

URBAN LEGENDS AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN ROMANIAN FOLKLORE: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

This paper explores the persistence and transformation of supernatural entities and motifs from traditional Romanian folklore, particularly those involving devils and ghosts, within a contemporary urban setting. The study argues that these modern legends function as vital cultural tools for navigating irrational fears and affirming belief in the supernatural amid an increasingly secularised society.

Keywords:

Romanian folklore, urban legends, supernatural, devils, ghosts.

1. Introduction

The notion of a reality that surpasses the confines of everyday human experience has been a persistent theme throughout history. Over the past several decades, scholarly and public interest in phenomena classified as paranormal or supernatural has notably increased. Individuals openly share their beliefs regarding guardian angels, the afterlife, extrasensory perception and the presence of spirits (Steiger, 2003: xiii). According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey, 83% of U.S. adults believe in the existence of a soul or spirit beyond the physical body, while 81% affirm the presence of a spiritual realm beyond the natural world¹. A 2025 Gallup poll further revealed that 48% of Americans believe in psychic healing and 39% express belief in ghosts², while in the United Kingdom, a 2025 YouGov survey found that four in ten Britons think ghosts could exist and one in five that

¹Pew Research Center (2023). "Americans' beliefs about the supernatural", available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/supernatural-beliefs-2023>, accessed 22 August 2025.

² Yi, Rachael & Hogenboom, Sarah (2025). "Paranormal Phenomena Met with Skepticism in U.S.", available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692738/paranormal-phenomena-met-skepticism.aspx>, accessed 22 August 2025.

communication with the dead may be possible³. These findings align with earlier Romanian data from 2014, which indicated that over half of respondents believed in life after death, heaven and hell⁴.

Folklorists frequently exclude elements of the paranormal, the supernatural or cryptozoology (the study of mysterious and unverified creatures) from their definitions of contemporary legends. As J. H. Brunvand observes, few of the narratives classified by modern folklorists as “urban legends” involve overt supernatural intervention, despite the fact that many of them contain bizarre, unusual and generally *unnatural* aspects (Brunvand, 2001: 429). The American scholar cites examples such as “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” and “The Devil at the Disco” as representative of this genre. Nevertheless, Brunvand argues that these are modernised versions of traditional supernatural legends and may be viewed as remnants of past folk traditions, whereas contemporary legends are typically grounded in real albeit extraordinary events. By designating their subject matter as *modern*, *contemporary* or *urban* legend, folklorists tend to exclude these ‘surviving’ supernatural tales from the category, relegating them instead to the domain of *traditional* or *rural* folklore.

On the other hand, Hungarian-American scholar Linda Dégh challenged these views, asserting that modern industrial society not only accommodates but actively fosters the irrational, with legend serving as its ideal mode of expression (Brunvand, 2001: 429). Dégh supports her perspective by citing the existence of contemporary sects and cults, the abundance of narratives involving haunted houses and the return of the dead, as well as the persistent attention the mass media devotes to supernatural themes. Consequently, she proposes that legend be defined also as a narrative of a “extranormal” experience, one grounded in concrete situations encountered by ordinary individuals, yet which defies the norms and values accepted by society:

“In more explicit terms, the legend is a story about an extranormal (supernatural or its equivalent) experience attested by situational facts. It happens to average people within their cultural realms but contradicts accepted norms and values of society at large.” (Dégh, 1991: 30)

According to Romanian ethnologist Constantin Eretescu, narratives involving supernatural beings constitute a prolific category, as human existence is inextricably linked to mythological entities: “*These beings accompany us, oversee*

³ Difford, Dylan (2025). “Ghosts? Magic? Do Britons believe in the supernatural?”, available at <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/52619-ghosts-magic-do-britons-believe-in-the-supernatural>, accessed 22 August 2025.

⁴ IRES (Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie) (2014). “Românii și superstițiile lor”, available at <https://ires.ro/articol/271/romanii-si-superstitiile-lor>, accessed 22 August 2025.

our actions, punish us and, at times, bless us" (Eretescu, 2003: 34). Furthermore, Eretescu argues that *"modern society has in no way altered ancient conceptions of the afterlife, reincarnation or the survival of the spirit beyond physical death"* (Eretescu, 2010: 16). The realm of the supernatural and the natural world intertwine, with the dead continuing to linger among the living in a very real sense, bearing witness to earthly events and even possessing the capacity to intervene.

Therefore, given that storytellers do not distinguish these elements from other urban legends and considering their presence within contemporary popular culture, we have deemed it both appropriate and necessary to dedicate a focused study to these narratives. The Internet has served as a primary source for many of the collected legends, in addition to several accounts gathered from within our own circle of friends and acquaintances.

2. *Fata Pădurii/ Pădureana* (The Forest Maiden).

Legends concerning supernatural beings often depict a world fraught with hidden dangers, where *"any misstep may summon a spirit that is at the very least terrifying, if not outright punitive"* (Hedeşan, 2000: 28). One such legend is that of the Forest Maiden, a polymorphic mythological figure encountered predominantly in the Maramureş region. The Forest Maiden is one of the most dreaded and widely known malevolent spirits, surrounded by a rich and elaborate mythology that has evolved over time.

"I heard this story from a guy I met on the train, on my way to the seaside. He said that in the forests of Maramureş, where he's from, the spirit of a woman haunts the night and causes great harm, especially to men. It is the spirit of a young girl who, many years ago, got lost in the woods. At one point, a man appeared and offered to help her. But instead of guiding her to safety, he led her deeper into the forest, cast spells on her and transformed her into a hideous creature. Since then, she has wandered endlessly, luring men, because she can take the form of a beautiful woman, only to kill or mutilate them. Some say she even abducts children. They call her the Forest Maiden." (Petra Ş., student)

"I once had a son. He tended sheep in the Gutâi Mountains. One day, the Forest Maiden came to his sheepfold. A great storm arose, and all the goats scattered across the Gutâi. The boys had to go after them, but the rain and the harsh weather made it impossible. They lacked the strength to pursue the goats. That was the doing of the Forest Maiden. She appeared clad in motley garments, tall and imposing like a great woman. The shepherd boys were left weakened and helpless, so the father had to go after the goats himself. (...) The Forest Maiden corrupted the flocks. (...) Wherever she passed, the

sheep became barren, as did the goats and the lambs. And those who crossed her path, those who walked the road she had taken, were afflicted in mind, bewildered, touched by madness.” (adapted) (Bilțiu, 1999: 229).

Described by Eretescu as a “vestige of an initiation rite into the shepherd’s profession” (Eretescu, 2007: 103), the Forest Maiden tests young men aspiring to this vocation. As Otilia Hedeșan also observes (Hedeșan, 2000: 39), she absorbs and merges the roles of other mythological figures: she becomes a kind of female *Zburător*, seducing young men and exacting revenge, arguably justified, given that her misfortune was caused by a man. She is also often confused with *Muma Pădurii*, the terror of mothers with small children, who “lingers around men, seeks intimacy and sometimes strikes them or cripples their legs” (Candrea, 1999: 190), or abducts infants, takes them into the forest, and devours them.

3. The Devil

In 1926, L. Winstanley and H. J. Rose published in the British journal *Folklore* the tale entitled “The Devil at a Card Party”, a version of the urban legend now widely known as “The Devil at the Disco” (Bennett & Smith, 1996: xxiv). In this account, a handsome stranger arrives at an inn in a coastal town, dances with the most beautiful girl and joins a card game. When the girl drops a card and bends down to retrieve it, she notices that the stranger has hooves instead of feet. She faints on the spot and dies shortly thereafter. The two folklorists were unaware that the story, though bearing all the hallmarks of a modern narrative, had long circulated across the European continent, particularly in rural areas, including Romania, as documented by Constantin Eretescu. In the Romanian variant, the stranger appears at a *șezătoare* (a traditional communal gathering) and sits beside the host’s daughter. When the girl drops her spindle and bends to pick it up, she sees that the young man has hooves. She attempts to escape, and in some versions of the tale, she succeeds (Eretescu, 2004: 320). Over time, the legend evolved. One version, circulating in the Târgoviște area (Dâmbovița County) during the 1980s, retains the motif of recognising the devil by his hooves (according to certain beliefs, the only part of his body he cannot disguise when assuming human form).

“In every town where, prior to 1989, factories and industrial plants had been established, residential blocks for single workers, known as ‘nefamiliști’, were also constructed. These accommodations were intended for labourers who could not commute daily or who had relocated from other regions of the country. My mother recounts a chilling incident that befell a woman employed at the Romlux lightbulb factory. One evening, after finishing the second shift, the woman set off alone toward the

nefamiliști block of flats where she lived. Hoping to reach home more quickly, especially as she was carrying luggage, she chose the shortest route, along the city's ring road. Midway through her journey, a man approached and offered to help, claiming he was headed in the same direction. The woman accepted his assistance and as they neared her building, she invited him in for a coffee as a gesture of gratitude. At the door of her apartment, the man attempted to enter first. In that moment, illuminated by the dim stairwell light, the woman noticed that the man who had helped her had hooves instead of feet. She fainted and when she regained consciousness, the man had vanished.” (Costin C., journalist)

The girl is no longer at the dance, no longer surrounded by the joyful community characteristic of the *șezătoare* or the disco. She is deprived of the protective sphere traditionally offered by the parental home. In this modern iteration, the woman – presumably unmarried, as suggested by her residence in a *nefamiliști* block – returns home alone, fatigued from her labour. The motif of dancing is absent, perhaps reflecting a socio-political context in which work is elevated as the individual's primary vocation. It is late at night, and she is approached by a seemingly helpful stranger in a sparsely populated, potentially hazardous area – the city's ring road. The narrative unfolds at a *liminal threshold*, both temporal and spatial, where the supernatural may easily intrude upon the human realm. The temporal boundary is *midnight*: the woman is returning from the second shift, which typically ends around 11:00 or 11:30 PM. The spatial *threshold*, a site traditionally associated with malevolent spirits, is marked by the ring road, a modern yet symbolically charged frontier (Olteanu, 1998: 134).

In an act of gratitude for the man's assistance, the woman invites him into her home for a cup of coffee⁵, an invitation into her private space that symbolically expresses a desire for social connection and reveals the emotional vulnerability of a solitary woman in search of male companionship. And although this is a “fortunate” version of the tale, where the worst that befalls the heroine is a fainting spell brought on by shock, the story's moralising intent and its cautionary function remain unmistakably clear.

Malevolent spirits also transgress the boundaries between worlds when summoned by the living, as is the case in the following account:

“In the countryside, it was said that if one looked into a mirror at midnight by candlelight and uttered “I believe in the Antichrist,” or something to that effect, Satan would appear.

⁵ As an intriguing detail, when coffee first arrived in Europe, it was regarded as the “Devil's drink”. Catholic priests considered it a symbol of the Antichrist, believing it had been invented by the Devil as a substitute for wine (the beverage sanctified by Jesus).

Everyone in the village claimed to have done it and to have seen him. One girl decided to test whether the tale was true, but she saw nothing. Later that night, while sleeping, apparently beside her grandmother, she felt something pulling her down from the bed... tugging at her legs... she was unable to move, and on the ceiling she saw a large shadow. She made the sign of the cross with her tongue... and it vanished. She never told anyone except me, for fear of being mocked.”⁶

Present in this account is a sacred object, the mirror, laden with symbolic meaning in folk belief. The mirror is conceived as a gateway between worlds, a liminal space of passage. Hence the widespread belief that gazing into a mirror at night reveals the face of the Devil; the prohibition against looking into mirrors after sunset is deeply rooted among Romanians, Aromanians, as well as the French, Italians and Germans (Olteanu, 1998: 238). The ritual described in this tale, involving a mirror and a lit candle, evokes the magical oracular practices once performed by young women seeking to divine their destined spouse. Such rituals were traditionally carried out only on the eve of major religious holidays and under strict conditions – the girl had to fast and remain silent throughout the day. By violating a double taboo – gazing into a mirror and uttering the Devil’s name⁷ – the young woman attempts to test the truth of popular lore. At first, she appears to fail; yet “*later that night, while sleeping [...] she felt something pulling her down from the bed ... tugging at her legs... she was unable to move, and on the ceiling she saw a large shadow,*” a sign that the malevolent entity had crossed into the human realm to torment the living.

Enthusiasts of the horror film genre will undoubtedly recognise in this ritual the legend of *Bloody Mary* (or, in some variants, *I Believe in Mary Worth*, *Hell Mary*, *Mary Whales*)⁸, widely disseminated throughout the Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere. Bloody Mary is a spirit or ghost invoked to reveal the future, said to appear when her name is spoken three or more times into a mirror. In the past, young women were encouraged to light a candle in a darkened room and, standing before a mirror, attempt to glimpse their future husband. Today, the ritual is performed primarily by adolescents, most often girls, for amusement, though the magical act is accompanied by feelings of fear and excitement alike. It is said that Bloody Mary’s appearance is not always benign: at times, she kills the summoner, drives them mad or scratches their face.

⁶ <http://www.lipiciosii.ro/?do=Forum&cat=6&topic=1881&page=29>, accessed 23 February 2012. *Note:* This forum is now defunct.

⁷ “It is said that one should never utter the Devil’s name, for he will appear instantly, as though summoned” (Candrea, 1999: 146).

⁸ See Brunvand, 2001: pp. 205-206.

4. Ghosts

Stories about ghosts or spirits are numerous and remarkably diverse. These are immaterial beings – the souls of the dead – who haunt various places, especially those where they once lived or where they met their end, typically through an untimely death. As a result, the soul is condemned to wander endlessly. Such is the case in a legend about a girl from Bessarabia who came to study in Rădăuți, became pregnant, gave birth to a stillborn child and overwhelmed by the trauma, hanged herself in the shower. Or the ghost of the student at the Cișmigiu Hotel (formerly a student dormitory), said to haunt the premises after dying in excruciating pain, crushed in the elevator shaft. Most often, ghosts are harmless presences that do not interfere with the lives of the living – at most, they frighten them. This is because, having remained trapped in the material world, the spirit of the deceased is perceived as existing in an unnatural state. Thus, the idea of the ghost is intrinsically linked to a reaction of fear.

“When I was little, my brother and I were staying at our grandparents’ house, waiting for our uncle to come play cards with us. We waited until midnight, but when he didn’t show up, we went to bed. Suddenly, we saw a trail of cigarette ash moving through the room, and we thought our uncle had arrived and was smoking inside. We called out to him, but he didn’t answer, though the ash kept moving, then it vanished. We turned on the light and there was no one there. We were so frightened that we fell asleep with the light on, wrapped tightly in our blankets up to our necks, even though it was summer and unbearably hot.” (Hermina P., student)

“One day, a man returning home by bicycle had to pass through a deserted valley known as Coasta lui Căcărează. As he rode along, he saw a bride who suddenly appeared and perched herself on the handlebars of his bicycle. The man was terrified, and then the bride vanished. It is said that many have seen that same bride. It’s a story from my village, at least, that’s how it’s told around here.” (Hermina P., student)

Ghosts sometimes manifest as *poltergeists*, that is, they produce noises, move objects and disturb the environment. *“At night, cries for help and the weeping of that tormented soul can sometimes be heard”* (referring to the girl from Cișmigiu). *“The bathroom doors on the second floor creak no matter how well they are oiled or repaired, and the faucets turn on by themselves”* (the Bessarabian girl from Hurmuzachi High School in Rădăuți):

“There exists an urban legend which claims that a girl from Bessarabia once lived in the dormitory of the Hurmuzachi High

School in the town of Rădăuți. Out of fear of her parents and societal judgment, the girl gave birth to a stillborn child in the attic of the dormitory. Traumatized by the grim event, she hanged herself in the showers on the second floor. Even today, it is said that the bathroom doors on that floor creak incessantly, no matter how well they are oiled or repaired, and the faucets turn on by themselves.”⁹

“According to legend, around the year 1990, the Cișmigiu Hotel was used as a dormitory for students of the Academy of Theatre and Film. It is said that one night, a female student from the Republic of Moldova suffered a terrible accident. Returning from classes and feeling exhausted, she chose to take the elevator instead of the stairs, as she usually did. Unaware that the elevator was not in place, she stepped into the shaft and fell. The most harrowing detail is that she did not die instantly, but survived for several hours – hours of excruciating pain during which she cried out for help until her final breath. It is said that, because her death was so horrific, her spirit cannot find peace and continues to haunt the Cișmigiu to this day. Employees report that, at night, cries for help and the weeping of that tormented soul can still be heard.”¹⁰

The ghost remains suspended between two worlds, disoriented, no longer knowing which path to follow, and becomes “a traveller who, naturally, when seen by someone still among the living, must reveal their status as a wanderer” (Hedeșan, 2000: 167), either by appearing in a vehicle or by traversing desolate roads. Perhaps the most evocative expression of this indefinite wandering is found in one of the most widespread urban legends: *the phantom hitchhiker* or *the vanishing hitchhiker*.

This legend circulates globally and although the most widely published examples come from the United States and the United Kingdom, similar accounts exist across Europe, Africa and Australia. The story appears in numerous variants, but the most familiar version tells of a young woman wandering alone along the roadside, who is picked up by a passing driver. She typically sits in the back seat, sometimes silent, other times giving the driver an address. At some point, she vanishes without a trace either upon reaching the destination or while the vehicle is still in motion. Subsequent investigations by the bewildered driver reveal that the passenger was, in fact, a supernatural entity, a ghost.

Here are some notable Romanian variants of the legend:

⁹ <http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/mituri-urbane/68/fantoma-din-caminul-liceului-hurmuzachi/>, accessed 23 February 2012. *Note:* This forum is now defunct.

¹⁰ <http://romanielapas.ro/legenda-hotelului-cismigiu/>, accessed 23 February 2012. *Note:* Page no longer available on this website.

“In Trivale, a neighbourhood in the city of Pitești, Argeș County, urban legends speak of an abandoned house in the nearby forest, haunted by the ghost of a bride who took her own life after her husband was killed by a car on their wedding day. It is said that a taxi driver once picked up the bride and drove her deep into the forest, to that very house. Lacking money, she gave him her wedding ring as a pledge, promising to return shortly with payment. The driver suddenly fell asleep and awoke hours later, parked in front of block of flats in Trivale, far from the forest. Confused, he entered the building to investigate how he had ended up there, only to learn that the bride had once lived in that very block – before her wedding, which had taken place ten years earlier. Realising he had been the driver of a ghost, he rushed back to his car in search of proof: the wedding ring she had given him, wrapped in a handkerchief and gleaming gold when he received it. But when he unwrapped the cloth, he found not just the ring, but a decaying finger, the ring now corroded by time, resembling a piece of rusted iron freshly unearthed.”¹¹ (adapted)

“An incident said to have been reported in the newspapers took place in Craiova. Around 11 PM, a taxi driver picked up a woman, and during the ride, she began to bleed from her nose. The driver offered her a handkerchief, and upon arriving at the destination, the woman gave him her wedding ring, telling him the flat number where she lived. About fifteen minutes later, the driver rang the doorbell and was met by the woman’s husband, who, after a brief altercation, called the police, claiming that the ring belonged to his dead wife. It is said that eight months later, he obtained a court order for exhumation and discovered the woman’s skeleton missing its wedding ring, with a handkerchief clutched in its hand.”
(Cristina B., student)

We cannot exclude, in this legend, echoes of the folkloric motif developed in the ballad *Voichița* (or *Voica*), recorded at the end of the 19th century: the motif of the dead brother transformed into a revenant as a result of a maternal curse. A mother reluctantly marries off her daughter to a distant land, persuaded only by one of her nine sons, who promises to bring his sister home whenever she longs for it. The plague, however, claims all the sons and the grieving mother, left alone, casts a curse upon the one who convinced her to part with her child. He rises from the grave, his coffin transformed into a horse, and gallops to his sister, whom he leaves at the doorstep of their childhood home. *Voichița* tells her mother that her brother brought

¹¹ <http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/mituri-urbane/79/taximetristul-blestemat/>, accessed 23 February 2012. *Note:* This forum is now defunct.

her back, but the mother does not believe her until the girl shows her the engagement ring (***, 2002: 52-63).

The folkloric motif served as a source of inspiration for the German author Gottfried August Bürger, who in 1773 composed the poem *Lenore*. In this version, however, the revenant is not a brother, but a deceased fiancé whom the young woman awaits to return from war. Her futile waiting turns into a quarrel with God, whom she blames for her misfortune. One night, a mysterious stranger appears at her door, resembling her beloved. She flees with him, and at dawn they arrive at the gates of a cemetery, stopping before a grave – the grave of Lenore's fiancé. It is at this moment that the young man sheds his human appearance, revealing himself as Death, scythe in hand; the grave opens beneath Lenore's feet, and she meets her end beside her lover¹².

The British essayist William Taylor compared *Lenore* to the English ballad *The Suffolk Miracle*, collected by the American folklorist Francis James Child and included in the *Child Ballads* (published between 1882-1898). *The Suffolk Miracle* recounts the story of a noble-born girl who falls in love with a commoner. Her father, disapproving of the match, sends her to live with relatives far from home. One night, the girl awakens to find her lover on horseback beneath her window. They flee together and at one point the young man complains of a headache; the girl ties her own handkerchief around his head. Upon reaching home, he leaves her at the doorstep and vanishes. Later, the girl learns from her father that her lover had died of heartbreak. The father visits the grave and, upon exhuming the body, is horrified to find his daughter's handkerchief tied around the skull of the deceased¹³.

In Romanian urban legends, the vanishing hitchhiker is consistently a female, often a young bride described as beautiful and sometimes possessing a ghostly, pale appearance. The driver is typically a taxi cabbie, whose profession serves as a plausible reason to take anyone in his car regardless of their physical appearance. The narrative is usually set at night or in the evening to create a mysterious atmosphere, although versions occurring during the day are seen as a way to validate the events' authenticity by removing any doubt of hallucination or confusion. Storytellers also use specific details, such as city names and street addresses, to lend credibility to the supernatural event.

The core plot unfolds when the hitchhiker, upon reaching her destination, offers the driver her wedding ring or another piece of jewellery as collateral for the fare. When she fails to return, the driver seeks payment and is met with a startling

¹² See the English translation rendered by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1844 available at <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1844.harvardms.rad.html#1-1844>, accessed 10 August 2025.

¹³ For the full text of the ballad, see *Internet Sacred Text Archive*, available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/child/ch272.htm>, accessed 10 August 2025.

revelation from her family: she died long ago, often in a violent accident on her wedding day. This unexpected disclosure forms the climax of the story. The physical evidence left behind, such as the wedding ring or other personal items, is a crucial element that distinguishes this legend from other ghost stories, providing tangible proof of the supernatural encounter and making it more believable to a modern audience (de Vos, 1996: 342).

These legends, which often feature an innocent victim, serve several functions. They reflect the tragic image of a life cut short by injustice, violence or accident, suggesting a ghost's reappearance is an attempt to fulfil a life that was denied to them (Bennett, 1998: 11). The ghost's desire to return home underscores the importance of not dying alone and the longing for peace. The presence of a family member to confirm the ghost's identity also reinforces the sadness of an untimely death and undermines potential scepticism from the audience. Finally, the inclusion of multiple witnesses in some versions further validates the supernatural by making a rational, psychological explanation less plausible (Main & Hobbs, 2012: 29). This validates the supernatural as the only logical conclusion for the events described.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that supernatural narratives, such as those discussed above, remain vibrant elements of contemporary Romanian urban folklore, highlighting the persistence of traditional beliefs about the paranormal in modern society. Far from being mere cautionary tales, these stories reveal a deeper, enduring human impulse: the need to interpret the irrational and confront the fear of the unknown. The legends explored are rooted in familiar, everyday contexts. This grounding in the ordinary lends a disturbing plausibility to the supernatural events, heightening their emotional impact on the audience. Moreover, the inclusion of specific, tangible details (actual locations, recognisable professions, traces of physical evidence) serves to authenticate these accounts, presenting them not as fanciful myths but as extraordinary experiences that blur the line between fiction and reality.

The continued circulation of these legends, whether through online platforms or shared personal experiences, attests to the enduring permeability of the boundary between the known and the mystical. Their persistent popularity suggests that, even in an age dominated by reason and technology, there remains a profound human inclination to believe in phenomena that defy scientific explanation. These stories do not merely survive; they resonate, revealing a collective yearning for mystery in a world increasingly governed by logic.

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