Refinding the Object and Reclaiming the Self

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THE OBJECT REFOUND AND THE SELF RECLAIMED

SANDRA

On a Monday hour a few months before ending her analysis, Sandra began with a dream.

I was climbing a hill with Richard, a hill in a remote, lonely place. A woman waited for us in a little gazebo. I said to Richard that I thought a lot of people passed through this place, but he said, "Almost no one comes here." It had a desolate and deserted feeling to it. As Sandra approached the end of our five years of work, her fear of loneliness and of losing me was contained in this dream walk in a desolate, lonely spot with Richard, an ex-boyfriend fifteen years older than herself, who had died a year earlier from chronic lung disease.

As I listened to this dream, I felt identified with her ex-boyfriend. A chill wind whistled through my bones. I was filled with an inner loneliness. There was an eerie, mythological quality to this dream. In keeping with her hysterical psychopathology, Sandra's dreams were usually concrete, often sexualized. This one felt oracular. Richard, she thought, stood for me. The other woman was her mother. In my mind, however, it was *my* mother in a distinctly unfriendly and disapproving mood.

Later in the hour, Sandra reported another dream from the weekend, this one directly about the two of us: I had gotten into sexual trouble of some sort. You said to me, "Don't you know I die a little inside when you get yourself into these messes?"

I felt drawn in by this dream, which seemed to follow on from the first one. I listened to her associations, which she no longer needed my prompting to give. My thoughts hovered over her thoughts, her history, and her effect on me. Sandra's life before and in the early stages of analysis had been one long string of sexual troubles: luring boyfriends into sexual escapades in high school at times of loneliness, seeking affairs with men who mildly abused her during her marriage and afterward, and taunting me sexually in the early stages of analysis. Early in the analysis she said to me, "I never met a man I couldn't get to sleep with me. I don't see why you'll be any different."

Throughout her life, she had used sex to form relationships to men and women. Through the agency of her analysis, she had gradually and painfully moved

beyond this behavior both in our analytic work and in her life. She had grown in integrity and in caring for herself and others, but she now felt deeply the loneliness she had formerly run from. In this hour her sadness was stirred and the hollow winds of the lonely hill were now inside us.

Sandra said, "How bizarre of you to say in the dream that you die a little when I get into messes." Then she became stagey in the old way. Theatrically, with a coy innocence, she asked, "Do I look like I'm the kind of person who would commit murder?"

I thought of the pun on "die" found in Elizabethan love poetry that linked death and orgasm.

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;

Call her one, me another fly,

We're tapers too, and at our own cost die.

(John Donne, "The Canonization," lines 19-21)

And I thought of sexual longing and death as Romeo concludes his final speech by saying,

> Here's to my love! O true apothecary, Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V: 3, 119-120)

Despite the murderous "confession" and the feeling of death in both dreams, I felt sexually excited rather than killed. I had a fleeting but vivid glimpse of being in bed with Sandra. This was interrupted, however, by an immediate fantasy of being censured and "cut down" by the senior analyst who woman had supervised my work with Sandra during my analytic training. The image of her also reminded me of the "other woman" in Sandra's first dream, whom I had felt was my mother in critical form. I noted that I was not worried about my wife's feelings

about my fantasy of an affair with Sandra. The frightening image was of castration by an older professional woman, a supervisor, because I had sinned by responding sexually to a patient. Without my being fully aware of it, my image of a female object had been split into a sexually seductive woman (Sandra), a harsh critical woman (the supervisor), and an understanding woman (my wife.)

A moment later Sandra said, "I solved my weekend loneliness by masturbating Saturday morning."

As soon as she said this, I felt we were on the same wavelength. I pulled back from my own fantasy, which had been a response to her repressed sexual excitement through which she had entered me and held on. I recognized I had taken it in from her without being able to identify it. When she identified it, I felt it let go of me.

Sandra referred to the fact that for most of her life she had been unable to

masturbate with her hands and that instead she had used both running water and, beginning at age 12, a vibrator. The first vibrator she used was a body massager that belonged to her mother. In the analysis we had come to understand that it stood not only for her mother's exciting possession, but also for her brother's penis, which had linked him to her mother, as well as for her father's penis, which her mother controlled and for which Sandra longed. Sandra's first use of the vibrator had occurred while her family was watching television in the next room. Sandra had masturbated with her mother's vibrator after feeling shut out by This them. happened during her tumultuous twelfth year when Sandra was also deeply frightened by the fact that her mother had a hysterectomy and her father had gall bladder surgery at almost the same time

I had this story in mind during this hour as Sandra now remembered her excitement and fear when she used her

mother's vibrator. "Although I was worried about being caught, the idea of using something of hers turned me on too much to be careful."

Μv sexual fantasv feelina of involvement with Sandra returned, flving in the face of my own values against sexual acting out. My next thought was that if sex occurred, we could never recover the analvtic work or mv professional standing, not for the usual reason of the damage done to the holding environment, but for the bizarrely primitive reason that we would be caught. In my reverie, we had already been caught and it was too late for recovery. Our doom was sealed

Part of the fantasy of doom came from my relationship with my supervisor. I felt intuitively —whether it was true or not-that she had not shared my comfort with the use of my own primitive fantasies as part of the work. This gap that I imagined existed between the supervisor and myself was part of my fantasy of her as an internal object that would condemn me.

Suddenly, This it came to me transference and countertransference sexual reenactment in fantasv represented Sandra's fear of losing me impending and my own loss and loneliness without her as a valued patient. I was experiencing the shared loss in a mode I had taken in from her-in an identification with her way of feeling loss and threat. In my confused welter, feeling and threatened. the aroused condemnation came from a harsh aspect of a maternal superego attacking my longing just as Sandra's image of her disapproving mother had often attacked her own longing.

Sandra continued by saying that in her loneliness over the weekend, she thought she had found a vibrator in the trash like that one of her mother's long ago. It turned out to be an animal hair clipper. The idea of the vibrator had excited her, and she was disappointed to have to masturbate without it. When she was unable to reach arousal with her hands, she had used the base of an electric toothbrush. She had the fantasy of inserting the metal end of the toothbrush base into the introitus of her vagina, using it as if it were a penis cut off from a body. She next thought it would tear her vaginal mucosa. She was excited just as —she shamefully noted —she used to be by stories of torture.

L was now no longer aroused. Suddenly I felt deflated, puzzled, upset by the image of internal cutting and bleeding. A scene came to me from Ingmar Bergman's film, Cries and Whispers, in which a women breaks a glass inside her vagina. This led me to think of a penis being inserted into that vagina in that scene, being cut by the broken glass. I felt endangered. The image of censure by another woman now gave way to an

acute sense of being directly attacked and genitally injured by Sandra.

"| Sandra continued read а newsclipping once about a man who killed hundreds of women and then had sex with them, some after decapitating them. That's gruesome-sex with dead people." Sandra paused. "I feel angry, too, but I can't talk about being mad somehow. All that perverse sex is making me sick. It seems brutal, not the way masturbation has become-kind of caretaking of myself. Having sex with you would destroy our work. It would kill us off!"

I was recovering now. I felt informed by my own fantasies, which had reached the depth of splitting my internal objects not only into parts of women, but into disembodied body parts in murderous relationship. I felt together enough to say, "The dreams and the news story both combine death and sex. Your toothbrush, which you used as your mother's vibrator, is my penis cut off from me. You 'decapitated' my penis and took it for yourself."

She said. "I'd like to have one of those penises from a sex shop. That's the way I've used men —as penises. The vibrator reminds me of that. This is me trying to hurt you, cutting off your penis. I want it to myself and you won't give it to me. When I was 3, I wanted Mother to come and put in a suppository when I was in the bath. I didn't tell you that I put my finger in my anus when I masturbated Saturday. I didn't want to tell you that. I guess I was furious. I have a sense of excitement in torturing you, like I had when Daddy beat me with his belt on my behind. Castrating you, having your penis like I had Mother's suppositories, fighting with you like when Daddy beat me-then I wouldn't have to miss vou."

A weight lifted in my chest. Relieved by her insight, I felt I was recovering myself, my professional life, and my connection with her as a patient who had taught me a great deal by her capacity to plumb these depths from which we had both learned to recover. I answered as best I could considering my fantasy of a narrow escape from certain professional death.

I said, "You wanted to kill me a little and then have sex with my decapitated penis. When you feel desperate, you feel that having that part of me is the only way of making up for the dreadful loneliness you think you'll feel when you can't come here any more, and for a part of you that you fear will be desperately missing. And you're more desperate when you feel I'll disapprove of you, that I won't understand your loneliness and loss."

The book's opening example is drawn from work with a man beginning his analysis at a time I was beginning my experience as an analyst. This session with Sandra came toward the end of her analytic experience and near the end of my analytic training. The session resonates with these endings, with Sandra's recovery of herself and her objects, and with the counterpart of that recovery in me.

In the beginning of her analysis, in the absence of a capacity to control herself, Sandra counted on being able to control me by getting under my skin. Not surprisingly, many of my early responses had to do with distancing myself from her, protecting myself lest she subtly invade my mind, a possibility that I found far more frightening than the sexual invasion she openly threatened. The distance I maintained was an ordinary therapeutic one. I thought about things rather than acting on them. I took time to understand when confused. And I distanced myself from her defensively. It was all I could manage.

Despite the defensive elements in my distance from Sandra, this let things grow between the point where to us new understanding slowly emerged. From Sandra's standpoint, I both took her in and put her off. I agreed to offer a relationship that would contain room for her and her concerns, but was enough on my terms that I could tolerate it within the bounds of my professional standards and my personal needs.

That got us into business. Once I had protected myself in this way, I could afford, gradually, to let Sandra in. As she told me about herself, her history, and her daily life, her strengths and her difficulties, a relationship slowly grew that got inside each of us. And just as the relationship is the basis for a mother and father's nurturing of the growth of a child, our

therapeutic relationship became the basis for her growth.

Sandra began analysis at the mercy of selfdestructive forces, lonely, and unfulfilled. She finished feeling that her life was substantially in her control and that although she was not always happy, she was no longer self-destructive, now capable of sustained relationships. She still suffered disappointments, and at those times, as in this session, she was drawn to the old places and the old ways. But she was different. She now had a capacity to transform those moments into new opportunities, an ability to resist the primitive ravages of her pain and disappointment, and a new use of objects that could elevate such moments from threats to destroy relationships into opportunities for closeness, understanding, and growth.

This session offered a dramatic example of Sandra's new capacity. Her dreams, fantasies, and longings recalled the history of her difficulties and of her growth. In the context of the therapeutic relationship, she and I could understand, tolerate, and transform the primitive urge to sadness and mourning. In this session, it took the two of us. But by this time, Sandra could also manage similar situations on her own outside the treatment, demonstrating repeatedly that she had taken in this kind of process and made it her own.

In this hour, things were also happening in me. It was not that Sandra could not have handled her sense of loss without me. By now, I felt confident that she could. This hour was a matter of her getting into me at firsthand what she was suffering, an experience beyond what

she could have told me about in simple and descriptive words. This hour was about our experiencing it together, because the loss belonged to both of us. By allowing Sandra's experience to get inside me, I could experience what she did, understand what she felt, and then experience my own sense of loss.

This session was an intense mutual experience, full of the history of our whole therapeutic relationship, a moment alive with the story of the five years of our relationship and with the loss of each other we both anticipated.

Having been able to keep my distance from Sandra through the use of the therapeutic situation, I was, eventually, also able to let her in —even to take her in—just as she was eventually able to let me in deeply,

therapeutically, instead of bending all her efforts at getting under my skin, at taking me in deceitfully. This session represented the fullness of that hard-won mutual capacity. We relived the troubles, now in more depth and resonance than when she was actually threatened by the anxieties over the many years of her growth and the first years of our work together. We exercised our capacity to be deeply in touch and deeply moved without having to enact the fears and loss. She conveyed to me the fullness of her longing and despair, and her capacity to convey these to me was our living testimony of her change and growth, even as my ability to tolerate a painful and threatening internal experience was my evidence of the growth I had experienced with her, of my transformation as

her analyst, which was the counterpart of her personal growth.

In the beginning of our work, Sandra could not have told me of her primitive fantasies, nor could I have taken them in. I could have listened to primitive material, but I could not have allowed it to be in touch with my own fantasy life. Since Sandra's analysis came early in my experience, my capacity to work grew during the years we worked together. I had her to thank for a great deal. This hour was a testament to the loss that her departure meant to me, just as surely as it was a testament to her loss in leaving me.

The threat Sandra felt was not her threat alone. I, too, was approaching the part of my career when I would be going it alone, without

the guidance of supervisors and teachers. Her fear had an echo in me. Eager to be on my own, I was also fearful of the dangers. Just as the dream of my first analytic patient, Adam, which opened this book, could have spoken for my fears as a beginning analyst, Sandra's dream of loneliness, fear, and longing spoke for an aspect of my fear. Our loss was shared, and the experience resonated with the mutual aspects of losses and gains for the two of us.

THE GOALS OF THERAPY

The goals of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis can be summarized as the reclaiming of parts of the self that have been lost through splitting, repression, and projective identification (Steiner 1989), the mending of

those that have been damaged, and the growing of those that have atrophied or failed to develop through neglect or self-restriction. But these goals are inextricably tied to the refinding and repair of internal objects, to the maturing of internal object relations, and, inevitably, to the growth of the person's capacity for external relationships that follows.

The process of therapy involves not only the relationship between the patients and their objects, but the relationship between patient and therapist. Each of the partners in the therapeutic relationship should be able in some measure to refind themselves in each other and to reclaim themselves from each other. Parts of the self that have been lodged in each other for safekeeping and for defensive purposes alike need to be, finally, recognized for what they are. This

reclaiming will involve, however, a concomitant recognition of the other as an object in his or her own right, with an independent existence but also with a function for the self that is a legitimate one, one that does not violate the object's need to be an object and a self at the same time.

This is hardly a radical statement when put in terms of the patients who have to relinquish their therapists and take the therapeutic functions into themselves, just as children leaving home must, as best they can, carry the parenting functions inside as caring internal objects.

But it is harder for us to recognize that the therapist must be able to do a comparable thing. It is not that the therapist's life is as radically

altered by the departure of any particular patient as is the patient's by the process of termination. The therapist, in most circumstances, will go on being a therapist. But life with that patient is ending, and what the patient has carried for the therapist, has meant to the therapist, has to be reckoned with, mourned, internalized. This loss will be experienced in the countertransference, where the defenses against it will also be felt (Searles 1959). It is not that the loss must be equal for the therapist or that change be of equal magnitude, but what loss, change, and refinding there are should be acknowledged, studied, and understood to be an integral part of the process of growth and change in relationships.

EVE FACES TERMINATION

This last example comes from later in my experience.

This patient, too, was at the end of an analysis, with major changes in her capacities for relationships and for work. I had learned a great deal from her, too, but since I was more seasoned when we began, I had perhaps changed less myself during our work. Of that, however, I cannot be entirely sure.

It's Friday. Eve, a 24-year-old law student, is getting married this month to a man she loves and feels is a good match for her. But she is anxious.

"Things feel all wrong today. I got my ring yesterday at the jeweler's. And I don't like it. I thought I liked it at the time, but when I picked it up, it was nothing, just ordinary. They have a policy that things can't be returned or exchanged, but policies are made to be given exceptions. I felt Donald's impatience when I was looking at rings, so in a way I felt pressured to get one. This one has lines like cracks on it. I really wanted one to go with my engagement ring, to fit inconspicuously beside it, but they didn't have one like it. Then yesterday I found one that did fit, but at another store. I should take the loss if they won't accept it, but I feel like arguing with them."

I felt a bit startled with a reference I thought might be to me in the phrase "Policies are made to be given exceptions," but I thought I might be personalizing things. I felt called to attention, but dared not speak.

Eve continued. "Then I parked in a fire lane at the cleaners —only for 3 minutes. And the security guard gave me a ticket for \$25. The man said, 'Sorry, lady! There's nothing you can do about it!' I was mad. Only 3 minutes! It wasn't much, but I didn't feel like letting them get away with it. So I went over his head and argued with the building manager. He said, 'We have to do it. If the fire marshal comes, he'd give you a \$250 ticket.' So I said, 'What about the other car that's parked there that you didn't give a ticket?' The manager said, 'He works here, so we let him do it.' But I used that against him. He had to agree that contradicted his argument, and finally he let me out of my ticket."

I'm drifting off a bit, put off by her selfrighteousness. She's done two things to defeat herself in minor ways and is insisting that it's the other guy's fault for holding to the rules. Yesterday she was upset about my vacation just before her wedding, claiming angrily that I often left her at times she felt in need of me. Today my leaving her in the hour by drifting off is happening at first outside of my awareness. I gradually become aware that this drifting off is the equivalent of leaving her already.

"Then I went to where Mom had ordered the bridesmaids' dresses. They came into the store in the wrong color. I said to the lady, 'This isn't the color you showed us, and we've ordered hats to match.' She said, "It's not my fault. We have to take them the way they come.' I said, 'But then you shouldn't advertise that people can pick their color. I'm paying you to get it right!' I'm just not satisfied with it."

I said, "You're upset with things not working out. Some of them you set in motion, others you didn't have a direct hand in. But the effect is to feel that things are happening to you in either case."

"I don't think it refers to you, though," she said.

"Well, I wondered," I said. "I thought perhaps the reference to 'policies being made for exceptions' referred to me."

"I don't think so," she said. "I've given up on fighting you about your policy of charging for missed appointments. I used to get mad when Dad was paying for my analysis, but even though I'm paying for it myself now, I just think, 'What the hell. It's part of coming here.' I really don't think I'm mad at you today. Maybe that's your issue, something you brought to it."

I thought she was right. I didn't feel she was out to challenge me or demand I take something back. That wasn't it, but she had been saying something important to me silently in the reference to policies.

"There is something, though, that you were trying to say to me in your throwaway line about policies being made for exceptions. I'm thinking about you telling me a number of times that you appreciate my firmness so much. This is a shorthand between us, but I'm not sure what for."

"Maybe." She was not particularly convinced, and continued on. "Well, then a friend called, a girl I had been out of touch with for a long time. She wants to be closer. It reminded me of a mutual friend of ours who tried to pick up with me after we had a kind of falling out. We met at a wedding, and as we were leaving, she said, 'Call me. Let's catch up and forget about what happened.' I wanted to, but what I said was, 'Okay. But I don't want to forget.' It drove her away. I haven't heard from her since."

"You're upset about something you do to people. To yourself, too. And if it can be blamed on the other person, it lets you off the hook, like the bridesmaids' dresses."

"Yes, or like the ticket. It upsets me when I think that *you* wouldn't get a ticket. I have an image of you parking in illegal places and not getting tickets."

"Where does that come from?" I asked.

"Oh, there's the time I saw you speeding on the Beltway, leaving me far behind. I thought, 'You travel in the fast lane. I'm just plodding along even though I'm young and it's me that's supposed to be in the fast lane.' "

I thought of the time the previous week I had parked near a sign clearly warning me not to—and had been towed. And of the speeding ticket I had received another time on the Beltway. I thought her image of me as getting away with things did fit with a fantasy she and I both had of me one that got me in my own brand of trouble. It certainly did not fit with reality.

"What makes you think I get away with things?" I asked.

"I suppose I really don't know," she said. "It's just an image I have of you."

"That I get away with things and you don't. Then you envy me for the fantasy idea you have of me," I said.

"Yeah. I think that's what happens," she said. "But what do I want from you? Do you think I'm worried about getting married?" "Yes," I said, realizing that's what I thought. "I think you're worried that you'll make a bad choice, like about the ring. You want a marriage that fits with the engagement ring inconspicuously, no more complications, no cracks in it."

"You don't miss a trick, do you? How do you do that, fit things together like that? That's good, that is!"

I liked the praise, even the envy. I felt puffed up, a bit inflated. I thought I shouldn't feel so good about it, but it was a nice antidote to the days I felt I didn't understand anything, or when she said I hadn't helped much. But I wondered, why was she doing this to me?

"Yes," she continued. "I'm worried I guess. Getting married is far more complicated than when Donald and I were just living together. It was just like it was the two of us. And for a long time I didn't find this part of myself intruding, and I didn't have to worry about those kids he's got from his first marriage. Or my mother.

Now it's so complicated! My mother pouts to get me to pay attention to her because, although she likes Donald, she says she doesn't know what she'll do without me. And his 4-year-old daughter is acting up something awful, probably for the same reason."

"So there are those things that are imposed on you, like the dresses coming in the wrong color. You'd like the marriage to go well, like the dresses matching the hats, with no trouble."

"And I'd like *you* to make it right!" She fairly leaped at the idea. "Things seem so right for you. I want you to make them right for me."

Now I felt this was what she had been after about the policies that called for exceptions. I should be able to make it right for her. I relaxed and realized, too, that her excessive praise of a moment ago was aimed at inflating me so that I would go to work on her behalf, try extra hard to make things right for her. In a way,
it had worked. I had felt energized by her praise to try to make more connections, to make more right for her.

"So you inflate your idea of me to help you feel better. You even inflate me with praise about how good I am at analysis, but then you find you're envious of me," I said.

"I think you have to be pretty good to help me, so it's reassuring at first to think you're so good. Then I find I'm diminished. I feel so little next to you," she acknowledged.

"What you feel worst about is not just the things that happen to you, but the times you feel you make the bad things happen," I said.

"Like making the wrong choice of rings. Or parking in the fire lane," she agreed.

"Or even worse, taking a slap at people. You're worried you'll hurt people, drive them away," I said. She was startled. She jumped in place on the couch so that it almost looked as though I had hit her. "That hurts to hear you say I take a slap at people."

"It's what you're most afraid of."

She said, "I do it to you, but I can hardly stand to think of it. I guess I think other people don't do it. You don't do it. I think of you as never getting in trouble in this way. I know it must happen to you, too, but I want you to make it better. Why? What am I afraid of?"

I was able now to be aware of times I did something similar to her "taking a slap at people." It looked as though she felt I had done it to her just now when she looked so hit by my comment. I remembered an unkind comment to my wife, a moment I felt ashamed of now as I remembered it. That led me to think of the anxiety of my own that had led to it.

"You came in feeling anxious. Part of it was that things would go wrong—in your marriage mostly at the moment. You want me to set it right. Like with the dress lady: 'You're paying me to get it right!' So I should be able to! What you want set right is partly the feeling things can go bad, but the most important things to set right are the things you do to yourself and the people you care about and need—to your friend, your fiancé, to me."

"I feel worse than when I came in. I don't want to do those things. Why do I do them?"

"It starts when you feel jangled and splintered on the inside, and you're desperate to get things to fit, like the rings and the dresses—but inside. Then you feel you have to get something special to make things fit, and that you have to get it from someone else —the dress store, Donald, me, because you're afraid you'll keep ruining things."

"I do feel I have to get it from you. And you're not going to be here when I need you. I know you have to take a vacation, but I'm worried I can't keep things going without you. How can I do it?"

"It's the feeling you yourself can't fit smoothly together, like rings with no cracks, or the dresses and hats. But inside, you're afraid you can't fit the splinters back together. So you need me so the splinters don't fly out at the people you need. So they can settle in and fit together without jabbing you from inside."

"I don't know if I can do it for myself. I just don't know," she said, now with tears. "It's not just that you're not going to be here when I get married. I'm not going to be coming here verv much longer anyhow. I'm going to miss you at the wedding. I wish you could be there. But that's okay, because I know you made it possible and that you're glad. But I don't know if later, when I'm not coming here anymore, if I'll be able to keep it up. Will the splinters fly out when you're not there to help me keep them in? I thought I could manage it, but at times like this, I get frightened I can't."

She had spoken my fear, too, the fear in every termination. Would our work have been enough? Had I given enough? Had she taken in enough? But I felt that she had reached the point of concern for herself and the people she cared about that had eluded her in the anger of the first part of the hour. I felt we had moved beyond the blaming and guilt to begin to share the loss of our work together. In that, I felt considerable reassurance.

"We still have some time to work on that," I said.

As Eve faced her marriage, we also faced the loss of each other. Neither of us was invulnerable to the loss, although it was her-and my—reward for our work. In this hour, I felt she also wanted to reassure me that I was still needed, presenting the gratifying envy of me so that I would not envy her for getting away with her new husband, leaving me behind with my loss of her. Her feeling that I would not want to let her go came from a fear of being left behind that her mother had conveyed to her. But it also had a basis in our current situation in the loss I always feel when a patient is ready to go it alone, leaving me with a twinge of feeling no longer needed.

Our work ends with loss. Our patients, who have lost parts of themselves and their objects, come to us to find them once again. To work with them we must, in turn, lose ourselves in each of our patients. If things go well —and with their help — they and we eventually find ourselves again. It is a mutual refinding.

42

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