

*Acting Edition*

# in a word

by Lauren Yee

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-79996-9

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### **IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS**

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*IN A WORD* was first produced by San Francisco Playhouse (Bill English, artistic director, Susi Damilano, producing director) as part of a National New Play Network rolling world premiere in San Francisco, California on April 2, 2015. The performance was directed by Giovanna Sardelli, with sets by Catalina Niño, costumes by Karina Chavarin, lights by Matthew Johns, sound by Madeleine Oldham, and props by Leah Hammond. The Production Manager was Jordan Puckett and the Stage Manager was Beth Hall. The cast was as follows:

**FIONA** ..... Jessica Bates  
**GUY** ..... Cassidy Brown  
**MAN** ..... Greg Ayers

It was then produced by Cleveland Public Theatre (Raymond Bobgan, executive artistic director) as part of a National New Play Network rolling world premiere in Cleveland, Ohio on April 17, 2015. The performance was directed by Beth Wood, with sets by Beth Wood, costumes by Ali Garrigan, lights by Ben Gantose, sound by Sam Fisher, and props by Jacqueline Westhead. The Stage Manager was Amanda Lin Boyd. The cast was as follows:

**FIONA** ..... Liz Conway  
**GUY** ..... Mark Rabin  
**MAN** ..... Matt O'Shea

It was then produced by Strawdog Theatre Company (Hank Boland, artistic director) as part of a National New Play Network rolling world premiere in Chicago, Illinois on February 15, 2016. The performance was directed by Jess McLeod, sets by Sarah JHP Watkins, costumes by Izumi Inaba, lights by John Kelly, sound by Heath Hays, and props by Jamie Karas. The stage manager was Melanie Kula and the Production Manager was Emmaline Keddy-Hector. The cast was as follows:

**FIONA** ..... Mary Winn Heider  
**GUY** ..... John Ferrick  
**MAN** ..... Gabriel Franken

*IN A WORD* was first presented at University of California San Diego's Baldwin New Play Festival (Naomi Iizuka, head of playwriting) at the Arthur Wagner Theatre in La Jolla, California on April 16, 2010. The performance was directed by Adam Arian, with costumes by Sue Makkoo, lights by Sherrice Mojgani, sound by Joe Huppert, and dramaturgy by Shirley Fishman. The Stage Manager was Kelly Hardy. The cast was as follows:

**FIONA** ..... Megan Robinson  
**GUY** ..... Kyle Anderson  
**MAN** ..... Paul Scudder

*IN A WORD* was also developed at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, the Hangar Theatre, Aurora Theatre, Lincoln Center/LCT3, and Boston Court.

## **CHARACTERS**

1. **FIONA** – female, 30s-40s
2. **GUY** – male, 30s-40s, Fiona’s husband
3. **MAN** – male, plays multiple people:

**KIDNAPPER** – a guy you’d otherwise hang out with

**DETECTIVE** – missing persons detective

**TRISTAN** – seven years old, smart, different

**PRINCIPAL** – Ted, Fiona’s boss

**ANDY** – Guy’s friend, a real nice fucker

**CLIENT**

**PHOTOGRAPHER**

**OFFICER** – police officer on the day of the kidnapping

## **SETTING**

Fiona and Guy’s living room.

## **TIME**

Now and two years earlier.

## **AUTHOR’S NOTES**

In this play, objects have a life of their own. Objects come up again whether you want them to or not. Words also come up again, and sometimes the characters realize this or not. Time is very fluid.

## **SPECIAL THANKS**

Naomi Iizuka, Adele Edling Shank, Allan Havis, Ryan Purcell, Ethan Heard, Nan Barnett, Antje Oegel, and Bailey Williams.

*For my parents*



## Scene

*(Living room.)*

*(Lights up on FIONA. She holds a glass jar in her hands, as if she has just come across it. The jar is empty. And yet, it feels like something is inside.)*

*(FIONA starts to unscrew the lid. Very faint whispering is heard.)*

*(Lights up on the rest of the room. FIONA stands next to a large cardboard box filled with papers and children's sweaters. Papers and various belongings litter the floor. Behind her, a pair of glass doors leads into the backyard.)*

*(GUY returns home from work with a newspaper and a small paper bag.)*

GUY. Fiona, you ready?

FIONA. Mmh.

GUY. You're not ready.

FIONA. I am.

GUY. Thought you wanted to go to dinner.

FIONA. I do.

GUY. Thought you wanted to go now.

FIONA. In a minute.

GUY. It took me two months to get this reservation.

FIONA. Then another minute's not gonna hurt. I just need to find one little thing and then we'll go.

GUY. You absolutely, positively promise?

FIONA. Yes.

GUY. Okay.

*(GUY drops a small bag in FIONA's lap.)*

GUY. Here.

FIONA. What is it?

GUY. What's brown and sticky?

FIONA. A stick.

GUY. A cupcake.

*(FIONA pulls out a chocolate cupcake from the bag.)*

A little something, from Andy.

FIONA. Why?

GUY. Just to celebrate.

FIONA. Celebrate what?

GUY. I don't know. "Happy birthday," I guess?

FIONA. Oh. Right. *(beat)* Later. I'll have it later. After dinner.

*(FIONA puts the cupcake away.)*

GUY. So how was your day today?

FIONA. Fine.

GUY. Anything interesting?

FIONA. Not really.

GUY. I saw, you know.

FIONA. What?

*(GUY holds up his newspaper.)*

GUY. The article, in the newspaper.

FIONA. Good.

GUY. Local section, front page.

FIONA. I know.

GUY. I thought we agreed we weren't talking about this anymore. Thought you said you never wanted to talk about it again.

FIONA. They called.

They wanted to know how we were doing, two years later.

They just wanted a word.

What was I supposed to say?

**GUY.** “No?” That’s a word. Say that.

**FIONA.** If it’s for the case –  
*(shrugs)* It was for the case.

**GUY.** ‘Cause you know:  
 Andy once had a girlfriend. Who had a kid.  
 She stopped talking to the media. And it helped.

**FIONA.** Hey, you get something in the paper, and all kinds of people come out of the woodwork.

**GUY.** Exactly.

**FIONA.** Just today: I was in the grocery store and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, this guy comes right up to me and says –

*(From out of nowhere, a KIDNAPPER approaches FIONA.)*

**KIDNAPPER.** Hey.

**FIONA.** Hey...?

*(Flashback to earlier in the day. At the grocery store.)*

*(FIONA in the fruit aisle, examining melons. Next to her, a KIDNAPPER.)*

*(GUY remains in the background, listening to the story.)*

**KIDNAPPER.** I know you.

**FIONA.** Excuse me?

**KIDNAPPER.** In the paper. This morning? Fiona Hamlin?

**FIONA.** Oh. Right. Yeah.

*(The KIDNAPPER smiles, stares at FIONA.)*

**KIDNAPPER.** You don’t remember me, do you?

**FIONA.** I’m sorry, should I?

**KIDNAPPER.** Think I had your kid.

**FIONA.** In class?

**KIDNAPPER.** In captivity.

**FIONA.** *(amused but disbelieving)* Nooooo.

**KIDNAPPER.** I'm pretty sure.

**FIONA.** You got a picture?

*(The KIDNAPPER opens his wallet, shows FIONA a picture.)*

Omigod, that's Tristan!

**GUY.** And what did he have to say for himself?

**FIONA.** Honestly, I didn't think to bring it up.

**GUY.** I think you imagined it.

**FIONA.** Guy.

**GUY.** I'm just saying: you met him buying watermelon?

**FIONA.** Cantaloupe!

**GUY.** And you're not the least bit suspicious.

**FIONA.** He came up to me.

**GUY.** Exactly.

**FIONA.** You don't believe me.

**GUY.** I'm just saying –

There's this guy and there was that last guy.

**FIONA.** Which guy?

**KIDNAPPER.** At the bakery.

At the school.

At the gas station.

**FIONA.** *(shrugs)* So I see lots of them.

**GUY.** They can't all be your guy.

**FIONA.** No?

**GUY.** 'Cause you know you only get one. *(beat)* Did you even ask him?

**FIONA.** I tried. *(to MAN)* Did you hurt him?

**KIDNAPPER.** Did I ever?

**FIONA.** Did you hit him?

**KIDNAPPER.** Did I ever!

**FIONA.** What did you do with him?

**KIDNAPPER.** Same thing as you: I lost him.

*(The KIDNAPPER moves to leave.)*

**FIONA.** *(to KIDNAPPER)* Wait.

**KIDNAPPER.** I should get going. My meter's gonna expire –

**FIONA.** What're you up to tomorrow?

**KIDNAPPER.** Listen, lady: I said hi, it's been nice, but really  
I gotta go.

**FIONA.** Where is he?

**KIDNAPPER.** He was right under your nose. Have a good  
day.

*(The KIDNAPPER disappears. Back to the present  
and the living room.)*

**GUY.** So he gave you a cantaloupe?

**FIONA.** Which he touched. Which I then brought to the  
detective.

**GUY.** Why?

**FIONA.** Why not?

**GUY.** Because you think he's an idiot.

Because the longer he stays on this case, the worse he  
seems to get.

**FIONA.** Worse is better than nothing.

**GUY.** And what did you say, huh? "I met a guy and another  
guy and among the six of them I may have your guy?"

**FIONA.** I did. I do.

*(Flashback to earlier in the day.)*

*(The DETECTIVE at his desk, showing FIONA  
pictures of children.)*

**DETECTIVE.** How 'bout this one?

**FIONA.** No.

**DETECTIVE.** You sure?

**FIONA.** Yep.

**DETECTIVE.** And this?

**FIONA.** No. *(beat)* I'm sorry, Detective, but look: I came in  
about a lead.

(**FIONA** shows the **DETECTIVE** the **KIDNAPPER**'s cantaloupe.)

**DETECTIVE.** A melon?

**FIONA.** A man.

(The **DETECTIVE** more closely evaluates the cantaloupe.)

**DETECTIVE.** (*confused*) A cantaloupe.

**FIONA.** We were in the produce aisle.

**DETECTIVE.** (*re: cantaloupe*) And how is this a lead?

**FIONA.** Well, I was talking to this man in the grocery store, and I think he might've been the one.

(The **DETECTIVE** cuts up the cantaloupe for eating. He takes a bite, contemplates the cantaloupe.)

**DETECTIVE.** So: what'd he look like?

**FIONA.** Six foot.\*

**DETECTIVE.** Yep.

**FIONA.** Green eyes.

**DETECTIVE.** Sure.

**FIONA.** Red hair.

**DETECTIVE.** So: me.

**FIONA.** Right. No.

**DETECTIVE.** You get a name?

**FIONA.** No.

**DETECTIVE.** A license plate, a blood type – ?

**FIONA.** (*sheepish*) His meter was gonna expire.

**DETECTIVE.** You get anything?

**FIONA.** I got a cantaloupe...?

**DETECTIVE.** Not much of a lead.

**FIONA.** Sorry.

**DETECTIVE.** (*re: cantaloupe*) Though it *is* delicious!

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\*The following description of the **KIDNAPPER** should be altered to reflect the actual appearance of the actor playing the **KIDNAPPER**, with the most distinctive feature last.

*(The DETECTIVE offers a slice of cantaloupe to FIONA.)*

*(re: cantaloupe)* Can't escape?

FIONA. What?

DETECTIVE. Cantaloupe. Have a piece.

FIONA. No. I brought it for you. For evidence.

DETECTIVE. Eh, more than enough guilt to go around.  
You sure? All right...

*(The DETECTIVE finishes the cantaloupe by himself. He then searches for something.)*

Not to worry, Mrs. Hamlin. We may not have answers, but we always have leads.

*(The DETECTIVE plunks down a cardboard box. The same cardboard box FIONA was looking through at the top of the scene. Several leaves float out of the box.)*

FIONA. Leaves?

DETECTIVE. So your son, seven years old?

FIONA. Yes.

DETECTIVE. Second grade?

FIONA. ("yes") He was in my class. I teach – *(corrects)* taught –

DETECTIVE. And kid's shirt size small, right?

FIONA. Right.

DETECTIVE. Now tell me: is he a sweater?

FIONA. What?

*(The DETECTIVE reaches into the box of leaves and pulls out a sweater. All of the sweaters are wrong for a seven-year-old boy. Some of them are too big, too garish. Some are girl sweaters.)*

DETECTIVE. Is he this sweater?

FIONA. No.

DETECTIVE. How 'bout this one?

FIONA. He's not a sweater –

**DETECTIVE.** – that you know of.

Two years, he might've faded, shrunk.

We're not looking for a perfect fit here –

**FIONA.** These are girl sweaters.

These are ugly sweaters.

*(The DETECTIVE demonstrates, feels the sweaters.)*

**DETECTIVE.** “Leave no rock unturned”: that's what I always say. One time, lady lost her son. Fifteen years. They found him as a rock, right in her own backyard. Cold, hard, igneous. But it was him. Right under her nose. *(question)* You've checked under your nose recently.

**FIONA.** Yes!

**DETECTIVE.** Okay, okay.

**FIONA.** Give me something else. Give me something real. I bring you evidence –

**DETECTIVE.** Technically, you're bringing me cantaloupe.

**FIONA.** – and all you show me are rocks and leaves and, and sweaters.

You are wasting my time.

**DETECTIVE.** *(beat)* You're right. I am.

**FIONA.** No, wait.

**DETECTIVE.** You can go.

**FIONA.** Detective, please –

**DETECTIVE.** Listen, lady: I know this's tough, and maybe you don't think your son's a rock or a sweater or anything else like that, but whatever he once was, he isn't anymore. People come in here, looking for a missing person and sometimes it isn't gonna be a person. Sometimes it's just gonna be a sweater.

**FIONA.** It's fine. I'll take it.

*(FIONA takes the box. The DETECTIVE exits. Back to the present with FIONA and GUY.)*

Always worth a second look, right?

I hear it takes time.

He says it takes time.

**DETECTIVE.** (*offstage*) And sweaters!

**FIONA.** He said he might swing by later. To drop something off.

**GUY.** Which means we should go now, right?

Before you turn this place into a real mess.

**FIONA.** Guy, this place is always a mess, whether it's me or not.

**GUY.** Fiona –

**FIONA.** No, seriously: you need to get that lock fixed. Sometimes I come home and the door isn't even all the way shut.

**GUY.** It's probably just us.

**FIONA.** I mean it!

**GUY.** No one is following you around.

**FIONA.** Oh really?

**GUY.** No one is in the corner of your eye or the back of your mind or anything else like that.

**FIONA.** You don't know.

**GUY.** I do 'cause he's not.

**FIONA.** Sometimes, I come in and it's like we've been robbed,

Like someone comes in when we're not here –

*(The MAN enters with a white cardboard box and begins to steal various objects from the room. All kinds of stuff, but mainly things that could have been TRISTAN's. FIONA and GUY are unaware of him.)*

**GUY.** – and rearranges the furniture?

*(Thus inspired, the MAN also rearranges the furniture for the next scene.)*

**FIONA.** I used to step on his toys all the time.

I used to find them at night, walking through the house.

“You don't put them away, I'm gonna throw them out.

**FIONA & MAN.** Take care of your things, or you're gonna lose them.”

FIONA. And now?

*(FIONA gestures “poof!” The MAN finishes his work. A wind blows him out of the scene, with the white box.)*

FIONA. I go into his room sometimes and it’s never the same as how I left it.

GUY. I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m sure it’s just us.

FIONA. Sometimes I don’t know.

GUY. So what’re you looking for anyway?

FIONA. The box. The white box.

GUY. The box with all his toys?

FIONA. And all the pictures. The newspaper asked if I had anything else, to put on the website, so I started looking for the pictures and – nothing!

GUY. But the pictures, you have them on your laptop.

FIONA. No. I don’t. All the pictures’re in the white box.

GUY. Then I’m sure it’ll turn up.

FIONA. Where?

GUY. Go to dinner,

Clean up,

Get some rest,

And the white box will be right where you left it.

Because you know, Andy once had a girlfriend who had a kid.

She cleaned house and it helped.

FIONA. I don’t want to do what the girlfriend Andy once had once did.

I don’t want to do what anyone Andy once did did.

GUY. All I’m saying is, I bet you’ll wake up tomorrow and it’ll be right where you left it. Right under your nose. Okay?

FIONA. All right...

*(FIONA goes to get her shoes. Then a sudden noise. FIONA looks around.)*

FIONA. What was that?

GUY. What.

FIONA. That noise. *(beat)* You didn't hear that?

GUY. No?

FIONA. Oh.

GUY. Probably just the wind.

*(FIONA looks into the backyard.)*

FIONA. I bet it's in the basement.

GUY. Fiona –

FIONA. Go look for me.

*(GUY stares at the newspaper.)*

GUY. Is that why you gave them this picture?

FIONA. It's the picture we always use. It's a good picture.

GUY. It's an old picture.

FIONA. Two years go by and they're all old pictures.

GUY. From when he was two?

FIONA. It's all I could find.

GUY. What about the picture from Picture Day?

FIONA. They're with the detective. It's part of his case file.

GUY. Well, if he's coming by later. Ask him. Use those.

FIONA. Guy.

GUY. "Most recent picture?"

That's what they said, right?

Picture Day: you can't get any more recent than that.

FIONA. Oh come on.

GUY. Why not?

FIONA. Picture Day? People don't want to see that.

GUY. No?

FIONA. No! "Day he disappeared," how does that sound?

It sounds morbid, that's how it sounds.

People don't want to remember that.

People don't want to see –

*(Camera flash.)*

GUY. What?

*(We segue into the past: Picture Day.)*

## Scene

*(Picture Day – Day of the kidnapping.)*

*(TRISTAN squirms a bit, as FIONA adjusts his clothes.)*

FIONA. Picture Day!

TRISTAN. Yep.

FIONA. Tristan, are you ready?

*(TRISTAN groans a little.)*

I said, Tris, you ready?

TRISTAN. Yep.

FIONA. You sure?

TRISTAN. Yep.

FIONA. Okay, then: which one?

*(FIONA looks into the cardboard box, offers various sweaters.)*

Black and tan?

Red and white with stripes all over?

*(TRISTAN pulls out one sweater.)*

TRISTAN. Brown and sticky.

FIONA. What?

TRISTAN. *(chooses)* Green and blue.

FIONA. All right then.

Very nice.

Comb your hair

Fix your shirt

Tuck it in

Now give me a kiss

Give me a kiss.

*(FIONA gets a kiss from TRISTAN.)*

You look very nice. Now try to keep it that way.

Okay?

C'mon.

*(FIONA tickles TRISTAN, he squirms and squeals. She smiles and kisses him on the forehead. FIONA helps TRISTAN into his sweater. Fastforward to FIONA and TRISTAN in the auditorium. TRISTAN sits in the chair. FIONA speaks to an unseen Photographer.)*

**FIONA.** Hold on.

*(to TRISTAN)* Your pants are falling.

Pick up your pants, Tris, they're gonna fall down.

*(TRISTAN picks up his pants, sits down in the chair.)*

Eyes nice and wide now.

*(The Photographer takes out a comb, combs TRISTAN's hair. TRISTAN fusses a tiny bit.)*

I'm sorry. He'll be fine.

*(TRISTAN holds his pose. Camera flash. We see the photograph of TRISTAN. Typical Lifetouch stuff: neat, perfect, adorable, on an abstract colored background. FIONA beams.)*

*(Back to the present.)*

**GUY.** See what? People don't want to see what?

**FIONA.** That. It's just –

**GUY.** Go call him.

**FIONA.** Who?

**GUY.** The detective. Just ask him for the photos back. If you're gonna put his picture online, we might as well have the right one, don't you think?

**FIONA.** I'm not going to bother him again.

**GUY.** You want me to do it then?

*(GUY picks up the home phone.)*

**FIONA.** Guy –

**GUY.** If someone's gonna see something,  
They should see something correct, right?

*(FIONA grabs the phone away from GUY.)*

## Scene

*(Living room.)*

*(GUY holds up the newspaper.)*

**GUY.** *(to us)* Fiona has a story and usually it contains the words:

*(FIONA pulls out a set of words and reads them, as she has read them dozens of times before, in various orders.)*

**FIONA.** Love

Loved

My baby

Tristan

He was a

Is a

**GUY.** Twenty-four months of the same words, countless permutations, rotating through her vocabulary, but always the same –

**FIONA.** Good kid

Who we

Miss

Every

Day after day

**GUY.** And the funny thing is:

They're none of the words I remember her saying while he was here.

**FIONA.** Blink and you

Miss him

**GUY.** Not a one!

**FIONA.** All the time

He was –

*(GUY adds a word of his own.)*

**GUY.** Difficult.

*(FIONA notices GUY for the first time.)*

**FIONA.** What?

**GUY.** Difficult. He was all those things, but he was difficult, too.

**FIONA.** (*faux playful*) This is my story, Guy. I'm talking. Get your own story and stop butting into mine, okay?

**GUY.** He was.

**FIONA.** (*dismissive*) Okay.

**GUY.** He was.

**FIONA.** Maybe. I don't remember.

*(GUY conjures up a memory of TRISTAN in the midst of a tantrum. TRISTAN flops into a pile of leaves in the backyard, spreads them everywhere.)*

*(FIONA sees TRISTAN but does not acknowledge anything wrong with this scene.)*

**GUY.** Doesn't sound familiar?

**FIONA.** I don't hear anything.

**GUY.** You sure?

**FIONA.** (*shrugs, looks off in the distance*) Is that a tree?

**GUY.** No.

**FIONA.** Then I don't know what you're talking about.

*(TRISTAN enters and produces a box of dirty laundry. He takes a piece out for every secret, passes it to GUY. An unseen audience of second graders egg him on.)*

**TRISTAN.** She snores.

She smells.

She farts in her sleep.

She sleeps on the couch.

And she hits me.

On the lips.

**GUY.** None of this?

**FIONA.** Nope.

*(FIONA exits. GUY stuffs all the laundry back into the box.)*

*(Flashback to GUY and TRISTAN in the backyard, sharing a moment. GUY drinks an espresso.)*

GUY. Tris, you can't be doing that.

TRISTAN. Why not?

GUY. How would you like it if she brought your dirty laundry to class?

*(TRISTAN shrugs.)*

She's your mother, but she's your teacher, too, and she's been under a lot of pressure lately.

TRISTAN. 'Cause of me?

GUY. 'Cause of herself.

She's only cranky 'cause she's tired.

She's only angry 'cause she's disappointed in herself.

She's just been having a rough time.

TRISTAN. What're you having?

GUY. I'm having an espresso.

TRISTAN. I want some.

GUY. It's only for grown-ups.

TRISTAN. I'm a grown-up.

GUY. You're seven. It's only for grown-ups who're having second thoughts.

TRISTAN. I'm a second thought.

GUY. Who're having a mid-life crisis.

TRISTAN. I'm a mid-life crisis.

GUY. No, you're not.

TRISTAN. I am! I'M A FUCKING MID-LIFE CRISIS!  
AAAAAAAHH.

GUY. *(amused)* When you're older, you will be.

*(TRISTAN waits, then...)*

TRISTAN. I'm older.

GUY. I know.

TRISTAN. And older.

And older.

I'm older than I've ever been,  
Than I'll ever be.

**GUY.** What?

**TRISTAN.** Pleeeease?

*(GUY hands TRISTAN his espresso.)*

**GUY.** All right.

But we don't tell Mom.

**TRISTAN.** Because I'm a rough time.

**GUY.** Yes.

*(GUY and TRISTAN do a special move that stands in for hugging.)*

Now go brush up.

*(TRISTAN drinks the espresso as they walk back inside.)*

*(to us)* Because when Tristan was around, these were the kind of words I heard. I'd come home and it wasn't –

*(FIONA appears. Lovingly...)*

**FIONA.** Love

**GUY.** Or –

**FIONA.** Loved

**GUY.** Or even –

**FIONA.** My baby!

**GUY.** It was –

*(FIONA confronts GUY in the living room.)*

**FIONA.** What in holy flipping hell did you give him?

**GUY.** Nothing.

**FIONA.** You did. You gave him a mid-life crisis.

*(TRISTAN crosses the room, still drinking the espresso. To no one in particular...)*

**TRISTAN.** I've wasted my life! I've gotten myself into something that I can never get out of!

**GUY.** I gave him a sip.

# **WAIT, THERE'S MORE!**

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