



## Bill Jayme - the greatest copywriter of them all...

In my humble opinion, Bill Jayme was the greatest direct response copywriter ever to walk on this planet...

A true superstar in every sense of the word, he made millions of dollars for his clients. Mind you, this was in an era when people recognised the real value of the written word in promotional activity.

Whatever happened to those halcyon days?

To a lot of you reading this, Bill Jayme will be a name you are unfamiliar with. That troubles me. It troubles me *greatly*.

Always has, always will. But that's for another time...

So, let me tell you about the great man. It's a longer than usual article, but I hope you stay with it...

Bill was born in 1926 and lived his early years in western Pennsylvania. He graduated from Princeton in 1949, and then moved to New York City.

He stumbled around at first, working at a variety of odd jobs to pay the rent, including being employed as a messenger for Young & Rubicam on Madison Avenue. But, his talent for writing became apparent very early, when he sold a script to the Studio One TV show.

In 1951, he joined the circulation department of Time Inc., working for copywriter Frank Johnson - the guy who was credited with creating the Johnson Box - the headline at the top of a direct mail letter, usually surrounded by a rectangle of asterisks.

Bill worked in a number of departments at Time, finally ending up in circulation.

*"I found I was pretty good at it," Jayme said. "It was fun to write something and know for the first time if it was good or bad".*

Apparently, on his first day on the job, he literally couldn't find his way to the men's room and, as happens in such situations, he found himself under a little bit of pressure and constantly shifted in his seat.

Fellow copywriter Millie Strelitz came to the rescue. Around two in the afternoon, she said to Bill, *"Do you have a problem sitting down for a long periods of time? You seem very antsy."*

Bill replied, *"Well, to tell you truth, I need to go to the bathroom, but I am embarrassed to ask a woman where the men's room is"*.

Millie laughed out loud and led Bill by the hand to the bathroom. He was a changed man for the rest of the day, quite understandably.

Bill's talent as a copywriter soon became apparent. He made a big impression on his bosses and on the recipients of his communications.

His first letter at Time Inc was "Cool Friday," celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of Life magazine. This letter soon became the control and was still being mailed well into the 1960's.

Asked how he got the idea for this letter, Bill said, *"Simply, out of my brain. Life was having a birthday, and we needed a letter to use, that would be a hook to get people to subscribe. So, I went down to the public library, and sat there with a lot of bums in the reading room, with my head sunk in this viewer, and rolled these scrolls about what was going on at the time, like the price of car, taking notes on the ads, and setting the scene."*

In 1997, Bill did the same thing with another Life mailing...

*"The whole front page was reddish autumn leaf, and the copy was printed over that," he said. "The copy would say, 'It's autumn, and isn't life wonderful? The smell of roasting marshmallows in the air, woollen clothes against your skin, first snow-fall, the smell of turkey cooking..."*

This was Bill's style. His copy appeared leisurely, something you could read aloud after dinner. It conveyed warmth and it conveyed charm. It rewarded the reader for his/her reading time.

But, it cleverly disguised the commercial attraction. Responses to campaigns simply poured in. A superstar was sharpening his knife...

*"He was good - you could tell," says fellow Time Inc colleague, Frank Johnson. "Bill was extremely literate and witty".*

As very talented creative people tend to be, Bill did not suffer fools gladly. He was, as Johnson recalled in a later interview, *"a snotty son of a bitch,"* Johnson recalls with a loving laugh. *"Bill was terribly articulate and very insulting to practically everybody."*

At a Time Inc. party, Joan Throckmorton recalled Bill meeting Nick Samstag, who apparently took great delight in intimidating people. "*Samstag – that's 'gatsmas' spelled backward isn't it?*" Jayme asked him, while maintaining eye contact, then smiling as he turned round and walked away, leaving Samstag open-mouthed.

After many years of huge successes writing for Life and Fortune, Bill became very hot property indeed and was finally lured away by an offer of more money to go to CBS.

At CBS he became copy chief in the advertising promotion department. At that time, CBS had won all the radio ratings and were flying high. The quality of this genius was apparent within hours, as on his very first day Bill wrote an ad that depicted a radio with only a knob for volume.

The headline said: 'The day they threw the knob away' ... implying that CBS was the only network worth listening to.

Everyone was stunned. After all, it was only his first day...

After three years making CBS a small fortune, Bill was talked into joining McCann-Erickson as an advertising copywriter. Very soon, he realised he had made a massive mistake.

He hated the company, its strange culture, products and people.

*"They had so much review of every word that was written," he said. "The copy went up to copy chief, then through the copy vice president, then the copy review board, then over to client's assistant--some nitwit earning maybe 5 cents a week, and he made changes with his pencil--then to the client himself.*

*Sometimes the only thing remaining that you had written, was the name of the product."*

(Obviously, the brainless idea of 'sign off by committee' happened in those days as well! Any passionate copywriter reading this will share Bill's frustration).

Bill became so miserable and disillusioned, he decided to go to Europe to seek his destiny. He didn't find it. A year later, he returned "*destitute*" as he later referred to it.

Soon after his return, he had lunch with Frank Johnson in Manhattan, during which Frank suggested he become a freelancer.

Eager for the freedom to write two and three-page direct mail letters, Bill took Johnson's advice and started freelancing in 1959. He immediately won a load of work from magazine consultant Dick Benson and his partner, Chris Stagg, plus other briefs from Frank Johnson for James Parton's Horizon, a sister publication to Parton's visionary American Heritage.

About that time, the editors of Esquire, still considered a World War II-era girlie magazine, opted to reposition their publication. While attracting new writers and introducing a sophisticated tone was relatively easy, one problem proved difficult - changing the long time control.

Called the "Damn it" letter because it opened with those words, it talked about pin-up girls and projected an embarrassing old image for the new Esquire. Yet it continued to win all tests against other letters.

Clay Felker, an Esquire editor, called in Bill Jayme.

Bill came up with the "Puzzle Letter." On the back of the envelope were nine dots. Can you, dear reader, connect all nine using only four lines and without lifting the pencil?

The letter revealed that to solve the puzzle you had to go outside the box formed by the nine dots - just as a modern man had to break out of his normal patterns - and the new Esquire was the very magazine to help you do it.

The puzzle letter won handily. The first time the control had been beaten in years of testing. The word was out. Everyone in the magazine community were talking about him and his copywriting genius.

Bill Jayme was now in great demand.

But, his wonderful copy talent needed a creative partner to make the packs sing. But he couldn't find one. He was forced to hand his copy to a number of designers who 'claimed' to specialise in direct mail.

The results were deeply disappointing to Bill. He knew his copy was on the money, but overall, something was missing with the packs. However, purely on the strength of his incredible copy skills, they still delivered excellent results.

But he knew the packs could do better. *Much* better...

The trouble he faced, was exactly the same as is being faced today. The designers he used, knew art well enough, but were totally lacking in human psychology. And, in a one -to-one communication channel like DM, they have little or no value.

His designers turned out packages Bill described as "*pristine and tidy that when viewed, the prospect's eyes would glaze over with boredom*". (Nothing much has changed there, then....)

But, in 1962 Bill's life changed forever. Both commercially and personally.

Bill met the creative partner he had been looking for for years - and the one who would complete his life as well. He was a Finnish-born graphics designer called Heikki Ratalahti.

After putting up with countless designers and art directors who just didn't understand the unique nature of direct response and especially Bill's brand of salesmanship by mail, Ratalahti was a breath of fresh air.

Heikki was the perfect design partner for Bill as he was a high quality visual communicator who understood human psychology. And, he was a good listener.

Bill and Heikki clicked immediately. The ultimate direct marketing creative dream team was born. They quickly became the 'gurus' of direct mail.

In over 40 years together, their stylish direct mail packs launched some three dozen magazines - including New York, Smithsonian, Bon Appetit, Food & Wine, Cooking Light, Air & Space, Louis Rukeyser's Wall Street, Worth, Saveur, Tufts Nutrition Letter, Mother Jones and the Harvard Medical School Health Letter.

Without question, they changed the face of direct mail through the 60's, 70's and 80's prior to Bill's retirement in the early 90's.

In their heyday, Bill and Heikki had publishers and circulation managers queuing up to see them, cheques in hand, ready to pay \$30,000 - \$50,000 for a single direct mail package. That's how good they were...

At one time, incredibly, there was a five-month waiting list. Bill would not visit clients - they had to visit him. The way it should be...

Bill and Heikki usually spent around three to four weeks crafting a package, with Bill writing and rewriting the basic letter, then a second letter, plus an order form and a brochure.

He would always read them aloud to himself and Heikki - and he never once looked at readership profiles, research or surveys. When asked why, Bill said *"because, that information tells us what they have, not what they want or who they want to be."*

Bill and Heikki's packs, usually shared four main characteristics:

#### The Outer Envelope

They understood the immense power of the outer envelope in direct mail and created some irresistible envelopes. (How marketers could learn from this now).

Bill referred to the outer envelope as the *"hot pants on the hooker"*

His most famous envelope strapline is now legendary. It was for Psychology Today.

*"Do you close the bathroom door even when you're the only one home?"*

He came up with a better one for a later campaign, in my opinion:

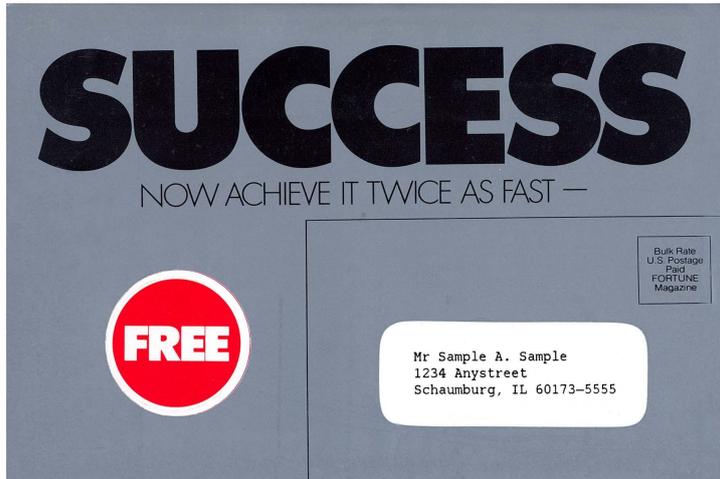
*"How much do you tip the waitress, when you're planning to steal the ashtray"*

Bill and Heikki used and tested many different sizes, but their hallmark was the 6"x 9" with a "FREE" token showing through its own round window. This show-through token gave them the added advantage of effectively another colour on the outer without having to pay for it.

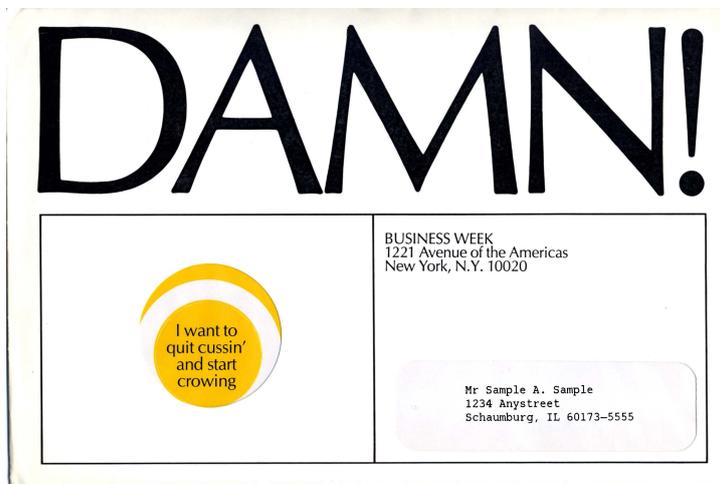
Whatever the size selected, you could be sure that a Jayme-Ratalahti envelope was always a grabber - and it teased the recipient to such a degree that the envelope almost *demand*ed to be opened. Which, after all, is the sole objective of any message on the outer. Something that again is misunderstood by naïve marketers today.

Here are just three examples of their great outer envelopes:

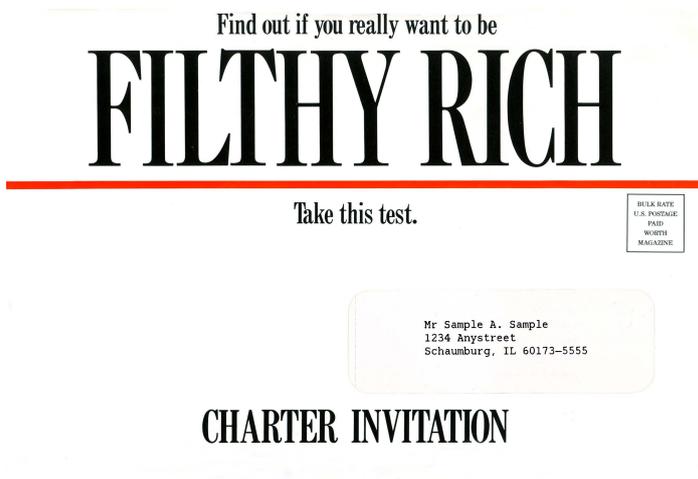
**1. Fortune - 'Success'**



**2. Business Week 'Damn'**



**3. Worth 'Filthy Rich'**



Bill explained the rationale...

*"Your outer envelope is where your prospect decides to stop, look and listen. It's the come-on – the headline on the ad, the cover of the catalogue, the dust jacket on the book, the display window outside the store..."*

*The same holds true for the business arena as well. Any competent secretary can recognize bulk mail. The secret to overcoming the 'secretary barrier' is to create an envelope that looks interesting..."*

### The Sales Letter

Bill was truly the master of the direct mail letter. I have studied his copy for years.

There has never been anyone better, before or since. His copy was consistently brilliant and very often, astonishing.

He knew then, as the more knowledgeable still know now, that direct mail has no equal when it comes to delivering an intimate, personal, one-to-one communication to your target market - in the privacy of their home or office.

This is what makes direct mail unique.

As Bill said all those years ago, *"Of all practical advertising media, only direct mail offers a sufficiently large canvas for telling a complex story."*

And, of course, the star player of direct mail is the letter.

Bill and Heikki knew that people did not read direct mail packs word for word. So, they adhered to a simple formula, which worked then, as it does today and will continue to work until the world stops turning.

State the offer message, repeat it - and then repeat it again. 'The Power Of Three' as the inspirational Murray Raphel once described it...

During a business lunch, Bill and Heikki quickly educated a new client when he requested that Bill only wrote a single page letter for the brief they were discussing. *"No one reads long copy",* the client said. *"They haven't got time..."* (ever heard that old chestnut somewhere before? Maybe last week?)

Bill took a long slug of his wine and then took 10 seconds to bust that myth. *"The letter should always be long - each additional page lifts the response rate by as much as half a percentage point. If you want short copy, there are loads of bums in California that will write you a one-page letter. Go look one up..."*

Boof! Another client educated in typical Jayme style.

Here are three first pages, written as only Bill could:

## 1. Quest

Ever expect a dozen or so— and have a multitude show up? That's what happened to us not long ago when we published our very first issue. At a time when our country was supposedly wallowing in gloom and doom—corruption, violence, porn—how many people, we wondered, would go for a magazine about quality, excellence, achievement. 100,000? 200,000? Wrong! The minute Volume I, Number One came off the presses, the lines began to form. And by today, they stretch cross-continent—from New York to California, from Texas to Illinois. Lo and behold, a magazine *about* success is *itself* a success without parallel!

# Quest/78

This letter invites you to find out what all the hoopla is about . . . to get in on this unusual new publication *without* having to stand in line . . . and to save a *substantial amount of money* . . . by becoming a

## **CHARTER SUBSCRIBER**

Dear fellow adventurer:

Remember how great it felt that first time?

You were ten, maybe eleven or twelve. They'd given it to you for your birthday. They held it steady while you climbed into the saddle. They pushed. And then they let go.

You picked up speed. The wobbling ceased. Suddenly, you were off--hair streaming, wind in your face, biking away to China, and you loved it!

Or maybe it was when you were older. Finally, Friday came. Three o'clock. Four o'clock. Ten minutes to five. At last, there it was--the envelope.

You ripped it open. Your first paycheck ever! All yours! And you'd earned every penny! You were richer than Rockefeller, and you loved it!

Or maybe it was the time you got through all three acts without forgetting a line. Or when you first had your picture in the paper. Or succeeded in cooking a meal from start to finish entirely by yourself.

Or when you first wrote a poem that wasn't half bad. Or proudly signed your name to a painting. Or shot par golf. Tossed a winning touchdown. Or welcomed your first-born to the world...

## 2. New Yorker

Now at a special introductory offer

# NEW YORK

**JUST 30¢ A WEEK**

Dear Fellow Denizen:

And now the good news: The worst is over, and you and I have come through.

The scents of abbondanza and the strains of tarantellas rise from festas. Coveys of Frisbees hover over the Sheep Meadow. The politicians are in bloom again.

From Coney to Captree the cool surf is breaking. From SoHo to the Seventies the spritzers are abubble at sidewalk cafes. The flea markets are open for browsing and Central Park is closed to traffic. A stroll through the stalls of Tenth Avenue is a gastronome's grand tour.

It's the season to harvest your own fruits de mer on a cruise out of Sheephead Bay. Laze up the Hudson on the Day Line. Hop a bus or a ferry and spread your blanket for music under the stars. Rediscover the Cloisters.

Just outside your window at this very moment, the world's greatest city lies waiting. And to help you fall in love with it all over again, there is nothing quite like New York--the magazine that makes a specialty of getting you and the city together.

This letter invites you to try New York. With the card enclosed, each week costs you just 30¢.

New York comes to you weekly with a front cover, back cover, and three sturdy staples to grip together everything you'll find packed inside. No other magazine keeps you in touch so excitingly with life as it's lived hereabouts--people, places, politics, finance, sports, business, survival, food, fashion, the arts:

Features like "The City Politic" (voting smart), "The Bottom Line" (investing smart), "The Urban Strategist" (keeping you cool), "Best Bets" (where to be at the right moment), "The Passionate Shopper" (getting with it), "Home Furnishings" (getting it together), "The Underground Gourmet" (eat a little something nourishing), "Your Own Business" (personal financial tips).

Timely reviews. Up-to-the-minute listings. Intriguing classifieds you can answer. The "New York Magazine Competition"--

### 3. Smithsonian

# SMITHSONIAN

ON THE OCCASION of our national Bicentennial, an invitation to join the Smithsonian, and to receive, among other benefits, our widely-heralded monthly magazine, published exclusively for members like yourself.



Dear Reader:

To do the trick, you've got to be standing.

Ready? First, raise your left arm until your elbow is level with your shoulder. Bend your forearm in towards your body, and let your hand dangle limp.

Now reach up with your right hand, and clutch the fingers of your left one. Cross one leg over the other just below the knee -- and look casual.

If you've got it right, you're now "leaning" on an imaginary mantelpiece. And you've just mastered one of the classic positions of pantomime -- the timeless art that invites us to find answers to questions by gazing into the mirror:

Why we laugh, cry, love, hate. Why we sing and dance. Why we build and destroy, dream and aspire, create gods and myths. Why we collect evidence that confirms our past, and look to tea leaves to tell us our future. Why we behave as we do.

For close to a century and a half, the Smithsonian Institution, too, has engaged in the quest for answers. This letter invites you to

Bill's copy always included key words like "sex," "death" or "free" liberally sprinkled throughout - Frank Johnson used to call them 'raisins' - to force the eye to stop.

He was revolutionary in the way he used old-fashioned narrative as a sales pitch.

His copy was filled with evocative images and nostalgia and written with such elegance and grace that readers were immediately hooked. Once he had captured them, Bill then led them cleverly through to the end of the letter and encouraged them to take up the offer, but by then, of course, they had already decided to do exactly that.

Millions of others did too. For Life magazine, Bill's offer was:

*"Take nine months of LIFE for just \$3.99 and send no money now"*

It was Life's control for years and years.

Also around that time, Bill and Heikki wrote a pack for McGraw-Hill's Business Week and, as you will have seen earlier in this article, a four-letter word in giant type dominated the envelope: "DAMN!"

The letter copy asked, "Do you find a perfect stock you are tempted to buy ... and you put it off for a day or two ... and it goes up ... and you find yourself saying, 'DAMN!' Well, now's the time to stop saying damn ..."

The mailing was a huge success and quickly became a very successful control, until, predictably, a bit of client nonsense got in the way.

A golfer at the local country club yelled over to Harold McGraw on the adjoining tee and said, "*Hey, Harold, how come you are using profanity in your mail?*"

McGraw got scared and killed a winning pack. Unbelievable, but true...

Bill's letters would always contain a guarantee, providing strong assurances and confidence to people purchasing a product they could not return to a store.

But always, the respect of the recipient was paramount. As Bill said, "*All copywriters face the same challenge. Is the copy believable? Does it sound like it comes from a human being for another human being?*"

But they had so many other tricks in their locker.

They used sentences that were short, punchy and startling. ("Hatch chicks in your bra!") says an offering for Countryside magazine.) The intimate second person "you" was nearly always used to connect early in the first sentence and then sprinkled liberally throughout the rest of the sales message.

Prices were rarely rounded. (Bill once said, "*A \$29.95 price tag helps people believe the item is still in the '\$20 range.'*")

Bill's letters often ran to several pages. Bill knew very well, that, in most cases, the more you tell, the more you sell. (It's still the same today, incidentally.)

And, there was always a postscript. Bill's experience with testing programmes showed him that the P.S. initially got more attention than the body of the pitch letter. (Still the case, by the way. Nearly 8 out of ten readers read the P.S. before the body of the letter).

Bill used to hate the trend that started to develop in his later years, that attempted to make up for poor writing and lack of intimacy by the use of tricky computerised personalisation.

*"Personalise indiscriminately at your peril. Do you really want as a customer, some boob who gets turned on by seeing his own name repeated nine times in a single page?"*

In 1967, Bill needed a change, so he and Heikki moved to San Francisco.

But, always a heavy smoker, Bill gradually found the geographical nature of San Francisco unmanageable. So, in 1990 he and Heikki moved to a spectacular house in five acres, overlooking the vineyards of the Sonoma Valley in California.

Visiting Bill and Heikki at their Bart Road hideaway was referred to recently as a personal 'hajj' for everybody who was anybody in direct marketing.

Clay Felker was a client *"We went like pilgrims to the guru. We had to go up the mountain to see them."*

In Sonoma Valley, Bill and Heikki continued to produce incredibly effective direct mail campaigns for a huge range of clients. Bill was still using his trusty old IBM Selectric and Heikki was creating, cutting and pasting by hand - even though the rest of the world had fallen in love with the computer.

But one day, on his 70th birthday in 1996, Bill Jayme placed a cover over his typewriter and stopped taking phone calls.

He was tired. And he was disillusioned. The warmth had gone out of the business. He felt he was just a commodity. So Bill and Heikki went cold turkey.

In the next few years, Bill's health deteriorated badly and he found himself fighting a long and tortuous battle against emphysema.

He lost that battle on May 18th 2001.

William North Jayme, whose truly magical copy sold millions of magazine subscriptions and without whose help many periodicals would have never been born, died at his home in Sonoma, California aged 75.

Bill's unique and unrivalled instinct for human nature and life, led him to create some of the most powerful, memorable and successful direct mail campaigns in the history of direct marketing.

He was a truly great man. A copywriter supreme, who had no equal. One of the main reasons was, he *cared*. Deeply. About every single word he wrote.

In one of his last interviews, he said: "I'll tell you what really irks me. Few copywriters today seem to care. How many times have I heard a colleague say to me, I'd love to have another drink with you, but I have to knock out a package tonight"

*Tonight!!! My God, Heikki and I spent three or four weeks getting it right. I cared about every single word. Heikki knew every single line and every typeface."*

It's sad to say it, but we will never see his like again. I so wish I could have met him.



*Bill and Heikki  
at their house in  
California.*

Keep the faith

## **About the Author**

Andy Owen is Managing Director of Andy Owen & Associates, a leading International direct marketing consultancy, specialising in all aspects of creative and copywriting for direct marketing.

The company has offices in UK, Dubai, Bucharest and Moscow.

The company's corporate website is [www.andyowen.co.uk](http://www.andyowen.co.uk) The specialist copy division has its own site at [www.copywritingthatsells.com](http://www.copywritingthatsells.com)

As well as his International speaking engagements, Andy runs in-house copywriting and direct marketing Masterclasses, Workshops and Seminars for companies and organisations worldwide. <http://www.andyowen.co.uk/speaker-presenter.html>

**\*\*\*New critique service\*\*\*** [www.andyowen.co.uk/critiqueservice.html](http://www.andyowen.co.uk/critiqueservice.html)

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If you feel your company could benefit from any of these, please contact Andy for details. If you would like further information on any aspect of copywriting and creative for direct marketing, please contact Andy personally at [andyowen@aol.com](mailto:andyowen@aol.com)

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