you seem to be hitting a wall, see, it's because there is a kind of a manifest story. But then there's a latent story and that one isn't clear to you. On some level, you don't really know what's happening to you. You know what you've done, but you don't really know why what. Why now? Why come? I wanted to ask you first, what have you understood so far of you?

Him: Of my actions?

Esther Perel: Of you. Of you, yeah. Of your actions and, most importantly, of what your actions tell you.

Him: I think there was such a curiosity at the beginning in the chat rooms, such a curiosity. I loved getting to know other people. I described it as fishing because I was basically fishing to try to gather attention in these chat rooms and how you could do that. Even though there was a sexual component to it, I learned a lot about human behavior, I really did.

Esther Perel: What did you learn about you?

Him: That I was likable, that there was something of value that people liked me, that women liked me. I think along-

Esther Perel: Because, slow down, slow down. Because before that, I thought and felt what?

Him: Alone, more alone, more isolated.

Esther Perel: And I thought of myself as what? You can connect that guy with the teenage one and with the younger one. I am likable and I am not what I've always thought of myself, which is what?

Him: I rub people the wrong way, even when I wasn't trying to run them the wrong way. I just rub people the wrong way. In the chat rooms, I might be worth spending a couple minutes with.

Esther Perel: But it's low risk.

Him: Sure.

Esther Perel: What other tricks did you try?

Him: I stumbled on this name, dopamine, in there. I thought that was ironic. I reached out, said something that I probably thought was semi-clever, and she responded. I was really trying to stop the whole process at this point, I really was. I didn't want to have anything to do with this.

Esther Perel: Are you okay listening to this?

Her : Yeah. I mean I want to-

Esther Perel: You do?

Her : I mean yeah.

Esther Perel: Because I can also take a few minutes alone with him.

Her : No. Because I know about this person and I need the truth.

Esther Perel: It's interesting because what I'm hoping to do with him and with you is to get away from the truth about the other people and get closer to the truth about him.

Her : I know.

Esther Perel: If he starts to talk now about the women, to me, it's a deflection.

Her : I agree. I agree.

Esther Perel: So as seductive as it may be to hear about her and to think you're going to find something there or he's going to find something there, but I hope that you leave here with things that you haven't yet talked, felt, or thought about. I think you may get more from understanding the meaning than the facts. Some of this is going to be for you to not fall into your typical stories. If you just tell it as the next anecdote, you won't learn anything new about you. This is true for all of us. We have a way of thinking about ourselves. We have a way of understanding ourselves and then we pile up stories that come to confirm it.

Esther Perel: But the truth doesn't lie there and the understanding doesn't lie there. You may stay in this marriage. You may leave this marriage and you won't have understood squat. The issue is not can you make a decision? You don't know what the decision is about. It is about the marriage and of the marriage, but it's also about what happened to you with the latest woman and the latest installment, but also throughout your life. This I say to you too, you kind of organized yourselves around we must make a decision. Does it stay in the attic or does it come back to the bedroom? Tell me something. What happened in the car?

Esther Perel: One part of his story that did seem to matter a great deal was a recent interaction with his teenage daughter in the car.

Him: They made a crack about me not being their real father.

Esther Perel: Who is they?

Him: My children. Where I felt super disrespected, which I haven't done well with my whole life, obviously. That would be a trigger point for me.

Esther Perel: They said you were not their father because?

Him: Well, because we had problems having babies and we needed a donor. We told them at a very early age in an effort to be healthy that Mommy and Daddy needed some help. So I went through two surgeries and we did everything we could. We went to the top of the line. I had a backup. I had a donor backup.

Esther Perel: Did you tell the daughters how hard you worked on this-

Him: Yeah, yeah.

Her : Oh yeah.

Esther Perel: ... how much you tried? They know all of that. So basically, they knew that this is your Achilles' heel and if they really want to get at you, this is the thing they need to throw at you?

Her : Yeah.

Him: Pretty much.

Her : It's just words. They understand, do you know what I mean?

Esther Perel: They understand nothing. They don't understand how much it hurts him.

Her : No.

Esther Perel: And they don't understand how much this may also be at the core of a lot of your acting out.

Him: Yeah. The friend, the woman I grew up with in my hometown, it's ironic that she has two boys. I also think it's ironic that she's a single mother.

Esther Perel: It's not ironic.

Her : I know.

Esther Perel: It's extremely well-chosen. You need enough elements to be able to repeat your story, your origin story, and maybe have the opportunity to play with it and change it. But do you know what you're trying to change?

Him: Myself?

Esther Perel: I don't know. What specifically?

Him: I think in some ways I can actually rewind history for me, right? I could be there for someone who seems really appreciative too. I mean one of the things I got in trouble with with her is I stumbled on this book. He's a runner and I sent him a book that I knew that he would really, really like because I wanted him to know that I was watching from afar, that I cared about him, I mean that I wanted him to know that he was valued.

Esther Perel: I have a sense that what I've just watched is a very old dynamic here whereby he highlights how the girls make him feel that he's not legit by throwing at him the genetic factor. They can really go and say, "You're not my dad," something that kids often will say to parents when they're upset. But when there is a piece of truth to it, some element, even though he's raised them from day one, they really know where they're aiming. And then the mother tries to defend the girls by just saying, "It's just words. The girls don't understand what he's going through."

Esther Perel: But in that moment, maybe the mother doesn't either. So he experiences that as a microaggression. He doesn't say it. I'm not even sure it's conscious. And then when he cries about how he was able to be so kind to the son of his lover, who doesn't question his DNA and so his competence and his legitimacy is

intact, then he's basically firing back a microaggression at the wife to say, "Here I may be incompetent, but there I'm deep appreciated."

- Her : You have two girls. They still need you. They need a father to really throw himself into them.
- Him: I know. I just can't change them, the little ones.
- Her : But you're not supposed to change them.
- Him: I have to wait for them to come to me.
- Esther Perel: Why is that?
- Him: They don't want to talk about it.
- Esther Perel: No, no, no, no. Don't put it all on them.
- Him: I don't know. I don't know. I'm sure I'm tough on them. I'm tough on them. I want them to be great. I want them to apply themselves.
- Esther Perel: So you're replaying the not enough, prove yourself?
- Him: Yeah. I guess so. It's the only way I knew how to get there.
- Her : They love him so much that it kills me that he ... It just kills me. They're all like this with each other, all of them, in different ways. But the three of them are like this with each other.
- Him: No. We go off on our own trips. We did that. We used to do that.
- Esther Perel: Don't argue.
- Him: No.
- Esther Perel: Listen for a split second.
- Her : I'm not saying that there's not moments. But I think there is some wall or something where I think the older one is more mature, more articulate to be able to not be afraid to say what she feels. She will be very direct about how she feels. She's not afraid to challenge you.
- Him: No.
- Her : The younger one though hasn't found a voice yet. She's in that awkward age where she doesn't even understand what her voice is. I think the younger one doesn't talk because everybody else does the talking for her. I think-

Him: She also has her escapes.

Her : That's why she escapes.

Him: Well, she has these darn devices and she watches her repeated television shows. It's ridiculous.

Her : It's easier. It's easier. She doesn't have to fight with them. She could think what she wants to think about those shows and not have somebody else tell her, "No, you're wrong," the way that you're thinking.

Esther Perel: One moment you get over-involved and you want to control the whole thing. The next minute, because you don't succeed at it, you say, "Fuck it."

Her : That's exactly what happens.

Esther Perel: "I've had it. I'm out of here." And then on occasion, you think, "No, I'm not going to do what my father did. I'm not going to abandon my children."

Him: Right.

Esther Perel: But then you say, "I want to be rewarded for that. They have to make me feel good about the fact that I didn't do what he did."

Him: Right. Yeah, that's right.

Esther Perel: Because you're not doing well at home, you find yourself another family where you think you can come in as the shining prince. If I can't help my daughters, I'll help those little boys with whom you create this kind of overlapping identification, "I once was that boy." You've confused realities.

Him: Right. I feel to that end that I'm being where someone also truly needs me and also understands me as well. Just bear with me here as we go into this. I mean I'm not trying to be hurtful. But I think there's a sense of you say people have responsibilities. I know my responsibility's with you and the girls. But I feel terribly guilty having entered her life in such a way.

Her : You know what? You know what? She-

Him: Now, I understand that really makes-

Her : But listen, listen, listen. She's got a family out there. She's got plenty of people to take care of her.

Him: She does.

Her : She's been taking care of herself and taking care of those boys and doing exactly what she wanted to do and making her choices way before you came into the picture.

Him: I know.

Her : You got to kind of understand that because I'm actually not here to let you just go and live out your other reality.

Him: I know.

Her : That's the bottom line.

Him: I know.

Her : I've had enough with that. I've been very forgiving. I've been very patient, very patient. But you say there's a decision to make. It's time to either actually put the work into this and figure this out or just go, so then I can go live my life.

Esther Perel: He ain't going to make a decision. You're going to make the decision.

Her : I know that. I know. I know that. I know.

Esther Perel: You're going to have to accept that the way this end goes is I want him to make the decision so I don't have to be the one that is responsible for breaking up my family. Let him do the dirty job. It's his doing. So then you end up sitting and waiting. You could wait for a few years like this. The woman is irrelevant. It's all about him. The test for you is to actually stay in a place where you're not doing so well and make it better rather than continuously seek out places, people, women in particular, who give you a stage to do mini performances.

Him: I don't want to hurt her anymore. I really don't. I just hope I have enough control to not hurt her anymore. I love her.

Her : I think that's what's so confusing to me. I just can't relate to not having control. If you know you're going to do something that's going to hurt somebody, then just don't do it. It's hard for me.

Esther Perel: Sometimes it's very hard to understand the logic of if you know it's going to hurt, why do you do it? What he's giving to the little boy inside of him, the affirmation, the importance, the whole spiel, the selfish part for him, in that moment, takes precedence of everything. It's not what he's doing to others, it's what he's doing for himself.

Her : Yeah. But then that's like indulgence.

Esther Perel: Yep.

Her : That's indulgence.

Esther Perel: You will call it indulgence and he will think that is primary food. That's the piece that needs to come out if this is to move. Not because you have to accept it, but because it needs to be at least properly labeled.

Her : Yeah.

Him: Why is the little boy so much in the forefront right now? Why is he coming on with a vengeance?

Esther Perel: Because your mother got sick. Because you're about to lose your mother. There was a sincerity to this question. Maybe one of the first moments when he stopped and found it. As I'm listening to it, it sounds as if I was kind of impatient with him and dismissive. That was really not the idea. It was more just to say, "It's so obvious why now." But it came out as if I was saying, "You don't know that? So obvious." That's really not okay.

Esther Perel: You found another woman that actually helps you with your sense of terror and helplessness. In an interesting way, I think it has less to do with this family and more to do with your family of origin. It's more about your mother than your wife and your daughters. The chat rooms, the nannies, all of that, that's a different story. But if you ask me for the timing, what better way to protect yourself against loss than to find someone who is completely dependent on you.

Her : When you say that there was this emotional connection, this person cares for you and loves you and everything and I guess I'm going off a little off-track here a little bit about me at this moment, but-

Esther Perel: It's okay. You can insert yourself back in the story.

Him: Please do. Please do.

Her : It makes me feel diminished. It makes me feel replaceable. It makes me feel replaceable. One thing he would say to be at the beginning is that, "If I had met this woman before I met you, this is someone I could have seen myself live my life with." I was so shocked. I thought I was finally giving him the family that he needed to complete himself.

Esther Perel: I know.

Her : I was giving him the stability. I was trying to be loving, calm, and compassionate, and a good mother. I was trying to do all these things. I thought I was really giving you everything that you wanted.

Him: You were.

Her : It's like but that's where it was that-

Esther Perel: Did you hear?

Her : ... you were. I was. But it wasn't enough.

Esther Perel: But that may not be because you're not enough. That's the catch here is to not translate this as if I was more, he wouldn't do this, instead of, I was plenty.

Her : I know.

Esther Perel: Whatever he did is not a response to you. You have got to know that.

Her : I know.

Esther Perel: Okay. No matter how much you've given him. There's a piece of it he's going to have to do on his own.

Her : I know.

Esther Perel: Or not.

Her : Or not. Or not.

Him: Can I just say something to qualify the comment that this was someone I could live or see myself with a life with? I think in some ways, as warped as it may sound, I felt that was ... It's not a compliment to you, but it's the idea that this wasn't just a floozy. This was someone of substance. The idea was it was an-

Esther Perel: May I stop you?

Him: Yeah.

Esther Perel: I think the only or the most important thing at this moment, if you will say something to your wife has to be about acknowledging how shitty a thing it was to say and how hurtful it was and not to justify yourself, seriously.

Him: I really wasn't trying to hurt her.

Esther Perel: I don't care if you were trying, but when we do, you own it.

Him: Yeah. Okay. I'm sorry. I am.

Her : Yeah. What makes it worse is you keep justifying it when sometimes it's just someone just wants to hear, "I'm sorry," and, "That was wrong."

Esther Perel: The challenge for you is that you see yourself as a good person and you're doing not good things. So you keep trying to close the gap.

Esther Perel: There's a lot of things that have been triggered by the fact that his mother is dying. There's also a lot of acting out, from the chat rooms to the nannies to all kinds of unsavory behaviors that really has happened over a 20-year period. So it's probably not the wisest thing to just try to come up with one reason to explain a whole behavior.

Him: I know I want to stay. I know I want to stay. I know I want to fix this. I know I want to move on. I don't want to have to answer for it forever. I just want to work on putting it behind me.

Her : Go with me here. Putting it behind you, we all move forward. But part of putting that behind you is also acknowledging that this happened and it is part of your story now. It should be the catalyst or the inspiration to be like, "Where have I gone now because of this?"

Him: I am. I'm acknowledging all that. I just don't want to talk about it 100 times a day.

Her : Yeah. I get that.

Him: Okay.

Her : Our life obviously hasn't been completely easy. There have been everything about our infertility. It took a long, long time. Not only him, but I went through many, many, many, many different treatments and medications, miscarriages, different things. I've had a lot of loss on my side. I don't have my parents anymore. I don't have a sibling anymore. I've had to kind of rush all these emotions along because I needed to be a wife and I needed to be a mother. I think what I'm feeling right now with all of this when you say you don't want to talk about it all the time is that this one I can't rush.

Her : If I'm feeling depressed or I'm feeling anxious or if something's triggering me, I shouldn't have to apologize for it, as if that's going to trigger you. I think that's my biggest fear.

Him: No. It's not about that. Listen, I think we're also a very dramatic family. I think we are.

Esther Perel: Talk to her. Don't be-

Him: I think we are prone to drama. I just think there's a sense of wallowing in it too.

Her : Yeah. But when you kept all this connection going on with this other person, it's like I can sense that. I can't really move on and just pick myself up when it's continuing on.

Him: I know.

Esther Perel: I like to think sometimes that when a crisis occurs like this in a relationship, it kind of lights up the scorecard of the relationship. The arrangements you made, the spoken and the unspoken compromises, the implicit agreements, the explicit ones, and what I'm hearing from you is, look, husband of mine, something that I realize is that I basically have continuously moderated my own emotional experience by checking in how it would affect you. If I didn't think you could take it, I would cut my grief. I just have always asked myself not what do I feel, but how will it affect-

Him: You.

Esther Perel: ... you. This has been pretty much the way we've been for 25 years.

Him: That's terrible. I mean I don't want you to do that.

Esther Perel: That is. It is neither a good thing or a terrible thing. These things are way more complicated than just right and wrong. But now my anger about all the other times when I cut things short because I was thinking of you is coming out because for once in my life I need you to think about me first.

Him: Yes.

Esther Perel: So when she says, "I need you to think about me," you can't start coming back and saying, "Honey, on occasion just be a little happy." This is bullshit because you know damn well that part of why she can't is because you keep sniffing under her nose. So you have to be really careful not to push each other out of the door when actually nobody really wants to go anywhere.

Him: Nobody wants to go.

Esther Perel: I want to ask you something, because you did mention loss and you mentioned your parents. You mentioned your siblings and you mentioned the miscarriages. You mentioned the infertility and you mentioned the sperm donor. You mentioned your mother. We need to talk about loss. You need to talk to each other about loss.

Her : I don't want to lose any more. I can't lose any more. How much more do I put up with because I'm afraid of loss? How much more do I put up with? How do I trust you?

Him: Listen. We know each-

Esther Perel: Hold on one second. Every time you talk, you create a buffer. Just look at her and listen.

Him: You're killing me.

Esther Perel: Because there's no screen here. There's no delete button. This one you can't just control. You have to actually not pretend you're dealing with distress, but actually be present for the distress.

Her : It's the girls too.

Him: Go ahead.

Her : I just want you to know it hurt me.

Him: I know. I know.

Her : I want you to put us first before yourself.

Him: I never wanted to hurt you. I mean she's had many friends who've wanted her to end this. Be strong. Walk out.

Esther Perel: Why does that make you laugh?

Him: I don't know.

Esther Perel: Talk to me about loss. In fact, not talk to me, talk to her.

Him: I lost the ability to have kids the way most guys have kids.

Esther Perel: How has that been for you?

Him: I never thought it was that much. I just rolled with it quick. But obviously, it hurts me. I love that my oldest, she has a lot of similar personality traits. I love those traits. I love her sense of humor. I love her spiritedness. The little one is ferociously funny. But I also feel sometimes distant, more distant than I want to be because I don't have that cellular connection. It hurts me. And then it reinforces it when they hit that dig that I'm not their real father. I just feel like some sort of standby.

Esther Perel: Because he knows that he's not the genetic father, the biological father, he then interprets his distance as being rooted in that. But that's a construction. It could have been about anything else. Maybe he's distant because he's too self-involved. Maybe he's distant because he doesn't like to be in a place where he doesn't feel competent. So everybody's using the same weapon, him to explain himself, them to push him away and attack him. But if that wasn't the weapon, there would be another way for kids to tell their parents, "I don't love you."

You're not my real person. How can I be your daughter? You mustn't be my father." There's loads of ways that people try to say, "Our relationship is broken." That is the statement, not the origins.

Esther Perel: You have a way of talking about very painful things in passing, like two surgeries, like many miscarriages. These things, even though you had your girls and you have to be thankful that they are there, these things, they scar us. I think if you allowed yourself more of that sadness, you'd be less into your sense of I deserve because you deserving is kind of the entitlement of the deprived. When I said to you before, "Why does that make you laugh?" It's because it's the laughter of self-loathing. It's not a real laughter. You escape from something and you fantasize into something.

Esther Perel: It's the something that we're trying to understand, otherwise you're going to continue to say, "I don't want to hurt you," and then go call the other lady and hurt her. In the end, you'll hurt both of them and you'll have two women who are pissed off at you, who want you and you will feel so important.

Him: Ridiculous.

Esther Perel: Do you see the dance?

Him: I know. The thing is I love this woman. I love this woman. I love her. We're good together. We're good.

Her : You're an integral part of our family unit. But you're also someone I really care about.

Him: I know. I love you too. You know that.

Her : It is like a roller coaster. That's why I've kept going on and on.

Esther Perel: Yep. And when he says, "You know that," then your head says, "Well, if you know that I know, then why do you keep doing things that hurt me? Then obviously you don't. So no, I don't know it. Why would I know it?" So that one is a slippery slope.

Him: It is.

Her : Yeah. That's why I have to start saying to myself, "Enough is enough." Enough is enough. I don't want to be this person.

Esther Perel: Which one?

Her : The person that keeps letting it all slide by. I don't want to be that. I don't. There's more to me than that.

Esther Perel: What would happen if he moved out? He will move to Ohio?

Him: No.

Esther Perel: What will you do all alone?

Him: Me?

Esther Perel: Yes. You will move to Ohio within a week.

Him: No, probably wouldn't stay there very long.

Esther Perel: Where?

Him: Alone. I don't think so. I don't like being alone. I mean I would try. I don't know. I would try to be alone for a little bit. But I'm sure things would kick back up with my friend in Ohio probably. What are you giving me that look for?

Her : Because it's just it is true.

Him: Well, I mean that's what happened-

Her : It's like that's what you've saying all along.

Him: That's what would happen.

Her : It's like you're lying to me-

Him: I'm not-

Her : You're lying to her. You're lying to yourself.

Him: I'm not lying. I'm not lying.

Her : All this is just-

Him: Actually, I'm not lying.

Her : No, no, no, exactly. That's exactly true. You're absolutely right. The reality is is that within a week you would ... Less than a week, you'd be right back. And honestly, and I would just divorce you.

Him: Okay.

Her : I can't fix-

Him: Isn't it funny how quickly we can get to the other side? I mean it is a slippery slope. I mean you can start running down that mountain real quick.

Esther Perel: But you're provocative. I love you, I love you, I love you. I move out, I'll figure it out. I don't like being alone. I'll solve that problem really fast.

Him: I just know me. I'm being honest.

Esther Perel: I didn't say you're not honest. I'm saying you're provocative. You're asking why did you just go on the other side of the slope? Because you just literally put a banana peel under her foot and then you say she slips. Your honesty is valued, but it has consequences. Because in effect, what you're saying to your wife is, "Not being alone is really the important thing for me. You matter to me, but if you're not there I'll figure it out." How else is she to understand? What comes out is what leads to the next move. You say this kind of stuff, you're going to get that kind of answer.

Him: I know.

Esther Perel: So if you want an end to this misery, it's true that you will have to have a negotiation with the part of you that says, "I deserve this."

Him: Right.

Esther Perel: It's less about the child you were and more about the adult you will be.

Him: Esther Perel is the author of *Mating in Captivity* and *The State of Affairs* and also the host of the podcast, *How's Work?* To apply with your partner for a session for the podcast or for show notes on each episode, go to whereshouldwebegin.estherperel.com. *Where Should We Begin?* With Esther Perel is produced by Magnificent Noise for Gimlet and Esther Perel Productions. Our production staff includes Eric Nuzum, Eva Wolchover, Destry Sibley, Hiwote Getaneh, and Olivia Natt. Recorded by Noriko Okabe. Kristin Mueller is on engineer. Original music and additional production by Paul Schneider.

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