# CUPCAKE LAND

## Requiem for the Midwest in the key of vanilla

*By Richard Rhodes*

In one corner of a decorative bridge on the Country Club Plaza, a shopping district in Kansas City, Missouri, a massive bronze sculpture attracts the attention of tourists. They are drawn to the work first of all by the colorful flags of the United States and Great Britain that fly overhead and seem to proclaim for it some undefined official status. Approaching the display, they discover that it depicts a man and a woman seated on or emerging from an undefined bronze mound. The man and the woman turn out to be Winston and Clementine Churchill—Winnie staring moodily ahead, Clemmie with folded hands observing her husband benevolently. *Married Love*, the sculpture is titled. By pushing a button on a sort of wooden jukebox behind it, one can listen to a scratchy recording of Churchill speaking to the British people in the dark days of the Second World War; "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" is sometimes discernible over the noise of traffic—Kansas Citians approaching the Plaza to shop.

*Married Love* originated as a small coffee-table piece by one Oscar Nemon. Nemon was an acquaintance of a Kansas City dentist, Joseph Jacobs; Jacobs saw the Churchill piece in Nemon's Oxford home several years ago. Impressed, Jacobs brought home a photograph. One of his dental patients is Kansas City business leader Miller Nichols, whose father, J.C. Nichols, built the Plaza, and whose realty company operates it today. With Miller Nichols captive in his dentist's chair one day, Jacobs confronted him with the photograph. "It's no wonder that our young people have gotten away from traditional values," the dentist says he told the realtor, "when they don't have symbolism to inspire them." Nichols liked the idea of a Churchill statue on the Plaza; it's been fashionable in Kansas City to celebrate the British wartime leader ever since Joyce Hall, the founder of Hallmark Cards, courted his friendship back in the 1950s by sponsoring a national tour of Churchill's leisure-time paintings. "Get that sculptor over here and let's talk about it," Nichols told Jacobs a few weeks later. Nemon was only too willing to scale the little sculpture up to heroic size.

Nichols, a man who pinches his inherited dollars until the eagles squeal,

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*The Holy Grail of Cupcake Land is pleasantness, well-scrubbed and bland*

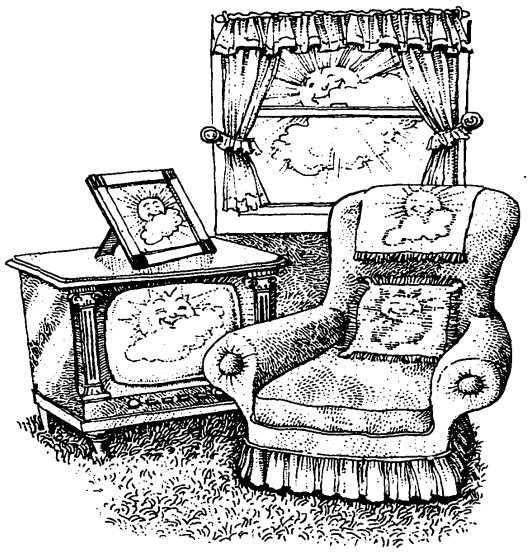
wasn't about to pay for the work himself. He turned fund-raising over to his wife, Jeannette, who assembled privately the nearly $500,000 that the statue and the endowment for its upkeep required. Jacobs says he suggested the title *Married Love*. What was merely kitsch at coffee-table scale thus found epic realization in bronze; the Country Club Plaza, with statuary already at hand of penguins, Indian braves, and sleeping babes, acquired the world's first Chatty Churchill.

Welcome to Cupcake Land.

I've lived in Kansas City for forty-four of my fifty years. I wasn't responsible for the first eighteen, after which I lit out for the East Coast as fast as my legs would carry me. But I came back here of my own volition, to teach and then to write, and I have to own responsibility for the other twenty-six. Partly I got stuck here—wife, children, then ex-wife with custody of the children. Maybe, as an editor friend once theorized, there's something irredeemably provincial in my soul. I like the country around here, rolling hills, prosperous farms. I even like the weather, which ranges from 20 below zero to 115 in the shade, from blizzards to tornadoes to swampy Bangkok heat, and which prepares you—good preparation for journalism—to be comfortable, even relieved, anywhere in the world.

Kansas City was a paradise once, or so it seemed to me when I was a boy in the years just after World War II. The edges of the rough cow town it once was had been sanded and polished to splinter-free nostalgia by an intelligent, benevolent, remarkably nonpartisan city government: the old arrangement of wide, sweeping boulevards and well-kept parks still functioned, the streets were safe, mass transit by electric streetcars and buses was a dream (miles and miles of clean, quiet travel for a nickel, transfers free—I could and did roam the city unescorted at the age of eight). Neighborhoods abounded: children walked to school; you knew the little girls next door and the old man down the block; ladies hung washboards over the backs of chairs on sunny afternoons and used rainwater and vinegar to wash their waist-length hair; on summer evenings roaring with locusts, lawn chairs came out and people called across front yards.

And then the suburbs arose, Cupcake Land, and sweetened Kansas City's plainspoken urban soul. We were more Elmer Gantry here once than George F. Babbitt. How many cities across the land have been similarly Cupcaked? What the hell happened to my town?



Curiously, although the cities of the East and West Coasts regularly forge ahead of the Midwest in many aspects of popular culture, in Cupcaking the Midwest has permanently held the lead. The Holy Grail of Cupcake Land is pleasantness, well-scrubbed and bland, and the Northeast Corridor is too crowded and dirty and ethnic, California too highly coveted, too expensive, and therefore too much on the make, quite to measure up. My hometown is the very heart of Cupcake Land. Not by accident has Kansas City become the best test market for new products in the United States; what we consume (to paraphrase Walt Whitman) you shall consume, for every longing belonging to us as good belongs to you.

Cupcake Land is petit point and paisley and white wicker. It's professionally catered deb parties. It's the standing ovation, a tribute audiences here accord almost every performance of classical music or ballet or theater, preferring effusion to critical appreciation and too timid to remain seated when fellow Cupcakes stand. Cupcake Land is Laura Ashley and Buick and Pierre Deux, yellow ribbons on every tree to declare Cupcake solidarity with distant hostages, memorials to Christa McAuliffe a thousand miles from Concord. When the goods at a bake sale staged to raise money for charity cost more to bake than they return in sales, I know I'm in Cupcake Land. I know I'm in Cupcake Land when a thorough search of an expensive, well-furnished house turns up not one serious book.

Cupcakes wear Ivy League styles of clothing, sort of: button-down shirts



Illustrations by Martim Avillez

for the men in easy-care Perma-Prest; demure skirts and one-piece bathing suits for the women. Cupcakes usually do not attend Ivy League schools, however; they attend state universities, because they believe that going to school out of state looks pretentious, isolates them from the gang, and excludes them from the network of potential business contacts they will need after graduation. Cupcakes do pledge fraternities and sororities; Cupcake Land itself is a working out in maturity of the values, such as they are, learned so painfully in the crucible of the fraternity or the sorority house.

Cupcake men drink beer in moderation at backyard barbecues; Cupcake women don't drink at all, fearing to misbehave ("I get so silly"), or drink "A glass of white wine, please." If the waiter specifies "Chablis?" they answer "That will be fine." "Chardonnay?" would elicit an identical response. Since to Cupcakes the only point of ordering a glass of wine is not to seem standoffish about drinking, the type of wine isn't an issue; and since Cupcakes in general know little about wine beyond what they've learned from television advertisements, making it an issue would appear snobbish to their friends. So of course they don't.

The suburban home and yard are the sturdy trunk and root of Cupcake Land. The ideal yard in Cupcake Land is a monoculture of bluegrass or zoysia (a hardier Southern hybrid), a carpet of brilliant green maintained unvarying through the vicissitudes of summer with herbicides, pesticides, fertilizer, mowing, trimming, and irrigation. The front yards of Cupcake Land, whatever their extent and however inviting their shaded green swards, aren't used. They're purely decorative, like the pristine curb spaces in front of Cupcake houses, where cars in urban neighborhoods would be parked. Cars in Cupcake Land belong in built-on garages with the garage doors closed. Garages for cars exemplify the Golden Rule of Cupcake Land, which is, *A place for everything and everything in its place.* In the spotless kitchens of Cupcake Land, hoods like the hoods condemned criminals wear to the gallows hide the blender and the food processor, and white-enameled tin lids painted with meadow flowers disguise the plain, functional heating coils on the electric range. In Cupcake bathrooms, a needlepoint cover, slotted on top and bottomless, slips over the Kleenex box.

Cupcakes go to church. They're comforted to find so many similarly dressed and like-minded people gathered together in one place. If the sermons are dull, the setting is peaceful. God's in his heaven; all's right with the world, except in unimaginable places like Iran.

The Empress of Cupcake Land is Nancy Reagan, whom Kansas City Cupcakes adore—always impeccable, all her deals under the table, devoted to a cause for which she has found a pleasant solution ("Just say no") that is the equivalent of Cupcake Land's pleasant solution to poverty ("Just get a job"), to AIDS and teenage sex ("Just keep your legs crossed"), and to the national debt ("Just quit spending"). Ronald Reagan is the Emperor of Cupcake Land, of course, pleasantness personified, financing the imperial expansion on plastic, resplendent in his new clothes.

I've had some luck identifying when Kansas City ceded its south side to Cupcake Land (I grew up on the east side of town, now the black ghetto, where the old urban life persisted a few years longer). It began around the time I was born, not much before. The late Edward Dahlberg remembered a brawnier and more vigorous Kansas City, for example, in his 1964 autobiography, *Because I Was Flesh.* "A vast inland city," he described it, "a wild, concupiscent city." He recalled "a young, seminal town" where "the seed of its men was strong." Clearly this is not yet Cupcake Land; the period Dahlberg is evoking is the decade before the First World War, when he was a small boy. "There were more sporting houses and saloons than churches" in Kansas City then, he says. Remembering those forthcoming days he asks heatedly, "Could the strumpets from the stews of Corinth,

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*Not many blacks live in Cupcake Land: white flight was a major force behind its founding*

Ephesus, or Tarsus fetch a groan or sigh more quickly than the dimpled thighs of lasses from St. Joseph or Topeka?"

But by the 1930s, on the evidence of Evan S. Connell's autobiographical 1959 novel, *Mrs. Bridge*, Cupcake Land was up and running, as if it came along one sinister Christmas complete and fully assembled, in a Pandoran box. Mrs. Bridge, a young Kansas City society matron, already shops on the Country Club Plaza, where presumably she bought her guest towels:

> She had a supply of Margab, which were the best, at least in the opinion of everyone she knew, and whenever guests were coming to the house she would put the ordinary towels in the laundry and place several of these little pastel towels in each of the bathrooms. They were quite small, not much larger than a handkerchief, and no one ever touched them. After the visitors had gone home she would carefully lift them from the rack and replace them in the box till next time. Nobody touched them because they looked too nice; guests always did as she herself did in their homes—she would dry her hands on a piece of Kleenex.

Mrs. Bridge is conversant primarily with just such matters as towels, Connell observes, as well as "the by-laws of certain committees, antique silver, Royal Doulton, Wedgwood, the price of margarine as compared to butter, or what the hemline was expected to do." She knows the bedrock rules of Cupcake Land, which would seem not to have changed much these past sixty years. "Now see here, young lady," she scolds one of her daughters, "in the morning one doesn't wear earrings that dangle."

Edward Dahlberg revisited Kansas City late in life; his cantankerous but perspicacious reaction confirms the area's Cupcaking:

> These cities, which are full of every kind of man and woman dirt, and have the most repulsive sex and movie dives, and prurient penny-arcade nudes, and pornographic postcard streets like Twelfth, have citizens, who are crazy about the word CLEAN. Clean health, clean living, clean politics! Only the corrupt can use this tabu word so easily.

Not many blacks live in Cupcake Land: white flight was a major force behind its founding, and it's nearly impossible to cross the invisible lines that toothless laws tolerate and realtors maintain. Recently I rented an apartment in an old restored building in midtown Kansas City (wonderful Nutbread Land, a slice of the spirited Kansas City I remember from childhood, trucks unloading outside grocery stores and buses going by, people of all sizes and shapes and colors walking real sidewalks, some of them talking to themselves). "Funny thing," the rental agent told me, "the people who rent here are almost always from somewhere else. Kansas Citians all want new." To find the new, however diminished—and to escape the desegregation of the public-school system that began in 1955 and is still not complete—Cupcake recruits moved en masse across the state line into Johnson County, Kansas, last year's cow pasture become this year's pseudo-Colonial or French Provincial suburb. Freight wagons used to follow the Santa Fe Trail from Kansas City out through Johnson County; developers today, putting up houses and shopping malls along that trail, seem bent on moving the city itself to Santa Fe.

Not that Kansas City Cupcakes dislike blacks, exactly. They avoid them not necessarily because they think them inferior but because they know them to be different, Cornbread rather than Cupcake, just as the blue-collar whites who live south and east of Kansas City in Pancake Land are different. In that difference Cupcakes measure a strong potential for unpleasant encounter. "What would I *say* to one?"

Connell, in *Mrs. Bridge*, reinforces this analysis, depicting discomfort rather than active hostility in black-white relations at the borders of the Country Club District. "The niggers are moving in," Mrs. Bridge's daughter announces provocatively one day:

> Mrs. Bridge slowly put down the tray of cookies. She did not know just what to say. Such situations were awkward. On the one hand, she herself would not care

to live next door to a houseful of Negroes; on the other hand, there was no reason not to. She had always liked the colored people she had known. She still thought affectionately of Beulah Mae [a laundress long departed for California] and worried about her, wondering if she was still alive. She had never known any Negroes socially; not that she avoided it, just that there weren't any in the neighborhood, or at the country club, or in the Auxiliary. There just weren't any for her to meet, that was all.

The Country Club Plaza is supposed to be a place for strolling, window-shopping, watering at one of its several outdoor cafes. (Alternatively, one may ride in a horse-drawn carriage, à la Central Park: at the height of the season more than a dozen carriages work the Plaza, an area only about ten city blocks in extent. They tour no park but streets of storefronts. They do not want for customers.) A little posse of black children biked into this pleasant setting one afternoon in the heyday of breakdancing. They unrolled their pads of cardboard and linoleum, cranked up their ghetto blasters on a centrally located corner outside a men's clothing store, and got down. They were good; spinning and double-jointing through their repertoire, they drew an appreciative crowd. But the Nichols Company doesn't want vulgar street entertainment within the confines of the Plaza, particularly when the entertainers are unlicensed and black. Security guards elbowed through the crowd, spread-eagled the children against the wall, handcuffed them (or tried to—the cuffs kept slipping off one small boy's wrists), and dragged them away.

In a subsequent year teenagers began to cruise and promenade the western end of the Plaza, to see and be seen, perhaps drawn by the McDonald's installed in a mall building there without golden arches but with a bronze statue of a seated lad eating a bronze hamburger and reading a bronze book. The Nichols Company reacted to the promenading as if it had been assaulted by Cuban mercenaries. First it tried to barricade the streets. That inconvenienced paying adults as well as conspiring teens. Next it sent in its security guards, gun-toting men paid not much more than minimum wage and trained initially only eight hours in their trade—lawsuits for brutality and false arrest are still pending. Finally the Nichols Company arranged with the Kansas City Police Department to set up a command post on the Plaza, *et in Arcadia ego,* from which police fanned out to arrest anyone committing even the most obscure infraction—shirt unbuttoned, one taillight out, taking a leak in the parking-lot bushes. That draconian measure seems to have cleared the kids away. I walked with them one Saturday night not long before the end. They were, for the most part, clean, wonderfully wide-eyed, and duded up—and black. Their real offense was that they scared Cupcakes away.

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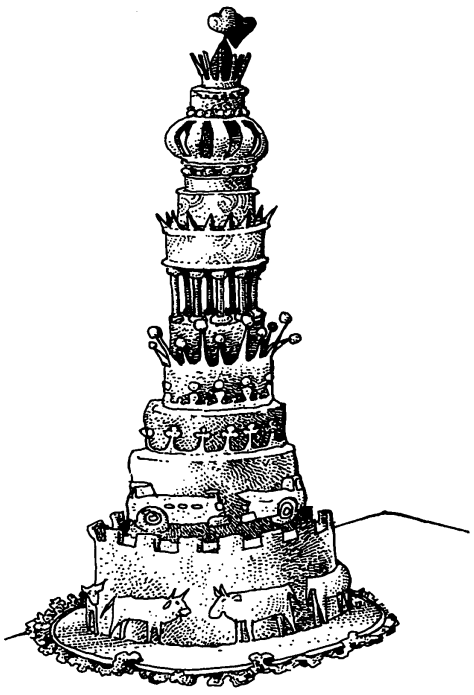

To obscure its bawdy history Kansas City lays claim to an ersatz nobility. Its livestock show is the American Royal, its debutantes debut at a Jewel Ball, and the trademark of its best-known local industry, Hallmark Cards, is a crown. An exhaustive Name-the-Team contest that received more than 17,000 entries preceded the establishment in Kansas City of its baseball team; we were asked to believe that team owner Ewing Kauffman, a self-made pharmaceutical tycoon, considered those thousands of alternatives seriously before he came up with his choice, the Kansas City Royals, and with the team logo, a distinctly Hallmark-like crown.

The apotheosis of Kansas City's pretentious Anglophilia was a wedding party in London last June for the twenty-one-year-old stepdaughter of the U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, Charles Price II, a good-old-boy Kansas City banker whose wife Carol is heiress to Omaha's Swanson TV-dinner fortune. Melissa Price's wedding dominated the pages of *The Kansas City Star*—a headline I particularly cherish read SIX-TIER, 500-EGG CAKE WILL BE SHOWPIECE OF RECEPTION—and nearly one hundred of Kansas City's elect flew to London for the event. "Sensible young people," the *Star*'s society editor wrote of the couple thus honored, "who believe in

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some of life's solid dividends, such as friendships and careers." The name of the Berkeley Hotel, the editor noted in a helpful aside, is "pronounced Barkley." There was breathless speculation that Nancy Reagan might attend the wedding, her presence transmuting Cupcake to Pound Cake—the Prices are inevitably canonized in Kansas City social notes as Reagan intimates—but no such imperial benevolence was bestowed.

I've concluded that Kansas Citian Calvin Trillin, writing in the *New Yorker,* declared Arthur Bryant's Kansas City barbecue to be the best in the world to gull such pretensions. Bryant's isn't even the best barbecue in Kansas City (their sauce, which Trillin seems to have confused with Lourdes water, tastes overwhelmingly of cayenne). Bryant's is situated in the heart of Kansas City's black ghetto, a place very few Cupcakes normally, by choice, even remotely approach. Arthur Bryant is gone now, but in his day the tables were rickety, the windows dirty, the neighborhood risky, and the barbecue bad. Back in the 1950s, Bud Trillin's high-school crowd went to Bryant's for barbecue to be daring. Cupcakes traipse down to Seventeenth and Brooklyn now because they think it's sophisticated. Eating greasy cayenne-embittered pork in a ghetto barbecue joint identifies them, mirabile dictu, as *New Yorker* readers.

The real humorist in Trillin's family is his daughter, Greenwich Village born, who spotted the change in Kansas City from urban paradise to Cupcake Land on a visit here when she was a little girl. Two days of driving from shopping center to shopping center led her to ask her stolid father, Daddy, is this a city? Dearest daughter, of course it is, Bud informed her. Then how come, she pounced, we never *walk?*

Most Kansas City Cupcakes work for large, impersonal corporations, which partly explains their enthusiasm for conformity. They commute home from work to Cupcake Land every afternoon fearing for their jobs, and the angst such fear engenders colors all the other hours of their lives. I have heard bright and talented adults, who do not hesitate to speak up on issues of national politics, lower their voices in public places when discussing the doings of their corporations, afraid they might be overheard by someone who might pass on their usually innocuous testimony to the éminences noires of directordom. The Soviet Union can't be any worse in this regard. If you can't say something good about something, as I've been told many times out here, don't say anything at all. Cupcakes don't. They don't dare.

As political institutions, corporations aspire to nationhood; they often do command budgets larger than many of the nations of the world, and expect their employees to die for them. In dispensing raises and advancement they make it clear that they value loyalty more than achievement. Within such institutions even the most talented employees frequently come to believe that they are qualified for no other work (the Man Without a Country syndrome), that only the corporation's benevolence sustains them.

At the bottom of the cup in Cupcake Land is a deep insecurity about the consequences of individual expression. Cupcakes are usually only one generation removed from the urban working class or the farm. They wear their newfound bourgeois respectability awkwardly. Like the maids and nannies of Victorian England, but with no such compelling evidence walking the streets around them, they believe that only their conformity to the narrowest standards of convention protects them from the abyss.

Their fear stales friendship and love; in personal relations Cupcake men and women give off a continual sense of disapproval and unease. They don't mean to be difficult; they're only continually fearful that your actions or theirs might reveal them to be parvenus. "Between you and I" is standard English in Kansas City, Cupcakes working too hard to get their grammar right. When such hypervigilance extends to sex it's deadly; in bed with a Cupcake (to speak in the simplified but useful jargon of transactional

analysis), child encounters parent instead of child encountering child. "I don't mind. I enjoy cuddling. Let's try again next time." Cupcakes, I'm afraid, lack spice.

A year ago I moved to the Missouri countryside to find out what rural life had become in the thirty years since I left the farm. (My farm career was an adolescent interlude, six years at a boys' home and farm outside Independence, Missouri—but we bused ourselves to school in Kansas City.) The morning of the first day of my visit I met the farmer I would be following, whom I call Tom Bauer, at the outdoor feeding floor where he finishes hogs for market. One of the hogs had a prolapsed rectum, Tom explained, which he was going to try to fix.

The poor animal wasn't hard to identify. Knee-high, weighing about 100 pounds—half-grown—it was pink, with coarse white hair, and a swollen, bluish tube of tissue protruded from its body behind. Because of attacks by the other hogs the prolapse was bloody. "You cain't always fix 'em," Tom told me. "Sometimes you work them back in and they come back out. Then you've lost the animal for sure. But we're gonna try."

Tom's big sixteen-year-old son, Brett, was at hand. He slipped into the pen and skillfully caught the hog by a back leg and dragged it out into the aisle. His father pulled on a sterile plastic glove. "We got to haul it up by its hind legs and hang it over the gate," Tom directed. Brett caught the other leg and worked the animal around as if it was a wheelbarrow until its belly approached the gate, which was framed with smooth iron pipe. But the hog's legs were slippery with brown, pungent hog manure. Strapping kid though he is, a reserve guard in high-school football, Brett struggled to lift the animal into position.

I didn't think I was being tested, that first day on the farm, but on the other hand, the boy needed help. I took a deep breath—not, in those redolent surroundings, the wisest decision I ever made—stepped to Brett's side, grabbed one shit-covered leg, timed my effort with the boy's, and heaved the hog over the gate so that it hung down bent at the hip, its butt in the air. Brett and I held on then while Tom carefully worked the poor animal's rectum back into its body, the hog screaming in unavoidable pain. "Gross," Brett said. Then his dad was finished and we let the animal gently down. It didn't prolapse again—it lived, to be trucked at 250 pounds to the slaughterhouse for pork chops to grace the tables of Cupcake Land.

I adjusted to the realities of farm work quickly enough, having grown up in the trade. But I realized that first morning as I pushed through my initial cultural shock how far removed Kansas City has become from the countryside that sustains it. Cupcake Land is farther removed yet—too far, I fear, for any straightforward recovery. To make life pleasant seems a worthy enough goal in the abstract, but increasing control and decreasing surprise is finally stifling. Full-blown and pathological, it results in life-threatening sensory deprivation. Cupcake children in their pervasive and much remarked ennui show symptoms of such deprivation. Only last summer a crowd of well-provisioned Johnson County teens raged through their suburban neighborhoods smashing cars; Cupcake opinion of the rampage blamed permissive education.

Talk is general these days of a brutal recession on its way, the ugly sequela of the Reagan years. That would be a terrible betrayal of Cupcake trust. Chatty Churchills won't guard the gates to Cupcake Land then, or tea cozies hood the disaster, or cuddling comfort the bewildered, or credit cards pay the bills. If any good might come from such a consequence it would be the lifting of the burden of pretension from Cupcake backs.

Like other Cupcake outposts across the land, this plainspoken river-bluff city I know and still grudgingly love has glazed over its insecurities with pretension. Sooner or later, such artificial barriers always collapse. The Missouri River will still be around then, ready in its brown flood to sweep the stale crumbs away. People I respect who care about this place counsel patience, but it's been a damned long wait. ■

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