



On Looking

Eleven Walks
with Expert Eyes

Alexandra Horowitz
author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller
Inside of a Dog

On Looking

ELEVEN WALKS WITH EXPERT EYES

Alexandra Horowitz

“Horowitz writes like a poet, thinks like a scientist, and ventures like an explorer. Her book will have you looking in a new way at the world around you, and make you glad you did.”

- **Susan Orlean**, author of *Rin Tin Tin*

From the author of the giant #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Inside of a Dog* comes an equally smart, delightful, and startling exploration of how we perceive and discover our world.

Alexandra Horowitz's *On Looking* shows us how to see the spectacle of the ordinary—to practice, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle put it, “the observation of trifles.”

On Looking is structured around a series of eleven walks the author takes, mostly in her Manhattan neighborhood, with experts on a diverse range of subjects, including an urban sociologist, the artist Maira Kalman, a geologist, a physician, and a sound designer. She also walks with a child and a dog to see the world as they perceive it. What they see, how they see it, and why most of us do not see the same things reveal the startling power of human attention and the cognitive aspects of what it means to be an expert observer.

On Looking is nutrition for the considered life, serving as a provocative response to our relentlessly virtual consciousness. So turn off the phone and other electronic devices and be in the real world—where strangers communicate by geometry as they walk toward one another, where sounds reveal shadows, where posture can display humility, and the underside of a leaf unveils a Lilliputian universe—where, indeed, there are worlds within worlds within worlds. whether shattered, shaky, or unbreakable.

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Amateur Eyes

You missed that. Right now, you are missing the vast majority of what is happening around you. You are missing the events unfolding in your body, in the distance, and right in front of you.

By marshaling your attention to these words, helpfully framed in a distinct border of white, you are ignoring an unthinkable large amount of information that continues to bombard all of your senses: the hum of the fluorescent lights, the ambient noise in a large room, the places your chair presses against your legs or back, your tongue touching the roof of your mouth, the tension you are holding in your shoulders or jaw, the map of the cool and warm places on your body, the constant hum of traffic or a distant lawnmower, the blurred view of your own shoulders and torso in your peripheral vision, a chirp of a bug or whine of a kitchen appliance.

This ignorance is useful: indeed, we compliment it and call it *concentration*. Our ignorance/concentration enables us to not just notice the scrawls on the page but also to absorb them as intelligible words, phrases, ideas. Alas, we tend to bring this focus to every activity we do—not just the most complicated but also the

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most quotidian. To a surprising extent, time spent going to and fro—walking down the street, traveling to work, heading to the store or a child’s (or one’s own) school—is unremembered. It is forgotten not because nothing of interest happens. It is forgotten because we failed to pay attention to the journey to begin with. On the phone, worrying over dinner, listening to others or to the to-do lists replaying in our own heads, we miss the world making itself available to be observed. And we miss the possibility of being surprised by what is hidden in plain sight right in front of us.

It was my dog who prompted me to consider that these daily journeys could be done . . . better. Bring a well-furred, wide-eyed, sharp-nosed dog into your life, and suddenly you find yourself taking a lot of walks. *Walks around the block*, in particular. Over the last three decades, living with two dogs, my blocks have been classic city blocks—down the street and three right corners and home; they have been along sidewalked small towns and un-sidewalked, hilly villages. But what counted as a “block” was changeable. Heading out for what I imagined would be a quick circumnavigation, I often found myself led elsewhere by my dog: our “blocks” have become tours of city parks, zigzagging meanders through canyons, trots along the sides of highways, and, when we were lucky, down narrow forest paths.

After enough waylaid walks, I began trying to see what my dog was seeing (and smelling) that was taking us far afield. Minor clashes between my dog’s preferences as to where and how a walk should proceed and my own indicated that I was experiencing almost an entirely different block than my dog. I was paying so little attention to most of what was right before us that I had become a sleepwalker on the sidewalk. What I saw and attended to was exactly what I expected to see; what my dog showed me was that my attention invited along attention’s companion: inattention to everything else.

This book attends to that inattention. It is not a book about

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how to bring more focus to your reading of Tolstoy or how to listen more carefully to your spouse. It is not about how to avoid falling asleep at a public lecture or at your grandfather's tales of boyhood misadventures. It will not help you plan dinner for eight as you listen to books-on-tape and as you consult the GPS—all while you are driving.

In this book, I aimed to knock myself awake. I took that walk “around the block”—an ordinary activity engaged in by everyone nearly every day—dozens of times with people who have distinctive, individual, expert ways of seeing all the unattended, perceived ordinary elements I was missing. Together, we became investigators of the ordinary, considering the block—the street and everything on it—as a living being that could be observed.

In this way, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and the old the new. My method took advantage of two elements. The first is inherent in each of us. We all have the capacity to really see what is in front of us. On moving to a new home, one's first approach is wide eyed—with senses alert to the various ways that this new block differs from one's old home: the trees provide more shade, or the cars are more plentiful, or the sidewalks are leaner, or the buildings are more deeply set back from the street. It is only after we have moved in, after we have walked the same street again and again, that we fall asleep to the block. Even the feeling of time passing changes on our walk: with less to notice, time speeds up. The capacity to attend is ours; we just forget how to turn it on.

The second element takes advantage of individual expertise. There is a certain bias in everyone's perspective that has been named, by the French, *déformation professionnelle*: the tendency to look at every context from the point of view of one's profession. The psychiatrist sees symptoms of diagnosable conditions in everyone from the grocery checkout cashier to his spouse; the economist views the simple buying of a cup of coffee as an exam-

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ple of a macroeconomic phenomenon. In the wrong context these experts are merely the people you try to avoid sitting next to at a dinner party. But applied to this project, these people are *seers*: able to bring attention to an element of a person's manner, or to a social interaction, that is often missed.

I live and work in a city—New York City—and thus have a special fascination with the humming life-form that is an urban street. To investigate, I took all the walks for this book in this and other cities, around ordinary blocks. My companions on these walks were people who have a distinct perspective on the world. Often, it was a perspective forged from explicit training, as with a doctor. For others, their sensibility was shaped by their passion—finding insect tracks or studying lettering, for example. Finally, for some, the way they see the world is part of their very constitution, as with a child, a blind person, or a dog. What follows is the record of eleven walks around the block I took with expert seers, who told me what they saw.

Well, *twelve* walks. I began by walking around the block by myself. I wanted to record what I saw before I was schooled by my walking companions.

The air was already drunk with humidity when I stepped outside on that first morning. I chose to walk the blocks around my home because they are not particularly special blocks; I have a certain fondness for my neighborhood blocks, born of familiarity, but even as they have grown familiar, I realize that I rarely look at them. Nonetheless, I was sure that I would be able to describe them well. My eyes were not altogether amateur: I was knowingly walking to “see what I could see” and, furthermore, professionally I study animal behavior using a method that is, in essence, *looking closely*. On this walk, I set off at a slow pace with a reporter's

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notebook in hand, planning to reconstruct the scene later. Feeling wide eyed, I turned down the block.

My eyes rested first on the bags of trash by our curb. Shredded, formerly private papers were visible in their clear recycling bags. A beagle pulling on a long leash trotted by and unceremoniously defined the corner of the trash pile by urinating on it.

I scribbled down something about flowers in a tree pit. When I looked up, I was at the corner, flanked by two large, somber apartment buildings. I briefly coveted a free parking spot, a gaping space between cars along the curb. There was no decoration in front of the near building save two pipes—one a humble water pipe, the other a mysterious two-headed gnome. I did not investigate. A child scurried by. I was passed by a series of dog-person pairs, headed toward the park that was now at my back.

The walkers trod silently; the dogs said nothing. The only sound was the hum of air conditioners. A pretty, red brownstone, with a gracious, curved stoop, sat between a large stone building and a handful of white- and red-bricked specimens. But I barely looked up. There was too much to see on the ground. Each building on the block was marked by its characteristic pile of bags of trash. Something dribbled from each: a Q-tip (how does a Q-tip escape? I wondered), a chicken bone, sundry crumpled papers. I saw another Q-tip, and started to wonder about the ear health of my neighbors. As I continued, the trash piles grew messier, or the sidewalk narrower, or both. Moving aside to let someone pass, I was nearly seated in a small alcove along a building—perhaps a place to sit, but it was lined with spikes. I did not sit there.

I approached the next intersection, Broadway, a wide avenue with traffic running both directions. An older gentleman was resting in the median, unable to make it across both lanes of traffic in one go. As he resumed, he teetered, and I swung widely around him so as to not knock him off course.

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Across the avenue, continuing east, a few commercial stores had escaped onto the side street: a small grocery, a rash of crushed cigarette butts outside its door; a hair salon, with a long awning to its entrance, oddly formal for a haircuttery. A stream of cars reversed its way down the block, some vehicles pulling into parking places and some backing heedlessly onto the avenue. I smelled trash. The sounds of a garbage truck straining to crush its load wafted from up ahead. A spill of spaghetti, cooked and sauced, formed a sunburst at my feet, attended to by a cluster of pigeons.

The garbage truck was out of sight, but it left a path of garbage leavings—marking the meals, cleaning habits, and unwanted memories of the hidden local inhabitants—from sidewalk to street. I took in the impatience of the drivers, all straining to see ahead, as though if they got a clear view of the impediment, it would dissipate. Watching them, I arrived at the building at the end of the block and turned right onto another busy avenue. Traffic came in waves as each scrum of cars caught the lights timed together running uptown. Every building had a storefront on its first floor, and at this early hour most of them were shuttered. Forgettable, indistinguishable signs topped the stores, advertising pizza and cleaners. Walking as I scribbled down notes, I missed whatever was on the next corner as I turned it. But I saw I had turned onto a tree-lined block, with one half providing an assurance of shade. I headed to it. Newly laid asphalt, deep black and glowing proudly in the morning's heat, gummed the soles of my shoes. Up ahead I saw, and then heard, a film-set truck. The block was taken over by those creating a simulacrum of the block for the day. The truck was a hub of human activity of an unidentifiable nature. Piles of metal rods, racks of poles, and stacked platforms, readied for work, sat on wheeled carts by the truck's rump. An audience of curious onlookers idled away the morning on brownstone stoops.

Each residence had its own one or two distinguishable fea-

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tures. At one building, there were rolled-up, rubber-banded newspapers just sitting on the step outside closed doors. I marveled, for the umpteenth time, that delivered newspapers do not just go missing every morning. Another building had ivy trained over its steps, forming a hopeful arch. A third presented a well-ordered set of trash cans underneath a metal fence.

Clustered along the curb were the loitering film crew and their loitering trucks, generators loudly generating. The crew wore badges or headsets, and nearly everyone held a coffee cup, some kind of early-morning security blanket. They stared at me: they had nothing to do, and they were not in their own neighborhoods, where eye contact is brief and polite. The smells of a nearby caterer caught me: breakfast. The front of a church I had never been in had become a gaping hole, its many doors propped widely open, as men in long shorts hoisted crates inside.

In the middle of this hubbub a honey locust tree sat broken. A recent furious storm had felled its top half, now folded messily next to its trunk. Passersby simply stepped around the police tape unhelpfully slung across it.

A breeze lured me from down the street and I reflexively pursued it, continuing back across Broadway. This block climbed ever-so-slightly up and then down a hill, which seemed to give it great character: the row of identical houses looked more intriguing at slightly different altitudes. On the second floor of one building an old dog studied me through the rails of a balcony. His ears dangled becomingly over his face, and he wagged as I greeted him.

Dominating the street was a single-family mansion, a true anomaly in this city. From behind its wall popped a squirrel, who headed across the street in fits and starts, pausing under a car and in the middle of the road before scurrying across and into a bush.

I turned my final corner, toward the mansion entrance, gazing up at its pair of stone lions waiting patiently for royalty that never

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arrives. A wooly caterpillar, his head crowned with four fearsome green horns, moved lazily on the first step, heading nowhere good for caterpillars. I scooped him onto a finger and deposited him in a nearby potted tree. I arrived back on my doorstep. The newspaper that should be rubber-banded outside my door had been stolen. I turned the key and was home.

I had waltzed out my door with considerably more self-consciousness than usual, not unaware that I was out to take a “typical” walk around the block. I reveled in my naïveté, pleased to be embarking on a walk whose limitations I knew I would spend the rest of this book delineating. But I also thought to myself that I might just impress myself with my uncanny observational skills. After all, in my professional life I am an observer—of dogs in particular. That skill should translate to observing my own behavior, and certainly to observing my own block. Hadn’t I heard how observant I was, from those many friends onto whom I’d lobbed surely unwelcome observations?

So on my return I felt plenty pleased with myself and my walk. Surely I had seen all that really mattered on the block. Not a car passed without my gaze upon it; nary a building got by un-ogled. I had stared down the trees; I even knew one’s name. I had eyeballed the passersby; noted a daring squirrel; spied a wooly caterpillar. I was consciously looking. What could I have missed?

As it turns out, I was missing pretty much everything. After taking the walks described in this book, I would find myself at once alarmed, delighted, and humbled at the limitations of my ordinary looking. My consolation is that this deficiency of mine is quite human. We see, but we do not see: we use our eyes, but our gaze

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is glancing, frivolously considering its object. We see the signs, but not their meanings. We are not blinded, but we have blinders.

My deficiency is one of attention: I simply was not paying close enough attention. Though *paying attention* seems simple, there are numerous forms of payment. I reckon that every child has been admonished by teacher or parent to “pay attention.” But no one tells you *how* to do that.

The consensus is that it is in some way taxing. Gustave Fechner, a nineteenth-century German psychophysicist, claimed he felt a physical sensation when attending: “a strain forward in the eyes,” and when listening, “one directed sidewise in the ears.” The American father of modern psychology, William James, reported that when attending to a memory, he felt “an actual rolling outwards and upwards of the eyeballs,” as though fixing on the striations of neurons in the interior of his head. In researching what people perceived attention to be, psychologists found that schoolteachers instructed their students to pay attention to an image by “hold[ing] the image still as one would with a camera.” To concentrate, to *pay attention*, is viewed as a brow-furrowing exercise. Sit still, don’t blink, and *attend*.

Given a thorny sentence to read, or asked to listen to a whispered secret while a truck rumbles by, you will quickly be brought to that mind-straining place that James and Fechner described. We take on a characteristic attentive pose. In reading, you might frown slightly, your eyes narrowed as though contracting the words into finer focus. In listening, you may lean toward the speaker, looking down to avoid visual distraction, your mouth falling slightly open. You hold something tensed—a flexed foot, fingers curled into a loose fist, shoulders raised protectively. You are surprisingly still, as though the noise of your muscle movement might drown out a whisper.

This may do for a moment of concentration, but it is not the

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way to better attention in your daily life. For that, we need to know what attention is. The very concept is odd. Is it an ability, a tendency, a skill? Is it processed in a special nugget in the brain, or by your eyes and ears? The psychologists have no clear answer. Since we all feel comfortable using the word, it has been customary to agreeably nod when someone starts talking to you about attention, but is it coherent to discuss something that we cannot even define, much less locate?

Surely “everyone knows what attention is,” claimed James over a century ago. *Maybe*, but it is notable that James himself then spent sixty pages of his psychology opus largely theorizing about what exactly it might be. If we are unsure what attention is, we are bound to have difficulty honing it.

The longtime model used by psychologists is that of a “spotlight” that picks out particular items of interest to examine, bringing some things into focus and awareness while leaving other things in the dim, dusty sidelines. The metaphor makes me feel like a headlight-wearing spelunker who can only see what is right in front of her in the darkness of the cave. Such a comparison can be misleading, because in fact one can still report on what was within one’s peripheral vision at rates better than chance. And despite that spotlight, we seem to miss huge elements of the thing we are ostensibly attending to.

A better way of thinking about attention is to consider the problems that evolution might have designed “attention” to solve. The first problem emerges from the nature of the world. The world is wildly distracting. It is full of brightly colored things, large things casting shadows, quickly moving things, approaching things, loud things, irregular things, smelly things. This cacophony can be found right outside your house or apartment. Should someone see us standing quietly on the sidewalk in front of an apartment building, and ask us, “What’s up?” we might be hard-

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pressed to respond accurately: “My eyes are being tickled with a splendid display of colors; we are surrounded by improbably large stone towers; occasionally a storm of metal and plastic roars by me on the street; soft-faced irregularly-moving forms come near me and pass by; smaller tight-bodied things move by my head in the air; there is a rumble from somewhere, intermittent jabbers from the soft faces, continual hums from these stone towers; my nose is attracted and repelled by something ripe and rotting . . .” we could begin.

Instead, we say, “Nothing much.”

And “nothing” is more or less what we notice, in fact. One way to solve the problem of the “blooming, buzzing confusion” an infant confronts on entering the world is to tune much of it out. As we grow up, over the course of days and months, we learn to deal with the confusion by paying little of it mind. By the time we are old enough to walk outside to the sidewalk, we have organized the perceptual melee into chunks of recognizable objects. After a few years, we learn to see the street scene—without really seeing it at all.

The second problem is that, even ignoring most of it, we can only take in so much of the world at a time. Our sensory system has a limited capacity, both in range and in speed of processing. The light we see, “visible” light, is an impossibly small snatch of the solar spectrum; similarly, what we hear is but a fraction of what there is to hear. Our eyes, like other sensory organs, can process a finite amount at once: the neural cells that transduce light to electricity effect this through a change in their pigment. In the time that this is happening, the cell cannot take in any more light. We do not *see* what cannot get past the eye. And, too, though with our highly fancy brains we are massive parallel distributed processors, there is still a limit to our computational capacity. The world’s best computers do not (yet) think like humans do, but

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they are much, much faster at processing information. Happily, not everything out there in the world is equally informative or important. We do not need to see everything.

If only we had a system that let us take in what we *do* need to see—

—and of course, we do: that system is attention. Having a way to tune out unnecessary information, to sort through the bombardment of visual and auditory noise, solves these problems. Objects in the world may seem benign, impotently hoping that your glance will light on them, but they are competing with each other for your regard. Attention is an intentional, unapologetic discriminator. It asks what is relevant right now, and gears us up to notice only that. Why bother sorting out all the elements of a visual scene? Evolution has a simple explanation. Some things are good to eat, and some things are trying to eat you. At the most basic level, an organism needs to be able to discriminate between these two categories of things from the rest of the world. Indeed, for a simple organism, that could be nearly *all* that is noticed. The bacterium does not care if your orange shirt clashes horribly with your pink slacks. The subtle but important difference between the smell of sweaty feet and the smell of Limburger cheese (actually not so different to all but the cheesemongers) is lost on the brave bacterium that would happily lounge on either. For an early hominid on the savanna, detection of, say, a lion would be of paramount importance. As a result, modern humans still have a type of attention—*vigilance*—which helps keep the body ready to look out for that lion, and dash off if he appears. More recently, what is relevant for modern man is being able to nod at the right times to the person animatedly talking to you at a cocktail party, while blocking out all the other conversations around you (noticing if one of them mentions you, though). We have got another kind of attention—*selective attention*—to do this job for us.

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When we can, we try to offload this work on the world: bringing attention by changing it—circling the key words of a book's pages; marking with bright color anything to be noticed; keeping your preferred knife not among knives but among the poor defenseless spoons. Hence the commercial success of highlighter pens, bright orange construction cones (or, even better, construction cones in neon green, for contrast with the old orange), and advertising that blinks at you from its billboard.* Indeed, the singularity of one unexpected element in a visual scene is so remarkable that the item can serve as just a marker for some other thing, tangible or intangible: to do the laundry or to call your mother. It is the string-on-the-finger phenomenon: in noticing the string, you do not head into a reverie about strings. Instead, you are reminded that there is something that needs remembering.

If you overuse this trick, though, you simply become accustomed to having strings on your fingers, and the strings no longer serve to do anything but keep you armed for tying knots at a moment's notice.

The most successful spotlighting of any situation usually involves directions from upstream, in the brain. Your brain ties strings on fingers all the time, without wasting a single strand. Your own internal monologue about what you are doing in any given moment actually affects what you will see in that moment. If you *know* you are looking for the knife, it will be easier to find.

At a basic level, then, *paying attention* is simply making a selection among all the stimuli bombarding you at any moment. It need not be concerted or difficult. But it does require some direc-

* Before I had a child and the floor of our home became an in-progress canvas of wooden toys, squeaking balls, and plush animals, I could drop the single item I needed to remember to take with me the next day by the front door. There it would wait for me, utterly forgotten, until I spied it on my way out and stashed it in my rucksack.

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tion from the brain. Simply to be reading these words at all is to be narrowing your range of mental field to the words on the page. Other sights, thoughts, sounds, and smells still fly by in your periphery, the suburbs of your mental viewfinder. They are a sub-level of attention, a kind of attention that we might not be aware of (until one of those sights or sounds migrates into our mental field of view). These are things we will quickly, and almost surely, forget—but that are ready for consideration. Later today, reflecting on the time spent sitting and reading this book, you will not remember an image of what was to your left or right, what was in your visual field above the top of the book's pages, the tune flitting through your head, or the ambient sound track of muffled footsteps or car traffic that accompanies your reading.

Psychologists call this the *selective enhancement* of some area of your perceptual field and suppression of other areas. And therein lies my approach to “paying attention” to the block: each of my companions on these walks serves to do the selective-enhancing for us, highlighting the parts of the world that they see but which we have either learned to ignore or do not even know we *can* see.

This is not to say that everyone I walked with saw everything. Moments into my walk with one of the world's foremost researchers on the science of paying attention, she stepped over sixty dollars lying in her path on the street.

She simply did not notice it.

A half-step behind her, I, and my eyebrows, expressed surprise. For this, an early walk for this project, I had headed out of town by train to walk with a psychologist who thinks a great deal about attention. We had just been talking about the psychological idea of being “mindful”—aiming to bring active attention to our daily lives by noticing new things. And we were on one of

the prototypical elements of daily life, a neighborhood jaunt with dogs.

But the mindful psychologist walked mindlessly by the cash.

It was her dog and I who saw it (well, I am guessing the dog smelled it). One twenty-dollar bill, bereft of owner. A footstep later, another twenty. I goggled at seeing a third bill lying forlornly to the side of the first two. They bore the creases of having been folded with the same hand, in possessive quarter-folds, though they were now unfurling with their freedom. They must have leapt from a pocket together, parachuted to the ground at different speeds, and landed a stride apart. I stopped, reached down, grabbed the loot, and managed to mutter, “*Look!*”

She smiled broadly as she registered the money resting on my outstretched palms. The dog stood beside me, proudly quiet, nose pointed at the ground. But then I thought, *Wait, did I miss another one?*

In this book, I am looking for what it is that I miss, every day, right in front of me, while walking around the block. “The block” includes the physical elements of the street—from the sidewalks to the buildings—and their history. My first four walks attend to this *inanimate city*. The block includes who (or what) is on it now and who (or what) has passed before; the next three chapters attend to this *animate city*. The block is full of things we miss seeing, smelling, or hearing—and it holds untold stories of the things we *do* see, smell, or hear. The final three chapters attend to the *sensory city*.

The result of all this walking is not a master’s degree in the details of any one city or any single block. It is a tale about what there is to see in any environment, urban or rural. These walks re-awakened in me a sense of perpetual wonder in my surround-

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ings—a perceptual skill typically available only to experts and to the very young (not yet expert in being people). Perhaps they will awaken wonder in you, too.

William James suggested that my experience will be “what I agree to attend to.” And so I headed agreeably to my first walk around the block, mind in my hand.



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