

# Erzsébet:

A Monodrama

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written for  
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*-Libretto-*



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# Erzsébet: A Monodrama

## Characters in the Drama

*The organization of characters and their history has been slightly altered for dramatic purposes.*

Countess Erzsébet (Elizabeth) Báthory (1560-1614), cousin to King Mátyás (Matthew), daughter of György (George) VI and Anna Báthory, part of the Ecsed line of the Báthory family, and mistress of Castle Cséjthe (in present-day Cachtice, Slovakia). She was reputed to have killed upwards of 600 servant girls.

Anna Darvulia, Erzsébet's mysterious lover.

Doratty (Dorothy) "Dorka" Szentes, Ilona (Helen) Joo, and Katalin (Catherine) Beneczky, Erzsébet's loyal handmaidens. They were executed after Erzsébet's first trial.

Anastasia (b. 1574), Anna (b. 1585) and Katalina (b. 1594), Erzsébet's daughters (Anastasia was born out of wedlock), and Paul Nádasdy (b. 1598), her son. Paul was killed as a young soldier, and two other children (one perhaps named Ursula) died in infancy.

Count Ferenc (Franz) Nádasdy (b. 1550), Erzsébet's husband (married 1575), who died at war in 1604, the year of Kepler's supernova.

Count György (George) Thurzo, rival member of the Báthory family.

Johannes Kepler, the astronomer.

Reverend Ponikenusz of the local church. The famous "Prayer of Erzsébet" was reputedly written down in Ponikenusz's memoirs.

Baroness Ilona (Helen) Harczy, a minor noblewoman who was also a singer at the church in Vienna (she has been relocated to Cséjthe for this story). Erzsébet killed Ilona, and the killing of a noblewoman gave Thurzo an opening to arrest the Countess and seize her lands and fortune.

## Some Background Information

In the prologue, a young Erzsébet is speaking about a peasant who was tortured and sewn into a horse's stomach by her father György as a lesson to others peasants who might steal or rebel (as they did against Vlad Dracul, and met a similar fate).

Later, Erzsébet is speaking about the Báthory coat of arms, which is a serpent or dragon circled around itself and swallowing its own tail. The Báthory seal was simplified to three dragon's teeth.

Mátyás-Templom (Matthias Cathedral) was built by Matthias Corvinus (Mátyás Király) in Buda (the hill city overlooking Pest) and had been captured by the Turkish advance in 1541 and stripped of Christian imagery. It was not re-taken until 1686, when a statue of the Virgin Mary was found hidden in the walls. Beatrice of Aragon was married to Mátyás in the cathedral.

It has been suggested but not verified that the astronomer Johannes Kepler visited the Báthory castles as a young scientist, as he had known and later married a Hungarian woman, and because Erzsébet's table was enthusiastically open to masters of the Renaissance.

The "lullaby history" in Act II Scene 2 is an accurate if abbreviated summary of the Báthory lineage up to the time of Erzsébet.

## Appreciation

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# Prologue



## Introduction: Overture and Prologue (A Childhood Scene)

*[Erzsébet enters laughing, amused. Changes to laughing, horrific. Back to amused.]*

O, the horse, the sad horse.  
His belly is split open and sewn closed.  
Split and sewn, with coarse cord.  
He has died, is dead.  
Yet he moves.

*[Laughter.]*

My father was angered by peasants—  
fools—  
certain that they were strong.  
A revolution is but a straw against the wind, for none are  
as strong as a Báthory. “Bator” is valor and bravery.  
And heralds a serpent strong enough to live and prosper  
while gorging upon its own tail.  
That is strength. That is our strength. Bator. Báthory.  
We *are* the wind that blows down and builds up,  
lifts and encircles. We are the Báthory.  
And so the peasants—  
fools—  
raised weak arms that were cut off by the blade of wind.  
Blood coursed and was gone from our breath.  
Now no peasant speaks or eats or takes a crumb.

Did I tell you I was a Countess?  
Yes, the Countess Erzsébet.  
I love to hear singing and screaming.

Oh, the horse, the sad horse.  
His belly is split open and sewn closed.  
Split and sewn, with coarse cord.  
He has died, is dead,  
yet he moves.  
For inside is a peasant who would steal crumbs.

His hands are cut off and he is sewn inside  
the belly  
where he and horse bleed and succumb in gasps.  
And putrefy together.  
That is the meaning of strength, of power, of love of one's own.  
No mercy to human or beast.  
Bator. Báthory. We are the wind—and the serpent.

*[Laughter.]*

*[Musical transition.]*

# Act 1



## Act I, Scene 1: Love of Anna Darvulia

**A**nna, Anna Darvulia, do you remember we as children watching?  
Watching the peasant sewn into the horse?

*[Gentle laughter.]*

I spied both you and Ferenc that day, my love—  
Yes, only a child of thirteen but the glinting young eye sees  
beauty and blood as one, does it not?  
A shimmer.

Speak to me.

Where are my children?  
You know the first, Anastasia, of the stable boy's seed.  
Only you know where she is, Anastasia. *[wondering]*  
Where are my children? Where are they?  
Good, they are playing and riding. Did you know that Ferenc  
comes home from the wars soon?  
Yes, he comes home from the wars. *[coldly]*  
He and Thurzo.  
I loathe Thurzo and his eye—not toward me  
but toward my fortune.  
It is mine. I am the Countess Báthory.  
He, Thurzo, almost nothing, a crumb.  
Like Ferenc, *[catching herself]*  
my beloved husband, father of my children.  
He is my husband, but I keep my name.  
For I am the Countess Báthory.

Speak to me.

I struggle to be a leader. It is a burden.  
To negotiate with my tongue and sign with my hand  
in languages...  
What language are you, my love? My native Magyar?  
Perhaps German? Latin? (Slovak.) Kepler is my friend.  
And the King my cousin. I am the Countess.  
O, Anna, where are my children?

*[Anger rising and falling in the above.]*

Speak to me.

Have you been to the Mátyás-Templom?  
So glorious, the heart of Buda, named for our beloved  
Mátyás Király, is now the mosque of the Musulman.  
(My tongue negotiates, my hand signs, to what end?)  
We worship just one—or the other. Which now?  
For the church where wed the lovely Beatrice of Aragon  
and our old King Mátyás is cloaked.  
Behind its walls hides the Virgin; she will be revealed one day.  
Do you wonder, Anna, about the cats and their Lord  
and how they protect us?  
(Or about the horse? Who protected the horse?)  
We worship them—and the other.  
Have you been to the Mátyás-Templom?  
It has changed.

Speak to me.

Ferenc comes home from the wars soon.

Hold me.

*[Musical transition.]*



## Act 1, Scene 2: Love of the Children

Here are the children! Come!  
*[Dance in an invisible circle, laugh.]*

Were you playing? In the close inside the ramparts?  
Were you riding? On the path to the village?  
Il: You love to ride, Anna.  
Always the ponies with the round bellies.  
And Katalina, day after day the horses, horses, horses. :||

*[Music is circular and repetitive, as are the words, as a children's song.]*

*[Laughing more on horses theme; brief musical transition & dream sequence.]*

*[Releases herself from the circle but still moving.]*  
*[Ferenc appears, in a dream, and another child is born.]*

Your father is home from the wars.

Ah! *[sensual]*  
Ah! *[satisfied]*  
Ah! *[labor]*  
Ah! *[scream]*  
Ah! *[birth joy]*

*[Brief musical transition and return to later reality; still dancing in a circle.]*

Your father is at war to defend us.  
From enemies foreign and domestic.  
And here is Paul, our horseman, our little warrior.  
He shall follow his father  
in action and in name.  
(For I am the Countess Báthory.)

*[The circle slows; in a gentle motherly way:]*

My Anna, my Katalina, my Paul.  
Your mother is tired now.

Your mother must negotiate and sign.  
Your mother has guests at table this night.  
Go now with Ilona Joo, she will guard you  
until I come to sing you lullabies...

Ilona Joo, Ilona Joo  
Send in Dorattya  
    and Katalin  
    and the other servant girls.

*[She watches them leave and turns around.]*

Thurzo! What do you want?  
I have no money for you. Go!

*[Musical transition.]*

## Act 11



## Act II, Scene I: Singing and Discovery of Blood

Dorattya, my Dorka, there is much to be done.  
Kepler will be here. And the priest, what is his name?  
Ponikenusz.

These names stick unlike my beloved Magyar, so full of harmony.

Ponikenusz. Ponikenusz. Kepler. Ponikenusz.

Danke, Kepler. Dakujem, Ponikenusz.

K. k. k. k. k. k. ... *[pause, then slowly melismatically]*

Kösönöm! *[sighs]* Kösönöm... Anna...

Dorattya, my Dorka, there is much to be done.

Kepler will be here. And the priest, what is his name?

Ponikenusz.

My collar's *rebato* must be readied, the gown prepared, the blouse ironed, the linen starched.

I must read. Who is this young Kepler?

*Mysterium Cosmographicum*, The Cosmographic Mystery.

Will his science free the Mátyás-Templom?

Will his stars bring harmony to our land?

Will his geometry of the universe reveal

the Lord-Christ,

the Lord-Allah,

the Lord-Cat?

Kepler writes of Copernicus, more disharmony of vowels.

Who can trust cacophony? Copernicus, cacophony, k. k. k. k. k...

Who is this young Kepler?

Dorattya, my Dorka, there is much to be done.

Kepler will be here. And that fraud priest Ponikenusz.

*[Turning away from Dorka to the servant girl.]*

Girl, wash me now, whiten my skin gently.

Tie me into my corset and camisole, pull on my dress and gown.

And sing to me, calm me,

and sing to me, calm me,

for Kepler will be here. And Ponikenusz.

Sing to me, calm me, to me sing.

*[Imitates motion of being dressed, including occasional vocal emphasis.]*

Girl, give me the mirror, ready the *rebato*, do it now!

Quickly for Kepler will be here!

(Sing to me, calm me.)

Straighten the wires, pin on the cloth, quickly now!

For Kepler will be here!

(Sing to me, calm me.)

||: For Kepler will be here! :||

*[Continue repetitive motifs, then the servant girl accidentally sticks her with a pin.]*

*[Pause.]*

Ow!

*[Erzsébet quickly reacts and slaps the servant with partly closed hand, scratching her face.]*

Blood!

Once a child of thirteen—  
and now a grown woman—  
but the glinting eye sees  
Beauty and blood as one, does it not?  
A shimmer.

Memory of a horse and a peasant and laughter.

*[She slaps again.]*

Blood!

Beauty and blood are one, are they not?

*[She slaps again, harder, and appears to be spattered in blood.]*

Blood!

Beauty and blood are one!

Dorka, my mirrors!

Girl, sing to me! To *me* sing!

Beauty and blood!

I will ride the horse, for I am the Countess...

Beauty and blood are one!  
Sing to me! To *me* sing!  
Sing and bleed, sing and scream, sing to me, scream to me—  
To me scream!  
I ride the bloodied horse... it is I in the mirrors!  
Bator is valor and bravery.  
We are a serpent strong enough to live and prosper  
while gorging upon our own tail.  
Beauty and blood are one!  
Sing to me, scream to me.  
Blood!  
(I am sewn into my own belly, for I am the beast.)  
I am the Countess Báthory in whose castle  
beauty and blood are one!  
Scream for me, scream to me, sing to me,  
To me sing!  
Dorka, the hot iron; I will burn away this sin.

*[Erzsébet herself screams; calms down; now stunned, quietly but back in control,  
sweeping her hand around the room:]*

Clean this.

## Act II, Scene 2: Singing the Lullaby

*[The dinner with Kepler and Ponikenusz has taken place in the interim. Erzsébet is now in the bedchamber with her children, hands and face still covered in blood but with a new set of clothes.]*

*[aside]*

A strange young man, that Kepler.  
And the priest, he is a crumb.  
Thurzo, I despise hosting his loathesome being.

*[She sits next to the bed and begins to sing a rocking modal lullaby, a historical song of bravery.]*

We are valiant and brave, descended from nobles  
Gut and Kelad, amidst Peter's good reign.  
Bald Andrew of Rakoméz followed Gutkeled,  
he, patron of Sárvár and brother of Hados.

Granted estate were Briccius and Benedict,  
the lands of Bátor from Vajda of Lángos.  
Briccius was first to name us 'of Bátor'  
and Báthory rose in great power and breadth.

'Twas Briccius who first made the horrible serpent,  
a dragon who grows strong consuming its tail.  
The dragon took vengeance upon the descendants,  
so Somlyó and Ecsed were rivals estranged.

In four generations each side gave us heroes,  
the builders of nations and churches alike.  
The Hapsburgs held sway with the people of Ecsed,  
while Somlyó with Zápolya János were fast.

Your grandfather György was good Hungary's savior,  
allied with Ninth István, the land's greatest King.  
The Hapsburgs and Muslims were brought to a stillness,  
Cicava then Cséthe our homes to this day.

Dream horses and warriors, and cats to protect you,



my sweet gentle children, the heirs to our power.  
Look out from the ramparts and see your dominion:  
it sings to you sweetly as breath from the trees.

Ask them to sing to you, sing to you, sing—  
and cry for your tongue to grant wide absolution,  
and beg to forgive them for every transgression,  
and scream when you find them a pony to die in.

Sleep, sweet ones, for you are the children of Erzsébet...

*[Erzsébet realizes that Anna Darvulia has slipped in at the end; warmly:]*

Anna!  
They have washed the walls and floors.  
Come, we will sleep.

# Act III



## Act III, Scene I: Ilona, Thurzo and Paul

**D**orka, I am tired. My face is older.  
The young servant girls come here to Cséjthe always sweet & fresh,  
and then they die.

Why must they die?

There is a deep sadness within me, a sadness in need of song.

I have negotiated and signed, and yet...

and yet...

The tongue and hand do not suffice.

Mátyás-Templom is still a hostage, and the lovely Kepler no longer visits.

Ferenc is now long dead

—in the year of young Kepler's supernova—

and Paul grows as a limb unfixed to the Báthory trunk.

Only my daughters Anna and Katalina

—and where is Anastasia? —

grow with me.

There was a lovely young singer in the church today, a noblewoman of no  
other account.

But a lovely voice.

Bring her to me.

I wish her to sing for me.

And bring my mirrors.

*[Brief musical interlude; Erzsébet is now facing her mirrors, and the singer Ilona may  
be there, or it may be the Countess herself.]*

You are a beautiful girl, and your voice pronounces the heavens.

What is your name?

Baroness Ilona Harcy.

Ilona, I am the Countess Báthory.

You will sing to me.

Sing to me with your voice that pronounces the heavens.

Come, sing to me.

*[Pause.]*

Sing to me, to me sing.

*[Pause.]*

I am the Countess Báthory.  
Sing to me.  
To me sing.

*[Pause.]*

Ilona, Ilona: Sing to me!  
Sing to me, to me sing!  
Sing!

*[Pause; rising anger.]*

Ilona, I am the Countess Báthory,  
once a child of thirteen whose glinting eye saw  
beauty and blood as one, a shimmer.  
I remember a horse and a peasant and laughter.  
But you are no peasant, Baroness Ilona.  
Your voice is beauty to ear as blood to eye.  
Sing, shimmer, glint—for me, to me sing.  
Remind me of ponies with fat round bellies  
running below me through thick forests,  
down to the village where my joy  
                    was the peasants' fear.  
They would be brought up here to Cséjthe  
                    to work for me  
but they were sloppy and needed discipline.  
Ilona, sing to me.  
There is no horse for you—  
just a blade or a hot iron.  
Ilona, sing to me.

*[Pause.]*

To me sing!

*[She slaps.]*

Blood!  
Beauty and blood are again one!  
Sing!

*[She slaps again, harder, and appears to be spattered in blood as before; she reprises the earlier aria, but with some changes.]*

Blood!  
Beauty and blood are one!  
Your voice pronounces the heavens!  
Ilona, sing to me! To *me* sing!  
Song and blood!  
I will ride the horse, for I am the Countess...  
Beauty and blood are one!  
Sing to me! To *me* sing!  
Sing and bleed, sing and scream, sing to me, scream to me—  
To me scream!  
I ride the bloodied horse... I hear my voice and yours!  
Bator is valor and bravery.  
We are a serpent strong enough to live and prosper  
while gorging upon our own tail.  
Beauty and blood and song and heaven are one!  
Sing to me, scream to me.  
Blood!  
(I am sewn into my own belly, for I am the beast.)  
I am the Countess Báthory in whose castle  
beauty and blood and song and scream and death are one!  
Scream for me, scream to me, sing to me,  
To me sing!

*[Erzsébet looks down at Ilona, who has expired and fallen to the floor.]*

*[The door bursts open; Erzsébet is briefly startled.]*

Thurzo! The crumb I have swept from my tablecloth!  
And Paul, my dear son, warrior and horseman!  
You, together? What are you doing? What have you done?

What have I done?  
I am the Countess Báthory.  
Ilona is nothing. I am all.  
She cried for my tongue to grant absolution  
and begged to forgive her for every transgression  
and screamed when I found her a pony to die in.

Thurzo, you are in the castle of song, of glint, of blood.  
Go now.

Go.

Go!

*[Erzsébet is being taken into custody, and momentarily begins to cry out, then regains her fortitude to reprise the opening aria.]*

My father was angered by fools—  
but like straw against the wind, they were  
never as strong as a Báthory. Bator is valor and bravery.  
And heralds a serpent strong enough to live and prosper  
while gorging upon its own tail.  
That is strength. That is our strength. Bator. Báthory.  
We *are* the wind that blows down and builds up,  
lifts and encircles. We are the Báthory.  
And so the fools such as you, Thurzo,  
raise weak arms to be cut off by a blade of wind.  
Your blood will course and be gone from our breath.  
You will neither speak nor eat nor take a crumb that is ours.

## Act III, Scene 2: The Trial and The Prayer

They have taken my handmaidens Dorka and Ilona Joo and Katalin  
and split them apart and torn them asunder.

Where are my children?

Paul has betrayed me, but Anna and Katalina, where are you?

And Anastasia?

The handmaidens, gone, the children, where?

I am the Countess Báthory—a serpent whose teeth consume its enemies.

I am...

*[She begins her Prayer to the Lord of Cats.]*

Help me, O Clouds.

O Clouds, stay above me, crowd there in the wind and

Let no harm come to me.

Let me remain healthy and valiant and invincible.

Send to me, to me send,

You powerful Clouds, ninety cats.

I command you, O Lord of the Cats, I pray you.

May you gather them together,

whether you abide in the mountains,

or on the shimmering waters,

or on the roof tiles,

or on the other side of the Balaton.

May these ninety cats appear to shred and destroy the hearts

of kings and princes,

And in the same way the hearts

of teachers and judges,

so they shall harm me not.

Holy Trinity, protect me.

*[Anna appears.]*

Anna?

Beloved Anna Darvulia, what shall I do?

Anna?

Dearest one, do not forsake me.



One day Mátyás-Templom will be free again  
and we will ride wild on our fat-bellied ponies  
and negotiation and signing will be fade into the past  
and freedom and beauty and wind and song  
and shimmering blood  
will be all.

They will sing first for us and then about us.  
We are eternal.  
Anna?

Anna?

*[Darvulia is gone and Erzsébet is alone.]*

*[Musical transition.]*

## Act III, Scene 3: Conviction (Thurzo's Triumph)

*[Erzsébet is seated, as if in the dock, but she is not actually present at the trial.]*

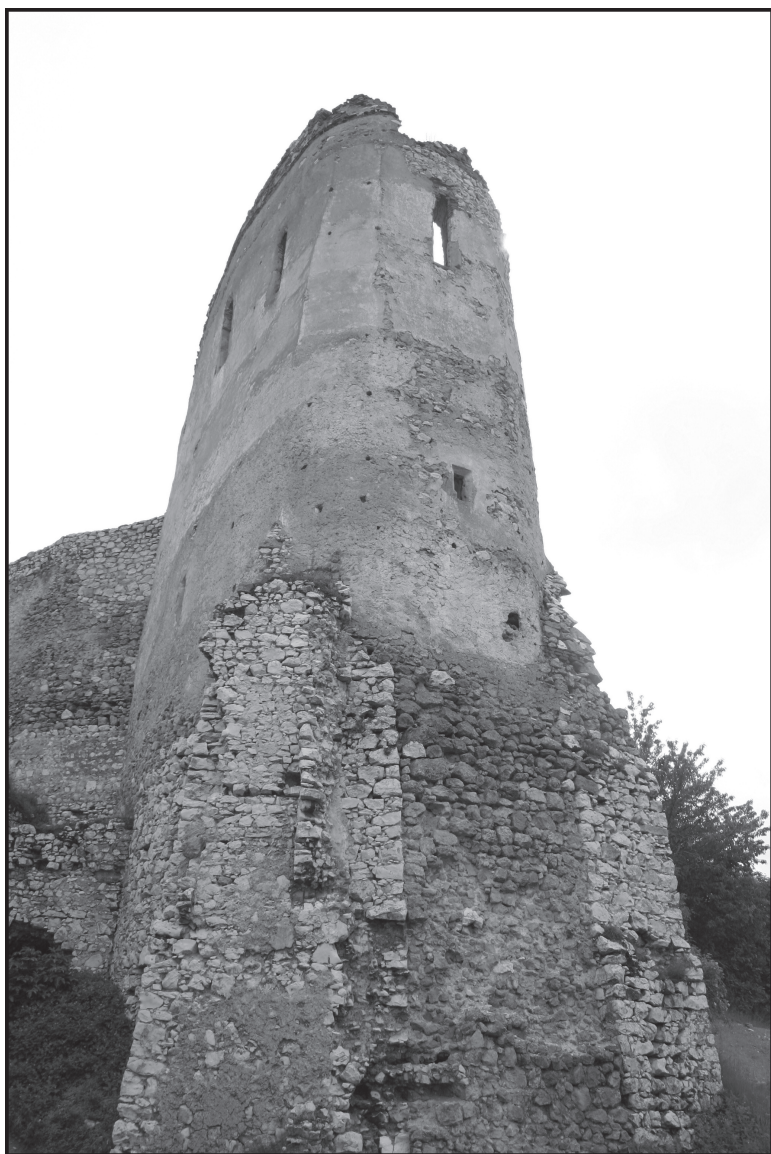
Ponikenusz! He deserved no place at my table  
with the lovely young Kepler.  
Ponikenusz! He is a crumb with Thurzo—and  
with my beloved Paul.  
Ponikenusz! He has killed my handmaidens  
with his words.  
Ponikenusz! May he rot in the belly of a horse.

Baroness Ilona Harczy, the tool of Thurzo  
who would have my purse.  
Paul Nádasdy, my son, the tool of Thurzo  
who would have my lands.  
(Ilona is dead.  
Paul will soon be dead, I know it.  
Thurzo is a crumb.)

Kösönöm, Dorattya.  
Kösönöm, Ilona Joo.  
Kösönöm, Katalin.  
For I am the Countess Báthory—valiant and brave—  
who thanks you  
in your bloody death.

The judge—may ninety cats appear to shred and destroy the hearts  
of teachers and judges—  
he has said I shall live my days out  
in Castle Cséjthe.  
In my chamber (where the young servants gathered  
to glint and shimmer and sing).  
Alone.  
The walls unwashed.

# Epilogue



## Epilogue

(formerly “The Blood Scene”)

*[Erzsébet is alone and old, walled into the castle’s torture chamber.]*

I lona. Ilona, sing to me.  
Sing to me; to me sing.  
Who am I to sing? I cannot sing again.  
I am Erzsébet.  
I am the Countess Báthory. The Countess—  
a noblewoman. *The noble woman.*  
I am the Countess Báthory */darkly/*(Nádasdy).  
Ferenc was my husband. I remember him.  
Where are my children?  
Sing to me. Sing to me. To me sing.  
What language are you? My native Magyar?  
Perhaps German? Latin? Kepler was my friend.  
And the King, my cousin.  
I am the Countess!  
I am cold, not hungry, but cold... and sick.  
Sick with age.  
Pale. Bloodless, needing more.  
My children, where are they?  
The barbarians... I turned them back East.  
I turned them back West.  
My tongue negotiated, my hand signed.  
I turned back my enemies, and each others’.  
Sing to me. Sing to me. To me sing.  
My children, where are they?  
My servants are faithless. A few dead peasants.  
Ilona, Ilona, sing to me. To me sing.  
Anna, sing to me. Sing to me.  
To me sing, Ilona.  
Anna.  
O Lord of Cats, sing to me.  
Sing to me. Sing to me. To me sing.  
I am the Countess Báthory. The Countess.  
Sing to me. Sing to me. To me sing...

## Curtain

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