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When Katonah resident Katherine Vockins first set foot inside Ossining's Sing Sing Correctional Facility 18 years ago, she expected to find monsters. Instead, she found people. The experience led Vockins to found Rehabilitation Through The Arts (RTA), a nonprofit that works inside five prisons across New York State, using the arts to teach life skills and ease prisoners' transitions into society upon release. With 95 percent of US prisoners eventually returning home—and more than 24,000 New York prisoners who either were paroled or finished their max sentence last year—programs like RTA play a key role in helping to turn once-violent men and women into productive members of society. This is the story of RTA—in five acts.

ACT 1

At 7:30 on the night of June 22, 1994, as most New Yorkers were settling in to watch Patrick Ewing and the Knicks attempt to stave off defeat in the NBA Finals, eight staccato gunshots rang out in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

Just moments before, in the courtyard of the Sallie Mathis housing complex, 18-year-old Maryon Ware was sitting on a bench talking to three girlfriends before getting up to change her 3-month-old son Kaheem's diaper. As she entered the building carrying her son, she passed Marvin Austin and Lamont Penn, both 30, sitting on the building's seven-step stoop. Across the courtyard on their bikes sat 20-year-old Kareem Joyner and Malik "Money" Habersham, talking with two girls. Austin waved to the girls, blowing them a few kisses. "Who're those guys?" Joyner asked. One of the girls knew Austin. Said he was cool. Neither recognized Penn. As Joyner and Habersham began to ride away, Austin and Joyner exchanged glances.



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“Yo, money, what’s up?” Penn yelled to Joyner, standing up from the stoop and walking toward him. Penn dropped a cellphone as he approached the young man. Perhaps mistaking the phone for a gun, Joyner got off his bike and pulled out a square-barreled 9 mm handgun. He shot at Penn three times, hitting his arm, leg, and stomach.

Moving past Penn, Joyner continued to shoot at Austin, who was fleeing inside. He fired five more times. Four bullets missed Austin. Two of those bullets soared through the glass plane of the building’s door and into the stairwell. One bullet pierced Ware’s back, shattering a rib and puncturing her left lung and the left ventricle of her heart before exiting her body and burying itself in her son’s right shoulder. Ware was dead when EMS arrived. Penn, Austin, and the infant were transported to a nearby hospital with non-life-threatening injuries.

Joyner fled on his bike, riding half a mile before stashing the gun in a vent at PS 219. He got a bite to eat, retrieved the gun, dismantled it, and threw the chamber off a bridge along the FDR.

Joyner spent two years on the run before getting picked up in North Carolina on unrelated charges. He was brought back to New York in May of 1996. After years of trials and appeals—and pleading guilty to first-degree manslaughter for the unrelated shooting death of a 39-year-old man—Joyner was convicted of second-degree murder and was sentenced to 25 years to life, with the possibility of parole.

While Joyner made his way through the court system, Katherine Vockins, a middle-aged suburban woman living in Katonah, was on her own, very different journey through the New York State Department of Corrections. It would be years before the two would cross paths, but when they did, each would be profoundly changed.



Valhalla native Kim Breden, who holds two master’s degrees in music, spent a year with the men of RTA inside Green Haven Correctional Facility, helping to prepare them for a 23-number musical revue. “They may be changing their lives,” she says, “but they’re also changing mine”

ACT II

Sing Sing Correctional Facility—the Maximum-security prison whose soaring concrete walls and guard towers rise above the Hudson, casting an indelible shadow on the sleepy Village of Ossining in which it sits—is the last place you’d expect to find Katherine Vockins. At five-and-a-half-feet tall with salt-and-pepper hair, the slender Vockins has a peppy attitude and warm smile that belie the tough-as-nails mentality she developed during her nearly 20 years as a business executive.

Still, Sing Sing is where she was in 1995, following on the heels of her husband, whose “midlife correction” led him inside the prison to teach theology in its master’s program. After accompanying him inside one day and getting to know a few of the men, the lens through



which Vockins had previously viewed prisoners was shattered. "They're not all monsters," she says. "Some have made pretty bad mistakes, but they're all human."

While sitting at the graduation for the master's program in June of 1996, Vockins was prompted by some inner voice to ask one of the prisoners if Sing Sing had any type of musical theater. Perhaps it was her newfound view of the prisoners, or nostalgic feelings for her brief theater career as stage manager in high school and college. "To this day, I do not know why I asked that question," she says.

Three weeks later, Vockins sat in a small room inside Sing Sing, surrounded by eight convicts. The men wanted to write a play, and needed someone to help get prison administrators to approve the production. "When you're working with the Department of Corrections, it's all about how you negotiate," Vockins says. Armed with her background running a marketing and trading company for 14 years—serving clients like American Express and Cartier—plus a three-year stint working for Dansk in Asia, Vockins approached the Department of Corrections in Albany, and then the superintendent of Sing Sing. In three months, she won the approval the men needed, and what was originally called Theater Workshop was born.



Katonah resident Katherine Vockins founded RTA 18 years ago, following a career as a marketing and trading executive. "We don't try to 'save them toward a common goal inside Green Haven; Kareem "Kalongi" Joyner, in prison for nearly two decades for murder and manslaughter, says, "We'

For the first few years, the group focused on original plays written by Sing Sing prisoners—plays about what they'd grown up with: drugs, HIV/AIDS, bling, violence. "But they were also about hope and redemption," says Vockins. Those twin themes became the cornerstone of the group, which, after three years, the prisoners renamed Rehabilitation Through The Arts (RTA). "Through the arts, we're opening their eyes to self-discipline and self-knowledge, presentation, delayed gratification, and nonviolent conflict-resolution," says Vockins.

As the men changed, so did their repertoire, and soon it was on to more advanced and nuanced productions. *Macbeth*. *Of Mice and Men*. *West Side Story*. Hardened men inside a maximum-security prison—men who'd robbed, beaten, and killed—were opening themselves up to the power of the arts. Their demeanors began to change. They began committing fewer infractions and causing fewer problems in the yard. As a result, the volunteer-led, privately funded organization—which is backed by private donors and corporations like Eileen Fisher—gained notice, prompting two academic studies. The first, by John Jay College of Criminal Justice, found that RTA participants were "more dependable, more socially mature, and sacrificed individual needs for the welfare of a group more than control participants." The second, by Purchase College, found that the men in RTA were 20-percent more likely to obtain a GED while in prison, and did so in a shorter amount of time than their peers.

Studies aside, RTA's alumni—parolees and those who've served their maximum sentences—are proof of the program's rehabilitative power. Out of 70 alumni, only seven have returned to prison. That's a fourth of New York State's recidivism rate, which hovers around 40 percent each year. RTA's success has led similar groups to seek advice from Vockins, like Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, two members of the Russian band Pussy Riot who were jailed for performing at a Moscow cathedral. When they toured the US early in 2014 to learn ways of instituting rehabilitation in the Russian prison system, they sought out RTA. "We had an interesting, meaningful dialogue," says Vockins. "We gave them samples of our proposals to the state system here." For other groups that come calling, Vockins tells them: "Don't just go in and have [prisoners] paint a picture or put on a play. Come up with some legitimate ways of building their life skills. We don't try to 'save them'—we give them an experience in which they can grow if they choose."



The men of RTA rehearsing and performing their 23-song musical revue, OVATION. They spent a year choosing songs, rehearsing, and learning hear yourself and other people," says director Kim Breden. "Teaching them harmony teaches them that they have the right to sing their line, w

Cornell "Nate" Alston, who spent 33 years in prison, knows full well the power of the RTA experience. As the youngest of eight children growing up in Harlem, Alston was orphaned by 12. His mother died of pneumonia, and his father drank himself to death during the ensuing six months. After being handed off from sibling to sibling, an older brother Alston describes as a "full-fledged criminal" tried to get him hooked on heroin and introduced him to the criminal world. Though Alston refused the drugs, he committed the crimes, and the little boy who'd dreamed of becoming an FBI agent instead became a professional stick-up artist by 14. It was at that same age when another brother got him drunk and threw him out of the house, forcing Alston to fend for himself and navigate through years of alcoholism and violence.

When he was 20, after a night of drinking and smoking weed and PCP, Alston stabbed and killed a friend during an argument. After being convicted of second-degree murder and bouncing between prisons, Alston landed in the medium-security section of Sing Sing in 1995. He was still smoking weed and fighting—with prisoners and correction officers (COs) alike—when in '97 a friend told him about RTA. Though skeptical, Alston joined RTA's production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* after another member was transferred out of the prison.

During the arduous process of rehearsals, it soon clicked that the volunteers—or "facilitators," as they're known in RTA—were without ulterior motives. They truly cared for him. "That's huge for someone from my background who's never been given shit but shit," he says. Rehearsals gave him something to look forward to, and, for the first time in his life, he knew what it felt like to be responsible. In order to rehearse, he couldn't get locked up. So he stopped smoking weed. Dialed back his aggression. Bit his tongue when dealing with COs.

“Doing a long bid, stuck in a cell, you can forget how to be human. RTA shows us how to fit into society.”

Besides forcing Alston to clean up his behavior, RTA helped him confront his past. While preparing for a role as a crime victim, he began to flirt with empathy. “For the first time, I started seeing my own circumstances and the pain I had caused on a deeper level,” he says. It also allowed Alston to deal with emotions he’d buried long ago. “I’m in prison, so I can’t run around feeling feelings. But through RTA, you explore your feelings under the guise of acting,” he explains. “As far as anyone else is concerned, you were playing a part. But you just went back to being a 12-year-old kid whose dad left him and you’re pissed.”

Seven years into RTA, Sing Sing closed its medium-security section, scattering Alston and 535 other inmates throughout the state’s prisons. Transferred upstate to Woodbourne Correctional Facility, Alston petitioned prison administrators and Vockins to get the program into his new home. But it didn’t stop there. After Woodbourne, RTA expanded across New York State to Fishkill Correctional Facility and eventually worked its way into Green Haven Correctional Facility, and finally Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. To date, nearly 700 prisoners have participated in RTA across those five prisons.

It’s not just the prisoners who are reaping benefits, though; RTA facilitators like Kim Breden gain rewards as well. Breden, a Valhalla native who runs her own theater company working with children and seniors, came face-to-face with RTA during a production of *A Few Good Men* at Sing Sing in 2002. Invited by a friend, she was “scared out of [her] mind to go in.” Still, the strawberry blonde with the kind face of a preschool teacher went to Sing Sing to watch a play. When RTA member “House”—a “giant black man as big as a refrigerator”—moved through the crowd offering coffee and cake, Breden, who didn’t notice him at first, shrieked and jumped from her chair.

But, moved by the performance, she volunteered her services to Vockins. It wasn’t until three years later that she got a call, asking her to musically direct and perform the role of Anita in a production of *West Side Story* at Sing Sing. Tentative at first, Breden began to warm up to the men in the group. “These men are so grateful you volunteer your time,” she says. “They were so warm and inviting.” In 2009, she helped stage a musical revue of Broadway show tunes, requiring her to teach months’-worth of vocal lessons. “Street life, prison life, shuts down your ability to hear yourself and other people,” says Breden. “Teaching them harmony teaches them that they have the right—and ability—to sing their line, while at the same time honor others’ voices.”

Though it may be difficult and time-consuming work, Breden can’t imagine her life without RTA. “The level of integrity and courage these men have has permanently affected my life,” she says. “They may be changing their lives, but they’re also changing mine.”

ACT III

Green Haven Correctional Facility is dismal, even by prison standards. Etched into a desolate hillside in Stormville, New York, the maximum-security prison’s massive, 30-foot walls blend in with the dying brown fields of early winter that surround it. The one-time home of Charles “Lucky” Luciano and John Gotti, Green Haven now houses 2,100 of the state’s most violent offenders. Prisoners here have a median sentence of 20 years, so this becomes the final home for many, a place to wander aimlessly as they wait out their remaining days. But it’s in the bowels of this above-ground cemetery that Vockins’ and Breden’s stories collide with Kareem Joyner’s, two decades after the split-second decision that ended the life of the young mother Maryon Ware.



On a frigid December evening, Vockins walks across the dirty floors of Green Haven's beige-tiled waiting room; through six guard stations—each with its own barred door that clanks loudly behind her; through a series of long white-cinderblock hallways, her heels clicking on the concrete floors, face dim in the orange fluorescent lighting; past prisoners walking in lock-step as COs shout orders; past the yard, where, through eight-inch windows, she glances at dozens of prisoners crowded around the prison's sole TV despite the falling snow; to Green Haven's auditorium, where 10 prisoners stand on stage.

Six hours into the day's rehearsal, they're running through "Food, Glorious Food" from *Oliver!* The number is one of 23 the group will perform in its upcoming musical revue three days from now. The revue, called *OVATION* (Our Voices Announce Transformation Inside Outside Now), has been a yearlong process of choosing songs, writing dialogue, learning harmonies, choreographing dance numbers, and rehearsing.

Some of the men on stage look a little robotic, but many are natural performers. "Fried, roasted, or stewed," they sing in unison, their hands held palms-up close to their bodies, mimicking the trays of food they're not yet allowed to rehearse with.

"Diction—watch the diction, thank you!" Breden shouts from the floor. Her face is intense, eyes fixed on the men onstage as she mimicks their moves, kicking her legs back and swinging her arms, just as she did while touring Europe and Asia performing in productions like *Annie* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

“Oh, food,” their voices echo off the white cinderblock walls. “Won-der-ful food,” they sing, starting to announce each syllable. “Marv-a-lous food, Glor-i-ous food,” the final words of the chorus soar to the back of the empty auditorium, past the brown plastic seating, all the way back to the glass enclosure where two COs sit, constantly on watch.

Working his way around the stage is Joyner, who's since changed his name to Kalongi. His eyes squint behind thin metal-framed glasses as he tilts his head to the side, mouth agape as he bellows a low, thunderous note. The 20 years since killing Maryon Ware are etched in the lines in his face, apparent in the added muscle on his short frame.

This is Kalongi's fifth performance since joining RTA, and he looks more comfortable on stage than most of the others. He joined RTA in 2009 after watching one of the group's performances. “It was like they were doing something foreign—you don't see Shakespeare where I'm from,” he says. His story is eerily, but unsurprisingly, similar to Alston's. The youngest of three boys growing up in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, Kalongi watched his mother succumb to colon cancer when he was 12 years old. A high-school dropout at 14 with no one home to look out for him—his father constantly worked and his 23-year-old brother took his own life with a bullet to the head—Kalongi was pulled deep into the violent life of the streets, collecting five bullet wounds before the age of 18.





Clockwise from top left: Clifton "Sky" Williamson, serving 31 years for second-degree murder; Jonathan "Green Eyes" Rodriguez, serving 25 years for second-degree assault; Malcolm Baptiste, serving 50 years for double homicide

Shortly after joining RTA, he got into a fight, preventing him from performing. "I lost something great," Kalongi says. But after four fightless years, Kalongi has assumed a leadership position within RTA. As part of the steering committee—a sort of elder-statesman-like group within RTA—he's both the go-between for prison administrators, and the one who interviews potential new members, "to make sure no one has any outside agendas." It's a roll that's allowed him to exude his natural leadership, says Vockins. "His leadership and commitment to the ethics of the program are what I find most important," she says. Echoing those thoughts, Breden says, "Kalongi reminds me of a chief. He has a vision for the program: 'Here's why it's important and here's why we want to protect it.'"

All 10 men up on stage get along without a hitch, remarkable in an environment that teaches that to survive, you must put up a wall. But here working toward the same goal are men like Lamont "Winter" Bryant from the Bronx. Tall and broad, he's currently in the final months of a 15-year sentence for assault (Editor's note: Bryant was paroled in early July). In 1999, as the third prong of a love triangle, he beat the father of his girlfriend's son, slicing his neck with a box cutter. A member of RTA since 2002, the lifelong "over-underachiever" is able to now look back on his life and crime with clarity. "I can never give that man what I took from him. Everyone else was affected by me not stopping to think about the situation," he says.

Bryant's 11 years in RTA have allowed him to discover his true self. Without RTA, he says, he'd have wallowed in unresolved issues. "Prison can make you angry and dejected," Bryant says. "I'm not the same man I was when I committed that crime—but I can't just say that. I got to show it," he adds, before hopping back on stage to join his peers, who now launch into "It's the Hard Knock Life" from Annie.

The bass-heavy intro—more Jay-Z than Broadway—thumps through the speakers. As the music starts, the men, down on their knees, begin to clean and scrub the floor. With the first chorus, the men stand and circle the stage, each taking their turn to sing a word or two to the audience—which, at the moment, consists of six fellow inmates on the stage crew, Vockins, and two COs.

"It's the hard-knock life. For. Us," they sing, still circling. Breden whistles a few times to help them keep pace. "Steady kisses, we. Get. Kicked," the song continues. "Good!" Breden yells. "One, two, three, down!" she directs, as the men fall to their knees once again.

“If I can’t get out, at least I help people that might—you can’t do that in the prison yard.”

Center stage is Jonathan “Green Eyes” Rodriguez from Harlem. One of the youngest of the group at 29, he’s been with RTA for three years now. Ten years ago, in the midst of a brawl, he stabbed and killed a 13-year-old bystander. At 21, Rodriguez entered prison “scared out of his pants.” He started hanging with the wrong group of guys, sticking to his old bad habits. Still, RTA was an instant draw for the childhood performer, who started singing in community talent shows at 14 with an R&B band. The program gives him a chance to let his voice out. “I don’t want to come back to prison—I know I have to rehabilitate myself,” he says.

A few feet to the right of Rodriguez is Clifton “Sky” Williamson from Albany. Tall and lanky with frameless glasses and long dreadlocks held back by a rubber band, he’s not what you might expect of a convicted felon. The few words he speaks are articulate and well thought-out. Nonetheless, Williamson is currently in his 18th year of a 31-year sentence for second-degree murder, the result of the botched robbery of a cab driver in which a friend shot the driver in the head. “It was a tragedy, and I didn’t take action to stop it,” he says. He’s thankful RTA has given him the chance to change not only his own experience, but also the experiences of the 100 or so prisoners that he’ll be performing for in a few days. “I can teach them something,” he says. “If I can’t get out, at least I help people that might—you can’t do that in the prison yard.”

“RTA helps us show people who we really are, not what society says we are,” says Malcolm Baptiste, a brooding house of a man. In his 18th year of a 50-year sentence for a double homicide, Baptiste says prison tends to stunt one’s personal growth, causing men to regress to childlike ways. “RTA has helped me become a man, honestly,” he says. “If I’m lucky enough to get out, I can actually be an asset.”

“We’re showing society we can do better,” adds Kalongi. “Doing a long bid, stuck in a cell, you can forget how to be human. RTA shows us how to fit into society.” That opportunity, he says, would never be available to him were it not for Vockins. “She’s been a blessing,” he says, noting that if he’d had something like RTA growing up, he wouldn’t have ended up in prison in the first place.

After nine hours of rehearsing, the group files out of the auditorium under the watchful eye of a CO. As they head down the long, dank hallway, the group dissolves into individuals once more as they break off one by one, each headed to different cellblocks to spend the night in their cells, alone except for their thoughts of tomorrow’s rehearsal.

ACT IV

It’s a few minutes before curtains open on OVATION. Breden and Vockins gather the group backstage for a preshow pep talk. The prisoners start to file in, filling up the left side of the auditorium. A handful of outside audience members trickle in, filling a few rows on the opposite side. The lights go down, and Green Haven’s Superintendent William A. Lee steps on stage to address the audience. “RTA opens a window into people’s minds,” he says. “What was once thought of as unattainable is now within these men’s future.”

Now it’s show time. First number: “Steppin’ to the Bad Side.” The song from Dreamgirls starts off slowly, with the men singing a capella. There are a few snickers from the prison crowd that are instantly hushed when the musical accompaniment breaks out and the song becomes more upbeat. The unification of the men’s voices is instantly captivating. The song, about people ratcheting up their musical careers to become top performers, strikes at the underlying message of the show—a commitment to transforming lives through music.

The crowd gets a kick out of a performance of “Man of La Mancha,” with two of the prisoners donning fake mustaches and sombreros. Then Kalongi takes the stage for a solo of Nat King Cole’s “Mona Lisa.” He stalks around the stage, opening his soul to let out the high notes. During a piano solo, he pretends to dance with a woman, spinning and dipping her, and even

planting a kiss, inciting laughs from the crowd. It's not a perfect rendition of the song, but that's not really the point.

Now Richie Molina, who's serving 18 years for manslaughter, steps out to sing an effortless version of "Maria" from West Side Story, his voice like butter as he perfectly draws out the high notes. That's followed up with "Over the Rainbow," performed by Joseph Striplin, who's currently serving life without parole for murder. Clutching a glittering red guitar, his voice is raspy, but his performance shines. Then it's on to Williamson's rendition of "Modern Major-General" from The Pirates of Penzance. Backed by the rest of the company, he doesn't miss a beat as he speeds through the tongue-twisting lyrics. "In matters vegetable, animal, and mineral, I am the very model of a modern Major-General," he patters, while donning a captain's hat and holding a pipe. The crowd loves it, laughing as he kicks his feet and dips at the knee with every other note.

The group then transitions into "Bein' Green," a song made famous by The Muppets. Dressed in their prison greens, they recite a few lines of dialogue to set up the number. The slapstick line of "Man, I can't stand the color green; this place is named after green—that's depressing!" gets huge laughs from the crowd. The big finale is a performance of "Waitin' for the Light to Shine." The men perform the first verse of the song from Big River in sign language. It's a powerful moment. Men, who've for so long buried their emotions, are now telling a story relying solely on their emotions. They get a minutes-long standing ovation—from both the outside population and the prisoners.

After the final bow, the outsiders head toward the stage to embrace the prisoners. It's a moving, yet all-too-short moment as they laugh, hug, and shake hands before the COs shepherd the crowd out.

ACT V

Cornell "Nate" Alston stands at a crosswalk on Jamaica Avenue in Queens, New York, peering nervously through his black-rimmed glasses. He looks left. Right. Up at the crosswalk signal. Left again. Right again. It's been two years since Alston walked out of Fishkill Correctional Facility a free man. Yet he's still struggling with the basic, everyday task of crossing a street.

Alston remembers the day—June 28, 2012—when he joined the 95 percent of US prisoners who are one day released. "I'd started to think that day would never come," he says. He was accompanied by his sister and nephews, as well as RTA facilitator Brent Buell and his wife. The 54-year-old hadn't walked on a sidewalk since he was 19. He recalls thinking he'd fall. Stopping for breakfast at a local restaurant, he ate with a metal fork—and a knife, a utensil he hadn't used in 33 years. "It was a complete culture shock," Alston says.

While RTA doesn't help with the culture shock, it has helped him transition back into society. "I'd say RTA alone gives those getting out a 75-percent chance at success on the outside," he says. "It helps you have the right attitude."

But Alston knows some people think prisoners don't deserve a program like RTA, that they deserve to be locked up 24 hours a day, refused access to vocational programs and education. "But, what are you creating if you do that? I'd be coming out not knowing how to function in society," he says. "Now the community is worse off, because since I have no skills and I need to eat and get money, I'm going to victimize someone again."

RTA has inspired Alston to try to help others the way the program helped him. "I hurt the community—I owe them, and they should expect repayment," he says. Alston is repaying his debt (when he's not working part-time shifts at Country Boy Bakery in Long Beach, New York) by working with at-risk teenagers in the Youth Empowerment Through The Arts (YEA) initiative. He helped Vockins launch the program in January in Long Island City with the idea of helping kids growing up in environments similar to those Alston and other RTA members grew up in avoid similar fates. "Most of us, if we had something like RTA [growing up], it likely would have changed the course of our lives," says Alston.

Though Alston jokes that "I've dealt with hardcore thugs and gang members, but nothing is as difficult as dealing with a regular 13-year-old," the program thus far has been a success. After



six months of rehearsing and a two-night production of a series of short scenes entitled Class Action, “we had parents crying, saying, ‘I didn’t know my child was capable of this,’” says Alston. Though the parents and their community want YEA to be a regular program, it’s on hold until Vockins can secure enough funding to run the program. “I’m ideal to do this work,” Alston says. “The kids glorify prison, but I can use my past to show them the truth.”

It’s exactly that past that’s brought Alston to this point. Make no mistake: It was his decision that led to a man dying. But it was also his decision to join RTA and start the long process of rehabilitation and reparation. “There’s nothing I can do about taking that life,” he admits. “I can’t bring that young man back, and there’s nothing of value I can present that can make up for it. But that doesn’t mean that each and every day of my life I can’t try.”

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