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THE BIG KILLING

by Philip Mackie

(Author of *The Whole Truth*, etc.)

SAMUEL FRENCH

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The Big Killing

This play was first presented at the Princes Theatre, London, on 1st February 1962, with the following cast:

Mary Ashbury	*Ursula Howells*
Peter Ashbury	*Leslie Phillips*
Nora	*Caroline Mortimer*
Gavin Cole	*Richard Coleman*
Liz Barcher	*Carol Coombe*
Charles Barcher	*Frank Lawton*
Inspector Fowler	*Naunton Wayne*
Sergeant Bassett	*David Morrell*

Directed by Allan Davis. *Setting by* Neil Hobson.

The action of the play takes place in Peter Ashbury's house, in Gloucestershire.

ACT ONE

Wednesday and Thursday

ACT TWO

Friday

ACT THREE

Saturday

No character, in this play, is intended to portray any specific person, alive or dead.

Note: *Running time of this play, excluding intervals, is approximately one hour and fifty-five minutes.*

PRODUCTION NOTE

To enjoy *The Big Killing* the audience must enjoy Peter's villainy. Peter is an out-and-out scoundrel. But, for the duration of the play, the audience must suspend moral judgments and at least half-believe that he can get away with murder and at least half-want him to get away with it.

This is not difficult: all the world loves a villain. The actor playing Peter can make it very easy, if he plays with charm and with an infectious enjoyment of his own villainy. Charm is essential: Peter is, after all, a very popular member of Gloucestershire society. Only his wife, Mary, knows the amoral and ruthless side of his nature, and even she isn't really sure about it.

Peter wearing his public face must not only be charming and amusing and attractive—he must also seem completely sincere. Gavin is no fool and Fowler is very clever. They are both, for a time at least, deceived by Peter's lies. Peter must tell his lies with great frankness and honesty, to make it believable that two intelligent men should be so deceived.

I don't want to overstress this: the audience should also, of course, have a good deal of sympathy for the virtuous members of the cast—Mary and Gavin and Fowler. Certainly the audience should enjoy not only Peter's deliberate ironies, but also the other ironies that turn against him; such as Mary's "She spent the whole dinner telling me how lucky I was to have you", and Gavin's "I like your wife. I'm not sure about you".

When the play was first produced we were a bit doubtful whether the audience would swallow the bet scene. Well, every audience so far has swallowed it with no effort at all. I think the key moment comes when Charles stops writing, and turns and stares at Peter. Charles can hold this stare for almost as long as he pleases, because he is going to do the unexpected and therefore enjoyable thing, roar with laughter and take the whole thing as a marvellous joke.

Charles is, of course, a creature of moods and therefore unpredictable. The actor should find a good deal of variety in the part: first truculent, then maudlin, then vinously jolly, then horribly hung-over —and so on.

I originally conceived Fowler as a large, genial, fatherly figure. Then we cast Mr. Naunton Wayne, who is smallish and diffident, and I need hardly say he played the part to perfection. Anyway, the essential thing

is, Fowler at first sight seems rather ordinary, rather plodding, probably not very quick-witted. It must take some time for the audience to recognize that he is just as quick-witted as Peter.

Gavin, not a member of the squirearchy and conscious of it, should be obviously less U than the Barchers and the Ashburys. He could very suitably be played with a slight Scots or provincial accent.

Gavin and Mary have the hardest job in the play, at the end of Act Three, Scene One, and the beginning of Act Three, Scene Two. Gavin goes outside to fix the brakes. While he's out there he thinks, "But I'm on the wrong tack! The murderer isn't Charles, it's Peter—and now Peter's planning a second murder!" When Gavin comes back into the house and tells Peter he did *not* fix the brakes he is, of course, telling the truth. But he is so disturbed by his realization of Peter's guilt that his manner towards Mary is terribly odd and strained—so odd that the audience (I hope) jumps to the wrong conclusion, and believes that he *did*, in fact, fix the brakes.

The wrong conclusion is reinforced by the Gavin-Mary scene at the beginning of Act Three, Scene Two. Here, Gavin is feeling guilty (towards Mary) because he's been cooking up a plot against her husband; but it should appear to the audience that he is feeling guilty because he fixed the brakes on the car.

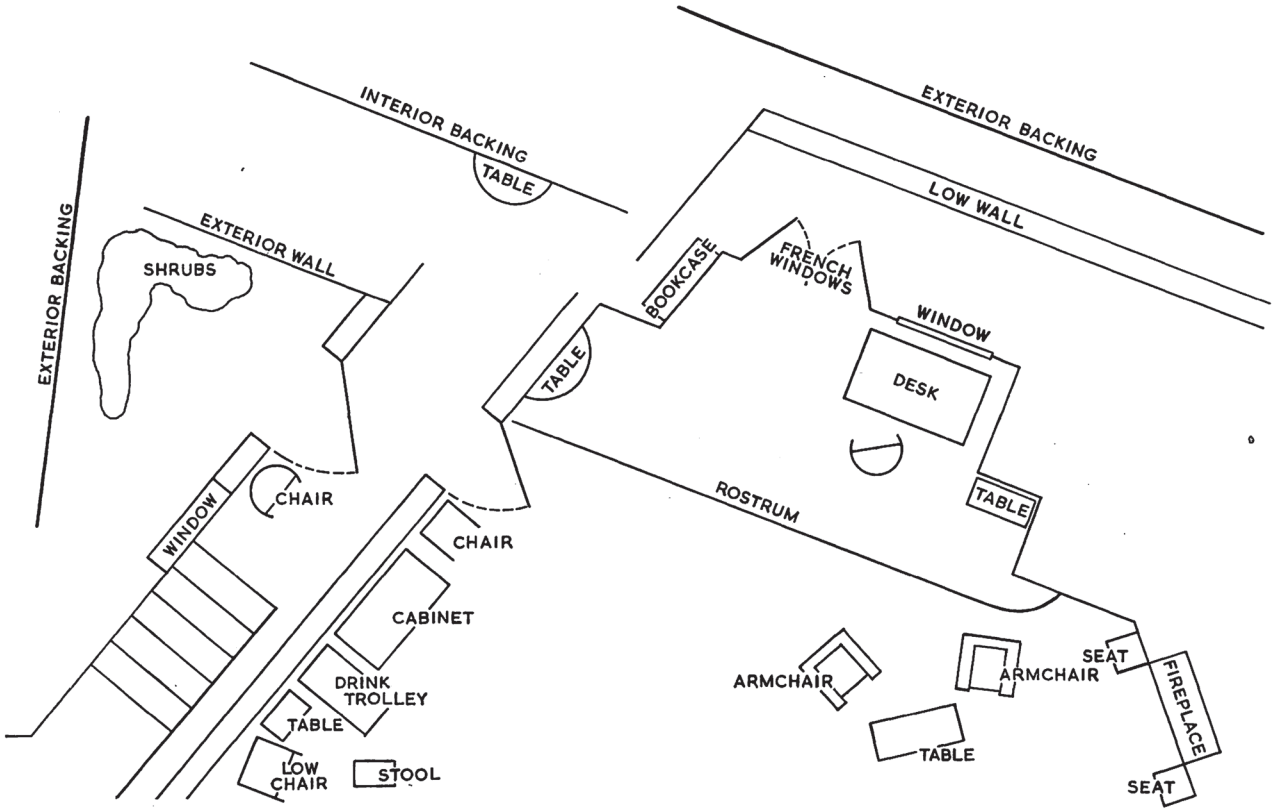
About the set. The cutaway wall is a device to allow the audience to see the hall and the front door. It must be recognizable as a device. It would never do if the audience mistook it for a new idea for open-plan gracious living.

The scenes in the hall may require careful staging. The actors must do their best to ease downstage, close to the non-existent wall, so that they are perfectly visible and audible from the front. (Particularly, "Did you fix the brakes?" "No!" must come over loud and clear.)

In the London production we had blackouts between scenes and curtains only at the end of acts. The blackouts were fine, but they took a good deal of planning and rehearsing, since there is a fair amount of re-setting between scenes. Other producers may find it simpler and better to drop the curtain between scenes. If they do, they should drop it as fast as possible and take it up again as soon as possible.

PHILIP MACKIE

N.B. Interleaved producers' copies of this play are available, price 10s. 6d. (postage 7d. extra), *direct from the Publishers only*.


INTERIOR BACKING
TABLE
EXTERIOR BACKING
LOW WALL
EXTERIOR BACKING
EXTERIOR WALL
SHRUBS
BOOKCASE
FRENCH WINDOWS
WINDOW
TABLE
DESK
WINDOW
CHAIR
CHAIR
ROSTRUM
TABLE
CABINET
DRINK TROLLEY
TABLE
LOW CHAIR
STOOL
ARMCHAIR
ARMCHAIR
SEAT
FIREPLACE
TABLE
SEAT

*THE BIG KILLING

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

PETER ASHBURY's *house in Gloucestershire. Comfortable and smart, country-gentleman style, with some evidence of wealth, but not grand.*

Most of the stage is taken up by the drawing-room. This has french windows looking on to the garden at the back of the house. The door, at the side of the room, gives on to the front hall. The wall downstage of the door is cut away to show the hall and the front door of the house.

At the back of the hall there is a passage to the kitchen and dining room. At the downstage end of the hall there is a staircase leading to the first floor.

About seven o'clock on a Wednesday evening in late summer. It is getting dark outside. The lights are on in the hall. In the drawing-room only one lamp is on. The curtains are drawn back. A fireplace, with a fire burning.

A moment after the curtain rises, MARY ASHBURY *comes into the room from the hall. She is a good-looking girl in her middle twenties. Charming, rather serious, normally calm: but at the moment she is under rather a strain. She is carrying an ice-bucket and a plate of canapés. At the door she looks round, hesitates, decides not to switch on the other lights yet. She puts ice-bucket on drink trolley, canapés on coffee-table, then crosses to fire and puts a log on. She starts towards the window to draw the curtains, but on the way she comes to the writing-desk, glances down at it, and stops. Instinctively, she looks quickly over her shoulder to make sure she's alone. Then she picks up a cheque-book which is lying on the desk, and starts looking through it, stub by stub.*

PETER ASHBURY *comes quickly but quietly down the stairs. He is about thirty, athletic, handsome, with a great deal of charm.*

He pauses a moment in the hall, then goes to the drawing-room door, which is open. He stops in the doorway, seeing MARY, *who does not see him. He stands there looking at her for quite a time. At last he puts out a hand and switches on the other lights so that the room is brightly illuminated.* MARY, *startled, hurriedly pushes the cheque-book back on to the desk and turns to face him.*

PETER. Darling, you'll ruin your eyes.

MARY. I didn't hear you—

PETER. I said your eyes, darling.

(MARY *goes to close french windows.*)

Good fire.

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MARY. Summer's nearly over.

PETER (*goes to the drink-trolley and pushes it to* C.). Mm. Drink?

MARY. No.

PETER. Charles and Liz will arrive half-cut, we don't want them to have too much of an advantage . . . Sure?

MARY. Quite sure. (*She comes down to coffee-table, gets cigarette and lights it.*)

PETER. And what delicious things are you giving us for dinner?

MARY. Soup—sole, and a soufflé—

PETER. Because there's an S in the month.

MARY. I'll go and see how Nora's getting on with it.

(*She makes to go, but* PETER's *voice stops her. It is harder than before.*)

PETER. Darling—

MARY. What?

PETER (*charming again*). Darling, you were reading something when I came in. What were you reading?

MARY. Nothing.

PETER. No, really, darling, what were you reading?

MARY. Your cheque-book.

PETER. (*pleased—he knew it*). Interesting story.

MARY. Yes.

PETER. Bookie, tailor, wine-merchant, horse-dealer, car-dealer. . . . Did you get to the end?

MARY. Yes.

PETER. Where they all lived happily ever after?

MARY. That wasn't the end.

PETER. Wasn't it? What a shame.

(MARY, *without replying, again makes to go. But* PETER *steps in front of her and closes door.*)

MARY. Peter, please—

PETER (*still charming*). Spying again, darling?

MARY. I wanted to know what you were spending.

PETER. As always.

MARY. I'm your wife.

PETER. For richer, for poorer—for broke, for bankrupt—?

MARY. I have a right to know.

PETER. Have you? It isn't your money.

MARY (*after a slight pause—bravely*). No. That went a long time ago. (*She turns away to* L.C. *chair.*)

PETER. Darling, don't look so smug about it.

MARY. I'm not.

PETER. The loyal helpmeet. Straight out of the parish magazine. Why don't you leave me?

MARY. I'm your wife. You can't do without me.

PETER. Can't I? (*He stares at her hard.*) Now, there's a thought worth exploring.

(GAVIN COLE *comes up unseen to the front door. He is thirtyish and mentally tough: a Redbrick intellectual who also played rugger. Shy and lacking in social graces: this makes him seem at first awkward and rather abrupt. He knocks at the front door.* PETER *looks round sharply.*)

MARY. The Barchers.

PETER. They'd sail straight in.

MARY. I'll go. (*She moves above* PETER, *towards door.*)

PETER. Let Nora do it. (*He crosses in front of* MARY *to door and turns at the door.*) You're the lady of the house—for the time being, anyway.

(*He goes out quickly to the hall.* NORA, *the maid—a shy, self-effacing village spinster—comes from the passage at the back of the entrance hall.* PETER *gives her a charming smile.*)

Give me a moment, Nora?

(*He goes quickly up the stairs and out of sight.* NORA *opens the door to* GAVIN.)

NORA. Good evening, Mr. Cole.

GAVIN. Good evening. I wonder if I could use your telephone?

MARY (*calling*). Come in, Gavin. (*She moves to meet him.* NORA *goes back to the kitchen, while* GAVIN *enters the drawing-room.*)

GAVIN. Oh, Mary, I'm sorry about this—I seem to be making a habit of it—but could I use your telephone?

MARY. Help yourself.

GAVIN. I haven't got my car and it's a longish walk to the village. If I could just make one call—

MARY. Of course. (*She indicates the telephone on small table* D.R. *and he goes to it.*)

GAVIN (*picking up the phone and dialling* 0). Very kind of you.

MARY. How are you getting on at the cottage?

GAVIN (*rather disconcertingly*). All right. And you? (*On the phone.*) Inglestone 152. I want a call to Oxford 223—

MARY. Must be rather quiet down there.

GAVIN. I like it quiet, don't you? (MARY *turns away to coffee-table.*) (*On the phone.*) Oh, hullo—Cole here. What's happening with my car? . . . Oh, why not? . . . Oh, I see. All right then . . . Right, I'll come over tomorrow afternoon then. 'bye. (*He hangs up and comes to* R. *of* MARY.) Thank you very much indeed.

(PETER *comes down the stairs, composed and charming again. He cocks an ear, hearing voices, then comes towards the drawing-room.*)

MARY. Any time. Have a drink now you're here. (*She moves to* L. *of drink-trolley.*)

GAVIN. No, I'll get back.

MARY. Peter'll be down in a moment—

PETER (*entering, full of charm*). Talk of the devil. (*To* GAVIN.) Hullo, there. (*He comes down between them to trolley.*)

MARY. Gavin came in to—

PETER. To see you?

GAVIN. To make a phone call.

PETER. And he hasn't got a drink? Darling, you're a terrible hostess. (*To* GAVIN.) What would you like? I think there's everything.

(MARY *moves* D.L. *and sits on arm of chair.*)

GAVIN. No, thanks, I won't.

PETER. My dear chap, this is the great gin-and-tonic belt.

GAVIN. It's just that I can't afford to return hospitality, so I'd rather not accept it.

PETER. If we all worked on that principle, England'd be disgustingly sober. Do.

GAVIN. No, thanks.

PETER (*giving himself a drink*). Well, I'll have one myself, though I can't afford it either—can I, darling?

MARY (*lightly*). But you have no principles.

PETER. How splendidly true. I'll drink to that. Cheers.

GAVIN. Cheers.

MARY (*rises and crosses above* PETER). If you'll excuse me, I'm needed in the kitchen—

PETER (*going to her*). Darling, I take it back, I didn't mean it anyway; you're the most marvellous hostess in the world. (*He gives her a quick fond kiss on the cheek.*) As I'm always telling you.

MARY. Good-bye, Gavin.

GAVIN. Good-bye.

MARY. We'll see you again soon. (*She goes.*)

(GAVIN *is awkwardly silent for a moment.*)

GAVIN. Sorry to have busted in like this, but my car broke down in Oxford yesterday—if I hadn't been in a hurry I'd have mended it myself—

PETER. Oh, are you a car expert?

GAVIN. I worked as a garage hand once.

PETER. Indeed. Very profitable. (*Crosses to fire.*)

GAVIN. For some. Not so much as your job.

PETER. My job? I haven't got one.
GAVIN (*moves to* D.L. *of trolley*). You were a racing driver, weren't you?
PETER. I was.
GAVIN. Even more profitable.
PETER. While it lasted.
GAVIN. Why didn't it last longer?
PETER. You've never raced?
GAVIN (*shakes his head*). I think you must be a bit of a madman.
PETER (*sits on* D.L. *arm-chair*). Oh yes. But a very cold-blooded madman. A very exact and careful madman.
GAVIN. When you're cornering at that kind of speed—
PETER. You're working on inches. Split-seconds. An inch too far, a tenth of a second too late—and you've had it.
GAVIN. Not for me.
PETER. Nor for me. After a time, I didn't find it quite dangerous enough.
GAVIN. That's hard to believe.
PETER. I don't like gambling on certs. You've got to give death a fair chance, don't you think? So I kept trying to cut down on the safety margin. A twentieth of a second instead of a tenth. Millimetres instead of inches.
GAVIN. With the result you crashed your cars.
PETER. And made a few other people crash theirs.
GAVIN. Yes. I remember.
PETER. So I drink to the employers who refuse to employ me, rot their cowardly little souls.
GAVIN. You're lucky to have got out of it alive.
PETER (*rises and moves to fire*). Am I? I don't think so. Life has been boring ever since.
GAVIN. What d'you do now?
PETER. Ride. Drink. Gamble.
GAVIN. On horses? Dogs?
PETER. Anything—so long as it's an outside chance. Always trying to make a big killing on a real outsider. There's no excitement in certs. But that's the hell of life these days—the certs always win. And the wrong people get the money. You're not rich?
GAVIN. Living from hand to mouth.
PETER. Who isn't? Do have one. (*Crosses to* U.R. *of trolley.*)
GAVIN. No.
PETER. Come on, and we'll try and think of something wildly exciting, splendidly dangerous—

(LIZ BARCHER *comes from* U.L. *to the french windows. She is a*

handsome, hard, county, bitchy woman in her middle-to-late thirties. Dressed for dinner, with a mink stole.)

LIZ (*off stage*). Hullo! Anyone at home?

PETER. Liz Barcher. Have you met your landlord's wife? She's a bitch.

(LIZ *enters.* PETER *goes up to french windows and greets her effusively.* GAVIN *moves* D.R.)

Oh, hullo, Liz darling, how are you? (*He kisses her on the cheek.*)

LIZ. Hullo, Peter. My bloody husband not here yet?

PETER. No sign of him.

LIZ. Oh, my God. You know what that means. Market day in Inglestone—getting stinking in the Cross Keys with all those moronic farmers—(*She sees* GAVIN.) Who've you got here?

PETER. One of your tenants, dear. Gavin Cole—the peasant in the cottage. Liz Barcher—the lady of the manor. Touch your forelock now.

LIZ. Stop that nonsense and give me a drink. (*Comes down to* L. *of trolley, with* PETER.)

PETER. Gin and tonic? (*Pours gin and tonic and puts in ice.*)

LIZ. Lovely big one. I haven't had a thing since lunch. (*She stares rudely at* GAVIN.) What's he do?

PETER. Ask him, darling. He can talk, really he can.

LIZ (*throws mink on* L.C. *arm-chair. Speaks over her shoulder to* GAVIN.) What d'you do?

GAVIN. I'm a poet.

LIZ (*looks at him*). Good God! . . . You're joking.

GAVIN. Want a recitation?

LIZ. If it's something simple enough for a poor blooming lowbrow like me to understand.

GAVIN. "Husband's shirts are twice as white,
Twice as bright with Splash:
Housewife's day is twice as light,
Twice as bright with Splash."

LIZ. You mean those things are actually written?

GAVIN. By peasants. Good night, then. (*To* PETER.) How much is a call to Oxford?

PETER. I've no idea, why?

GAVIN (*taking money from his pocket*). Won't be more than one-and-six.

PETER. My dear chap. Buy yourself a packet of Woodbines.

GAVIN (*looks coolly at him and puts the money down on the table by phone*). As one poor man to another. Good night.

(*He nods at them, and goes out of the room and out of the house.* PETER *gazes after him, amused, then turns to* LIZ.)

LIZ. He's in one of our cottages? Bit of an oick, isn't he?

PETER. Think so?

LIZ. I thought that last remark was pretty damn rude.

PETER (*crosses to* R. *of* LIZ). What a pity that everybody can't be nice, sweet, polite, charming, darling people like us.

(*He kisses her. She responds, then pulls away.*)

LIZ. Mary might come in any moment.

PETER. It wouldn't be interesting if it weren't that Mary might come in any moment.

LIZ (*moves away to fireplace*). You are a cad.

PETER. What a quaint old word. I'd forgotten that every mile you go out from London you step back a year in time. Which makes us about eighteen-eighty.

LIZ. A stinker, then. D'you like that better?

PETER. Oh, yes. Much better. (*He kisses her again.*)

LIZ (*looks at him for a moment*). Peter. What are we going to do?

PETER. Have dinner. (LIZ *crosses below* PETER *and sits* L.C. *arm-chair.*) When Charles comes. If Charles comes. We invited you both, really we did.

LIZ. I mean you and me. Us.

PETER. Oh, us.

LIZ. I'm mad about you, as if that was news to you.

PETER. Do you go round telling people?

LIZ. I'm not a fool.

PETER. No, I agree.

LIZ. But it's not good enough, you know. Oh, you're all right, you've got a lovely wife—

PETER. Oh, yes.

LIZ. But look at me. I ask you. What have I got?

PETER. Charles.

LIZ. Charles. I can't tell you how much I'd give to get rid of him.

PETER (*sits in* D.L. *arm-chair*). Do tell me. How much?

LIZ. Don't be stupid, Peter.

PETER. Just a thought. You're so stinking rich. At least Charles is.

LIZ. I hate his bloody money.

PETER. You know, you're a lucky woman. Vast house, vast cars, vast dress allowance—and Charles doesn't bother you in bed.

LIZ. He snores like a pig.

PETER. He snores. Take a vote at the next Hunt Ball. How many women envy you Charles.

LIZ. Oh, do shut up about Charles. (*Rises and moves away, then comes back to* PETER.) Sorry darling, but you know how it is. I don't want to hear about him any more than I have to.

PETER. Sure.

LIZ. Peter.

PETER. Mm?

LIZ. Look, I know you love your wife and all that, but—

PETER. But what?

LIZ. I'm going up to Scotland next week—do you think you could get away?

(PETER *considers this. As he does so,* MARY *comes from the kitchen into the hall.*)

PETER. I think—

MARY. All right, Nora, I'll see about that.

PETER (*rises and crosses below* LIZ *to trolley*). I think I hear my beloved wife coming, and she'll be wanting a glass of sherry.

(*He pours it as* MARY *enters.*)

And I don't think Scotland's half dangerous enough.

MARY (*goes to* R. *of* LIZ, *above* PETER, *and kisses her—*LIZ *rises*). Hullo, Liz, dear.

LIZ. Hullo, darling.

MARY (to PETER). Dangerous enough? What do you mean?

PETER (*giving her the sherry*). I mean for the birds. I always feel the people with the guns ought to stand an equal chance of getting killed.

MARY (*smiling at* LIZ) What on earth's he talking about?

LIZ (*sits* D.L. *arm-chair.*) Haven't the foggiest.

MARY. Where's Charles?

LIZ. God knows. Carry on as if he didn't exist.

MARY. We don't have to eat yet.

LIZ. Whatever time we eat, he'll turn up half an hour later. No, darling, give him a sandwich when he comes, it's all he deserves.

MARY (*puts sherry on coffee-table and then goes to window to close curtains*). We'll wait a bit.

LIZ. So long as he doesn't smash up the car again, for the third time this month.

PETER. Which one's he driving?

LIZ. The Jag.

PETER. Lovely and fast. Four minutes from Inglestone.

LIZ. Three and a half if you do it on the wrong side of the road.

PETER. With a couple of short cuts through hedges. God bless the squire and his relations. They used to break their necks hunting, now they have fast cars. A dying race.

MARY. Darling, don't be macabre.

PETER. Not in the least—am I, Liz?

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