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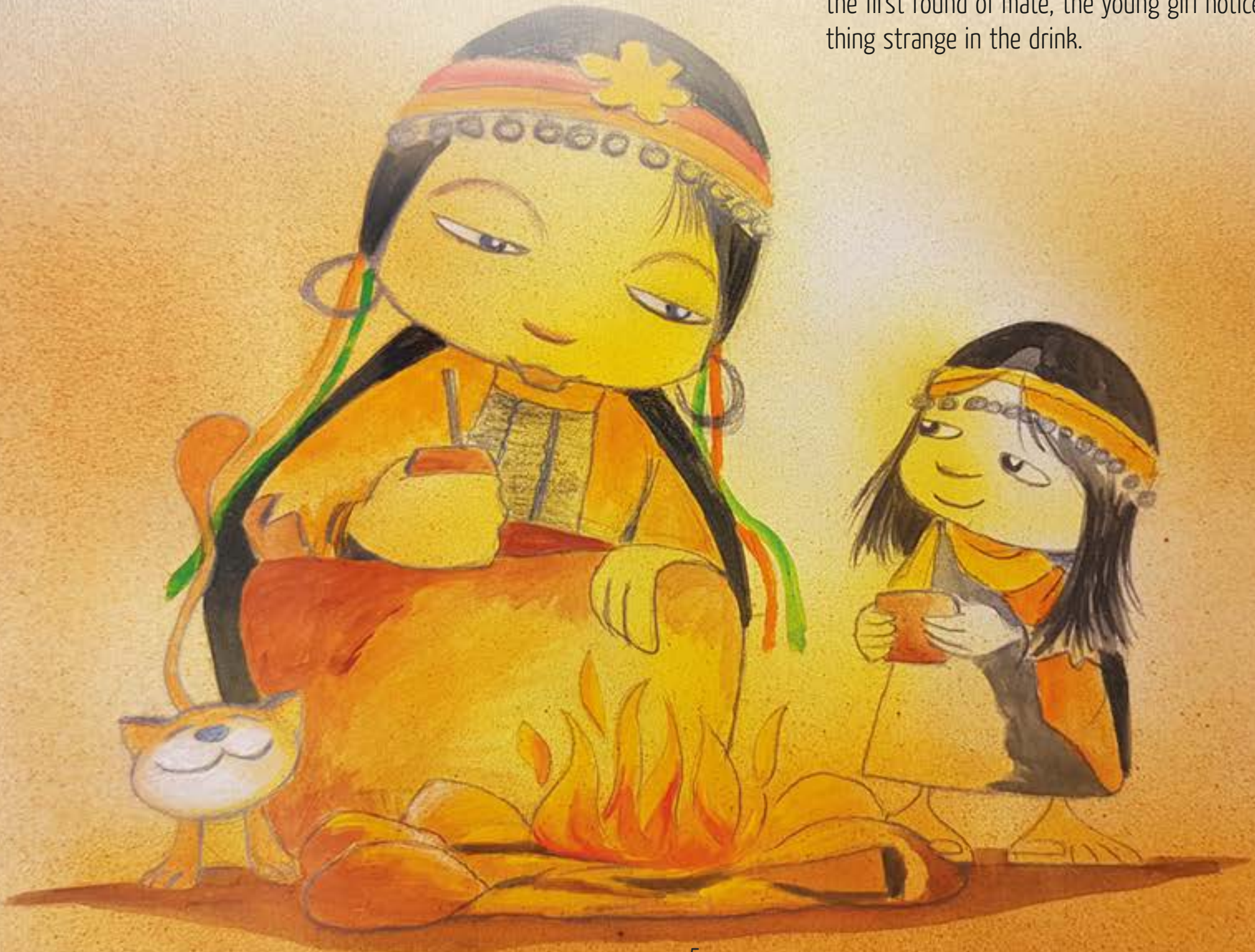
# KALFUMALEN AND THE SPIRIT OF THE CHESQUE RIVER

Hans Labra Bassa

**The** Chesque Alto box canyon is located west of Ruka pillán (Villarrica volcano) and is one of the few remaining stands of native forest. A couple of decades ago a fish farm was set up there that began to pollute the river water with large quantities of toxins and antibiotics. And then, everything changed.

Chesque means "paternal grandfather" in the Mapuzungun language, and, according to the Mapuche worldview, what happened was that fish farming broke the balance and hurt the spirit of the river (ngenko).

When her grandmother sat down next to the wood stove, one of the cats jumped up and curled up between her legs. During the first round of mate, the young girl noticed something strange in the drink.





—Your mate is salty, ñaña— Kalfumalén said to her grandmother, handing the cup of mate back to her.

—What do you mean, my child? If I boil the water first and let it cool a little...— She did not finish the sentence because she was interrupted by her granddaughter.

—But ñaña... you mustn't get water from the river, you know it's polluted. "Remember that ever since the fish farm came, not even the animals will drink water from it and if one of them does, it dies"— she said looking at her grandmother sternly.

What Kalfumalén said was one of the stories that her grandmother had personally told her, like the one about a little calf that she had to bury with great effort one day, or about the neighbors who had either lost animals or gotten sick. That's why she imitated her with a rare mixture of sarcasm and helplessness.

—In summer the springs dry up and what the municipality brings me is barely enough for my plants and my dogs and cats— said the old woman in resignation. —What would I do without my little animals? That's why I don't give them water, from the river no, no, no!— she said, petting her cat, adding —well, and if I have to give it to them, I boil it and cool it down for them.

Because of the pollution, the municipality has been distributing 500 liters of water per family per week for years, but after watering the garden and giving some to the animals, not to mention personal hygiene, the old woman and the rest of the people do not have enough water and must draw it from the river, still believing that boiling will make it safe.

Kalfumalén has seen her grandmother's health worsen over the years and wants to help her, but she doesn't know what to do. The old woman refills the mate cup with hot water. She offers it to her granddaughter, who sorrowfully drinks the salty mate, purely out of love for her ñaña. After drinking it, she hands it back without saying a word, while thinking... can a human get

rich at the expense of harming the environment and people's health?

—The damage that the fish farmers have done to the ÑukeMapu is inhuman— her grandmother said, as if reading her thoughts.

Kalfumalén looks her in the eye, but the old woman's gaze is lost in the cup of mate, her wrinkled hands and tired face reflecting the pain of a generation who saw how the salmon farm destroyed nature.

—They are not people!— the old woman exclaimed.

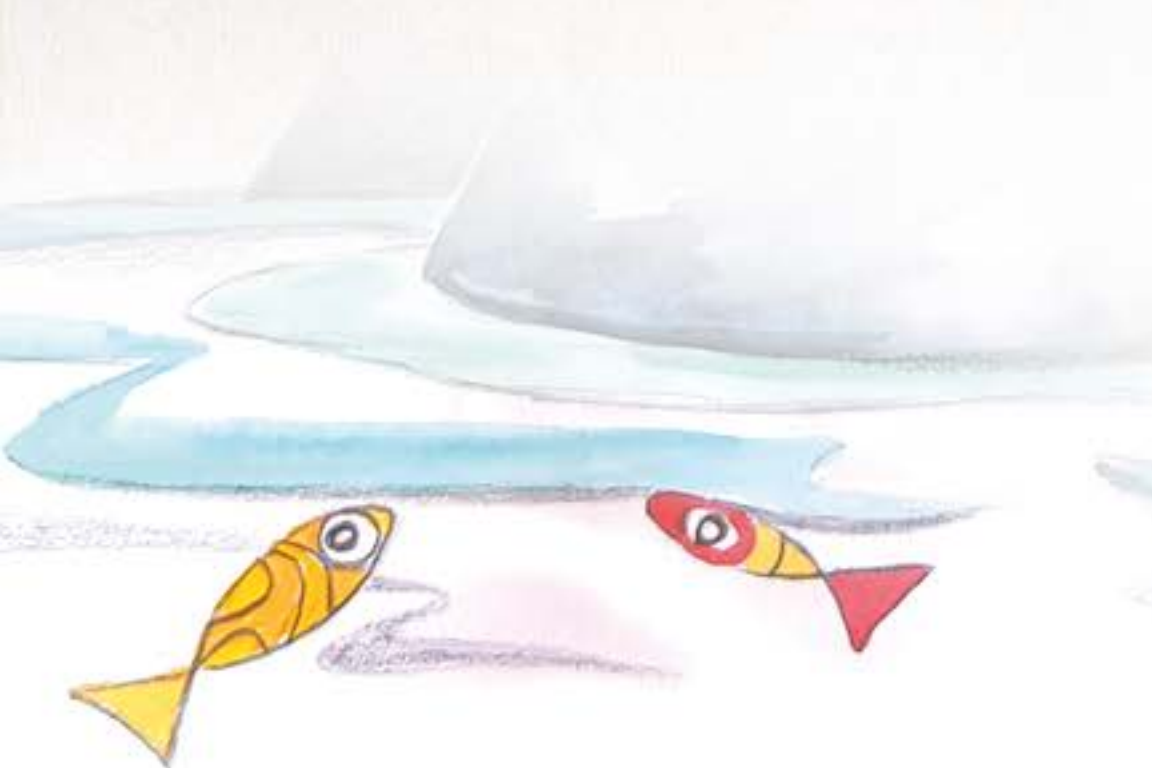
They remained silent. Another round of salty mate. All of a sudden, the grandmother cheered up because she remembered something and told Kalfumalén that she found out that the surrounding communities had organized and were preparing a lawsuit against the fish farm. This sparked a ray of hope in her granddaughter. A meeting would be held that afternoon at the operation's head office. Kalfumalén was excited and decided to go.

As she left the house, her grandmother stopped her, kissed her on the forehead and gave her a smile. Kalfumalén was happy, motivated, and hopeful as she walked. When it was her turn to introduce herself, she said that although she had no formal education or technical knowledge, she would help in any way she could. It was at that moment, thanks to the research that the people in the area had done, that she understood the real reasons why the mate tasted salty and why her grandmother was getting sicker with each passing day. She also saw all the work being done by the communities to demonstrate how their rights were being violated and she understood, among other things, that this fish farm was actually a laboratory.

When the meeting was over, she ran back to her grandmother's house to tell her what the communities had discovered. The company was involved in the production of juvenile fish and smolt, and the maturation of salmonid broodstock. In other words, it was artificially fertilizing "eggs", which were actually small fish that were then transferred to pools where they were fed until they reach the juvenile stage, and then matured until they reached their adult stage by adding large amounts of sodium chloride to the water.

—That's the problem, ñaña! Don't you see? They are 'anadromous' fish, that's why the mate is so salty— Kalfumalén said with such certainty that her grandmother looked at her in amazement and great joy.

—Oh, my child, I don't understand any of that— slamented the old woman —but I'm glad that you're joining the people who are





protecting the river, as I'm too old for that.

—Look, ñaña, what happens is that...— Kalfumalén spoke, patiently and calmly explaining it to her as she would to a young child; but her grandmother, despite giving her full attention, did not hear with voice with her ears, but with her heart, understanding the feeling behind her granddaughter's words. Her granddaughter's voice carried her back to the river, through the places of her childhood, to those magical years when there was no pollution and the people went down to the river to bathe or fetch water, where they met as a community and happily shared the pools along the banks of the river, something that the new generations could not enjoy. Her own son went to live in the city and, since her husband had died years ago. She was alone, although her granddaughter visited her from time to time. It was a blessing to be with her granddaughter, who she looked at in amazement as her voice transported her back through her memories.

Kalfumalén explained that anadromous fish are fish that are born in fresh water at the headwaters of the river basins and then swim downstream to the sea and mature in salt water, and later go back up the rivers to reproduce in fresh water.

—You see, ñaña? The fish farm is breaking the natural cycle of the fish— The communities discovered that the fish farm used a method to avoid having to take the fish to maturation cages located in the sea, which means they are applying large quantities of salt in the pools to mature the salmon. By adding applying tons of sodium chloride each day, the fish that previously had to be trucked to the coasts and fjords in the south for maturation are kept in "salted" pools at the headwaters of the river, which produces significant profits for the industry in terms of savings in transportation and infrastructure costs. This unnatural technique then started to be used by several salmon-producing countries worldwide, and is now referred to as "land-based smolt maturation," "post-smolt production," or "recirculating aquaculture systems," known throughout the world as "RAS."

Her grandmother had fallen asleep listening to her voice and was already falling out of her chair, so she wanted to lie down and happily let herself be led by her granddaughter to her bed. The idea that they were putting salt in the water made the young girl feel completely helpless because of all the environmental harm and the damage to people's health, but her concern went beyond that.

—Don't the fish get sick?— Kalfumalén asked at the meeting.

—Of course, lamien, very much so— replied a peñi —and to prevent high mortality rates the industry uses huge amounts of



antibiotics.

Kalfumalén imagined the trapped, overcrowded and sick fish that were forcibly kept alive by antibiotics. Her heart tightened at the thought of everything that was happening to the water. At the meeting, they analyzed how fish farming began in Mapuche territory as an artisanal endeavor, but then illegally expanded its operations, growing by 3,000% without any authorizations or permits, and without anyone being able to stop it.

—It grew by three thousand percent?— Kalfumalén asked in shock, as if she were trying to get someone to correct her if she was wrong. But she was not.

—That's right, it grew at the same rate as the demand for

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\* Resolución de Calificación Ambiental (RCA).





salmon worldwide— replied a neighbor —but in a totally illegal way and at the expense of the environment, leaving us with no water, even though the river continues to flow.

—And the authorities haven't done anything?— Kalfumalén asked.

—They dismissed all our complaints and gave environmental approval for fish farming— answered another neighbor.

They explained that although government agencies are the ones that should prevent unscrupulous businesses from setting up polluting industries, those agencies are controlled by politicians. In other words, those who make the decisions are not scientists or professionals with a vocation, but partisan politicians put there to promote the development and growth of private economies.

—And development and private growth threaten nature and human rights, especially the rights of indigenous peoples— said a leader of one of the Mapuche communities.

There was a full moon that night. After putting her grandmother to bed, Kalfumalén went down to sit by the river to listen to its sounds. She felt sad, and wanted to promise the ngenko that she would protect it and do everything she could to prevent them from continuing to pollute the river. However, fish farming operations increase in summer, and they discharge waste at night; the water, even in the dim light of the moon, turned cloudy and smelly.

Kalfumalén began to cry and apologized to the river for the wickedness of those who polluted it. She looked at the full moon and took refuge in it, in its immense and luminous calm. In the morning she got up early when it was still dark and went out to get water upstream of the fish farm. She wanted to serve some mate made with clean water to her grandmother and surprise her. When the old woman came into the kitchen, Kalfumalén was already back and waiting for her with the table set.



—Kumeantu, ñañita— she said smiling and gesturing her to sit down. The old woman looked radiant and her gray hair was loose, which gave her a luminous aura and wrapped her in a holiness that she had never seen before, which reminded the girl of the full moon she had taken refuge in the night before. The old woman drank the mate that her granddaughter served her and enjoyed it without saying a word. Kalfumalén noticed some crystalline tears running down her wrinkled cheeks and cried silently, but they were no longer of tears of sorrow, but of joy.

—Chaltumai, my child, your mate is delicious. I enjoyed it very much, as it reminded me of the kind I used to drink with my husband so very many years ago.

The old woman stood up, walked over to her granddaughter and kissed her on the forehead as usual, then walked to the door and left, saying "I am going out to join those who are protecting the river." Kalfumalén watched her as she walked toward the water and it seemed like she was not even limping. Suddenly, an unexpected mist appeared and enveloped the radiant old woman, so that Kalfumalén could not see where she had gone.

Frightened, she ran towards the river, but could not find her. Her footprints had vanished right before reaching the water. In the vegetation, the thick mist drew human forms, including ones she thought she recognized as not only her grandmother, but her grandfather too, her beloved chesque. At the same time, she thought she heard a voice in the sound of the water that said: "beware the yanaconas who have sold themselves." Then a premonition came over her; she ran back home and went straight to her grandmother's room. The cold, lifeless body of her beloved grandmother was still in bed, surrounded by her dogs and cats.

Kalfumalén then understood that her grandmother's spirit had said goodbye to her and that she had joined the ngenko. She tenderly kissed her on the forehead, went to get some hot water and mate, and sat next to her in silence to drink it, free of any salt or antibiotics. Only the sound of the river could be heard in the distance. Her grandmother had joined the telluric forces of nature and would fight by their side so that the environmental trial against the Chesque Alto fish farm would be ruled in favor of ÑukeMapu.

## GLOSSARY

- **Kalfumalén:** kalfu - blue; malen - girl or woman; blue girl (in the Mapuche worldview "kalfumalén" is not a proper name, but a female protector spirit, similar to an angel).
- **Chesque:** maternal grandfather.
- **Rukapillán:** Ruka - house; Pillán - great spirit; where the great spirit dwells.
- **Mapuzungun:** Mapu - earth; zungun - speech or language; the language spoken on earth.
- **Mapuche:** Mapu - earth; Che - people; the people of the earth.
- **Ngenko:** Ngen - owner, guardian spirit; Ko - water; spirit of the water.
- **Ñaña, ñañita:** grandmother, old woman, elderly lady.
- **ÑukeMapu:** Ñuke - mother; Mapu - earth; Mother Earth.
- **Cachai:** see, understand.
- **Lamien:** Sister.
- **Peñi:** Brother.
- **Kumeantu:** Kumey - well; Antu - Sun; Good morning.
- **Chaltumai:** Thank you very much.
- **Yanaconas:** indigenous people of any ethnic group, including the Mapuche, who sell to or work for the extractive system, attacking their own people and Mother Earth. (Yanacona is the name given by the ancient Araucanians who for centuries resisted the "friendly Indians" who arrived with the Spaniards to invade the southern lands; these indigenous people were recruited from among the Abyayala populations that they had already defeated).



**Hans Cristian Labra Bassa.** Chilean of Mapuche origin. Studied Professional Graphic Design at INACAP. Repair and construction of lutes, harps, and guitars. He is currently a music worker, street musician, and percussionist for Antu kai Mawen, and has published two books "LLUVIA DE SOL, La Memoria del Canto" 2007; and "PAZ UNIVERSAL, El Derecho de la Humanidad a un Buen Vivir" in 2021. He is an artisan, works in silversmithing and silkscreen printing. Environmental activist.

**Note:** On 25/08/2021 the Final Judgment of the THIRD ENVIRONMENTAL COURT OF VALDIVIA was issued, which partially accepted the claims against the Chesque Alto fish farm and the National Director of SEA, HERNÁN BRÜCHER VALENZUELA, who did not duly consider citizen and community comments opposing the project presented in 2016 by the owner of the fish farm, GERMAN MALIG LANTZ.

For the legal notice about the judgment: <https://bit.ly/Chesque>  
For more information about post-smolt production: <https://bit.ly/3LnDYmN>