

The Teddy Bears

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Late in the afternoon on a humid August day, Dana Divort leaned back in the dilapidated armchair in her Brooklyn studio and stared at the large and very wet abstract oil painting hanging on the wall in front of her. She struggled to prevent the tears that were gathering force along her lower eyelids from spilling down her face, which was already damp with sweat. She'd been painting when Marcus Cole's text message had popped up with a *ding* on her cell phone a few seconds earlier: DANA DEAR SAD NEWS HAVE DECIDED MUST CLOSE GALLERY PERMANENTLY AT END OF MONTH WILL TALK NEXT WEEK. MARCUS.

Dana read the message two more times. How could this *be*? How could he *do* this? Her show—her first with the gallery in four years—had been scheduled for the coming October, and she'd been working steadily toward it for more than two years. Just six months ago, Marcus had taken her to lunch at Petrarca to hammer out the show's details—opening and closing dates, reception, number of paintings, what the press release should say—all that stuff. They'd shared a fine cabernet, and after they were both a tad drunk, he'd leaned forward across the table and offered a toast to her show.

"To Dana's moment in the art world," Marcus had said, sounding earnest and silly at the same time. Dana tilted her glass toward his and offered him a wry smile. She'd just had her semi-annual haircut, along with a color job that included partial highlights. Her lips were carefully coated in Plum Purple Rose, a subtly bright lipstick that went especially well with her new hair color, and was guaranteed to remain in place for 14 hours. Wearing her favorite short, black jacket, along with the jeans that showed off her still good bottom to its best advantage, she knew that the total package she was presenting Marcus was about as good as she could make it.

““Yes, and it’s about time,” she replied, before taking another sip of wine. “Now that I’ve turned forty-five my days as a hot young thing are over.”

Dana realized instantly that she’d said the wrong thing. Marcus’s elegantly coiffed, if thinning, white hair, as well as his handsome, professionally tanned face and gym-hewn body, were evidence that he was at war with having moved almost halfway into his sixties. Moreover, only a few moments earlier, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she was nothing if not a “mid-career” artist, he’d declared yet again—as if it were an original insight—that the work of mid-career artists was the hardest to move. What dealers really wanted, he’d said laughingly, were either very young emerging artists, very old ones, or, of course, very dead ones.

Dana steered the conversation back to the show. Marcus said he thought he could get the moderately conservative, but nevertheless respected coot Henry Delancey—who’d favorably reviewed Dana’s work on a few previous occasions—to write the catalog essay. Not just a glossy announcement card and an e-vite blast, mind you, but an actual bound catalog with color repros of every painting in the show. The thought, heightened by the cabernet, turned Dana’s face a bright, shiny pink.

Now, Dana sat sweltering in the heat of her studio, almost ready to vomit, and trying not to cry. She started going over everything she could remember since the lunch meeting with Marcus. Had he dropped some clue about closing the gallery that she’d somehow missed? She had been in almost weekly contact with him—or if not him, with Kristine Amador, the gallery’s director. Not once had either of them even faintly hinted that business was anything but usual. Nor had anyone who worked at the gallery—the two sleek blonde gallerinas behind the counter, the registrar, the preparator, or the accountant—uttered anything remotely suspicious. Wasn’t it only a month ago that Marcus had emailed her asking for her approval for the press release he’d written? Dana scrolled down through her old emails looking for it. There it was—yes, one month ago—Marcus’s slobbery prose describing her work as “a brilliant chromatic and brushstroke-driven exploration of the joys of being in the

moment” that was “marked by both a deeply contemplative and profoundly spiritual sense of chaos in tension with the certainty of an underlying order in the universe.”

Dana listened to the hum of the slowly turning ceiling fan. Why would Marcus close his wonderful gallery? Cole Fine Art had one of Chelsea’s best spaces—an enormous ground floor showroom with one of those lustrous tung-oiled cement floors. With the art handlers Harry and Marvin continuously moving works of art in and out of the back room, the place positively reeked of profit. Even Dana, one of the least saleable artists in the stable, sold a painting or two every year. That money was all she needed to pay for her painting studio in Brooklyn, where she spent three days a week slathering paint around her canvases. But it wasn’t enough to pay her share of the mortgage on the East Village apartment she shared with Jack, her dull but loyal boyfriend, or the rest of her living expenses.

For all of that, Dana had to spend four days a week seated at a folding table that she’d managed to squeeze into the storage room, that came with its own window looking out onto a pretty brick wall, that came as an “extra” with the studio. There she cranked out more or less exact copies of the same large teddy bear drawing she’d been supplying, on contract, to JoyCard.com, for more years than she cared to remember. On a good day, she’d draw for six or seven hours, taking breaks to make cups of tea or eat her sandwich, all the while listening to *The Marriage of Figaro* or *Leonard Cohen, Live in London* playing in the background.

She’d thought up the basic teddy bear drawing in high school, when her mother, had asked her to make “something artistic” for a friend’s daughter who’d just had a baby. When money got tight after substitute teaching dried up, right after she and Jack got together, she’d begun selling the same kind of teddy bear drawing, through word of mouth, to friends, and friends of friends, who had little kids or babies. One day she’d answered a JoyCard.com ad in *The Village Voice*, soliciting proposals for “custom gifts from creative people for creative people.” To Dana’s surprise, the bears caught on instantaneously, and JoyCard.com was glad to accept however many she could

deliver. If she hadn't been so determined to stay the course as a serious abstract painter, Dana often ruefully thought, she could have made herself rich by setting up her own company and devoting herself entirely to drawing teddy bears.

Dana's drawings were advertised prominently in a large blurb on JoyCard.com's home page: "A professionally framed, fabulously adorable, uniquely drawn teddy bear, signed in the lower right-hand corner by the artist Daisy Duckworth herself, this original work of art is guaranteed to elicit endless smiles from your cranky baby or tired toddler."

Dana started each teddy-bear drawing using a water-soluble graphite stick in its dry mode, loosely laying out the large fat bear body, as well as the delineation of its paws, nose, mouth and ears, on an expensive, acid-free 32 x 25-inch Arches watercolor paper. She always worked up three bear drawings at a time, setting each to the side as soon as it became too wet to work on, and then working on one of the others. About an hour into the drawings, she would shift to a medium-sized, very wet brush, using it to change most of the dry graphite marks into brush strokes that built subtle gradations of tone and, along the edges of the bears, suggested a fuzzy texture.

Once the bear bodies and head finally appeared round instead of flat, and the large ears looked plump, Dana turned to her smallest brush, dampening it ever so slightly with water and then dipping it into a pot of dry, black carbon, before carefully indicating the teddy bear paws. At the very end, she would take a deep breath and meticulously add the two eyes—black, silver dollar-sized perfect circles, each with its own small reflecting glint that was, in reality, nothing but leftover white paper peering through from underneath the black. Only then, with the glistening eyes, did the bears spring to life.

JoyCard.com charged \$299.00 dollars plus tax for each framed teddy bear drawing. Dana got \$100 of that. Every once in a while, when she remembered that there was

always a long waiting list for her bears, she would ask for a bigger cut. Elena Darensen, JoyCard.com's owner, inevitably sent back the same crisp email response: "Dear Dana: Advertising, handling, framing, insuring, and shipping are all considerable expenses that limit the company's profit margin. Although I would like to increase your rate for the drawings, it is not possible at this time." Elena would then close by reminding Dana that only because of JoyCard's "economy of scale" (Dana's teddy bears were but one of its seventy-five products) could Elena afford to pay Dana a hundred dollars a bear.

So Dana always went back to drawing the same old tiresome bears for the same old price, producing about a dozen bears every week (occasionally, when she needed extra cash, she pushed herself to produce fifteen). After the bears were thoroughly dry, she placed them between slip-sheets in a box she'd built for the purpose, and on Monday mornings, the trucker for JoyCard's framer picked up whatever was in the box.

Dana always told her friends that she worked as a freelance graphic designer for various unnamed clients—only a little lie, she always told herself. She was mortified at the thought that anyone in the art world would find out she made these schlocky bear drawings for a living. The only people who knew were her mother, who adored the bears and bragged about them to her friends, and Jack, who swore himself to secrecy on the subject, but couldn't resist continually prodding her to go off and start her own business with them.

Dana pressed the tips of her fingers together, trying to think what to do next. Her obsession with finishing the large painting in time for her show with Marcus meant she was behind in her teddy bear production for the week. In order to deliver the minimum dozen bears for Monday morning's pickup, she would have to work straight through the weekend—no Saturday-night watching Netflix with Jack, or going to an opening with Sarah and her other painter friends. Dana called Jack, leaving a message that he needed to get back to her immediately. Next, she texted

Howard Schultz, the only artist in the gallery she considered a friend: ASSUME U HEARD NEWS CALL WHEN U GET THIS. Then she leaned forward and sobbed out loud.

News that Cole Fine Art was closing spread fast in the art world, and before Dana had a chance to speak directly with Marcus, her artist friends and, to her surprise, even artists she barely knew, began calling to console her. Or, more accurately, to express their faintly disguised satisfaction that she, too, had fallen into the massive pit of New York painters without gallery representation. Jack tried to comfort her, but knowing little about painting and practically nothing about the art world (he worked in IT for a business monthly), his efforts were futile. It wasn't until the third week in September—two weeks before her show would have opened—that Dana finally managed to get Marcus to meet with her.

“You should demand that he pay you a shitload of money for cutting your throat this way,” Jack said the night before the meeting. They were lying side-by-side in bed in their underwear. The lights were out because the air conditioning wasn't working, and they shared a cigarette and what was left of a bottle of tequila.

“Not going to happen, Jack,” Dana said. “That's not how things work in the art world.”

“The art world!” Jack snapped. “Gimme a break. You work your ass off for three years and produce a complete body of work to hold up your end of what any lawyer would say is a contract, and this guy gets to walk away scot-free?”

“Look, Jack, I really don't need this right now. You're in computers, which is fine and all that, but is something I don't know anything about. So I leave you alone about it. You really don't know anything about the art world.” Jack grunted and reached for the shot glass.

“Ninety-nine percent of the people in New York who call themselves artists don’t have a gallery, let alone a good one,” Dana said. “I was always grateful to Marcus for taking me into his gallery. Even if I didn’t sell much, he gave me cred as a serious painter. Anyway, money’s not the issue. I earn plenty of money from those stupid bears—and if I have to, I can crank up the production. But the bears aren’t my *art*, Jack. They don’t *mean* anything to me.

“What I need now is a new dealer—someone who will get behind my paintings, someone who can promote me and do something like get me in a museum show—maybe even get me a ‘mid-career survey’ at some little college museum somewhere. Someone who can do better than Marcus, even—maybe sell enough paintings for me where I can live off them, and don’t have to make the goddamned bears any more. The truth is, right now I need Marcus more than ever, to call dealers for me. I can’t go out there and be like some stupid art school rube, dragging my résumé around to galleries.”

Jack sat up in bed and knocked back a shot. “Oh bullshit!” he said. “Here you go again with that old crap about how an artist can never approach a dealer directly, can never just walk in the front door and ask to see him, blah blah blah. Look, You’re *not* some snot-nosed brat fresh out of art school. You’re a solid, mature artist with a very nice résumé.”

Dana laughed. “I’d be a lot better of if I were a snot-nosed brat just out of art school. But I’m not. I’m a mid-career artist. OK, yes, I’ve got a reasonable track record. But I’m just not *news*.”

Dana rolled out of bed and walked over to the window, letting Jack’s lack of response hang in the air.

“Let me try again, Jack. Please listen hard. I’m just one more abstract painter in an art world where abstract painters count for squat. Most of the art that gets

attention nowadays has nothing to do with painting. I know you don't follow the art world, but don't pretend you haven't seen what's going on. Art that makes the art magazines is gargantuan stuff that fills up whole rooms with just one work—video and sound installations that come with heavy theoretical bullshit. If the art is actually painting, it tends to be that thrown-poop kind of painting like that show I dragged you to last spring—the one with the paintings made by that geek who'd just gotten his M.F.A. from Columbia and who knew diddly about real painting. He just smeared some blue blobs on those half-assed, warped canvases, and thought he was too sexy for his shirt. But the show caused a couple of clueless big collectors to drool over him. It's absurd, I know. But he just got picked up by Perrigrew and Morton.

“And then there's the new kind of art that's made by aesthetically challenged wannabe sociologists who 'conduct research' into the sewage system in Caracas and then mount diagrams and texts that supposedly make some dissertation-sounding point about postcolonialism, or something. Critics and curators eat that shit up. Regular painters like me don't have a chance in the face of all this unless we get some help.”

The next day, Dana met Marcus in a downtown bar and, after exchanging some forced pleasantries, Dana decided to just ask it plain: “Why, Marcus? At least tell me why you didn't tell me earlier, and why you kept acting like my show was going ahead as planned.”

Marcus put on a very serious look and caressed the rim of his glass of wine before answering. “The decision to close the gallery was not planned, Dana. It was actually almost spur of the moment. There are several reasons, but I can't go into all of them.” Like all dealers, Marcus was adept at blowing protective smoke.

“Oh, all right. You might as well hear it from me. I'm divorcing Martha, and yes, there's another woman, whom I met, coincidentally, right when it became clear that my marriage was over. In case you're wondering, however, she's age-appropriate.

She'll turn thirty in less than a year, and is finishing up her doctoral studies at Oxford. We've taken a flat in London, and come November 1st, we'll be moving there, together."

Dana rapidly tried to calculate the meaning of thirty as age-appropriate for Marcus, along with how many weeks in New York Marcus had left, how long she had to get her consigned work back and where she'd store it. One thing that didn't take long to compute was that Marcus, at bottom, was a full-fledged ass.

"That's wonderful, Marcus. I'm genuinely happy for you," she said, her eyes glistening with the watery appeal of a cocker spaniel. "But I do have a favor to ask, Marcus. I really do need your help. You have to persuade a good dealer to take a look at my new body of work that—if I may remind you—is a show that's ready to go right now."

Dana slid a piece of paper toward Marcus on which she'd listed the dozen galleries she wanted Marcus to call on her behalf. "These are the places I think are right for my work."

"Of course," Marcus said, coolly pocketing the paper after glancing at it only briefly.

"But things are on the busy side right now, as I'm sure you understand." Marcus rose and buttoned his jacket. "So tell you what. I'll get Kristine on this right away. She's the one who deals with dealers, who has the real contacts and the schmoozing skills, not me. Besides, in her new position as head curator at Fredolies Collections, she's got more pull with dealers and collectors than she had even when she was my director. Well, technically, she still is my director, until the gallery is settled. I'll tell her to expect a call from you tomorrow."

Dana tried to digest the news that Kristine had already taken a new job, which meant that when they'd last talked about Dana's show, Kristine must have known Marcus was closing the gallery. The two of them were such good liars.

Dana stood up and gave Marcus a warm hug. "Good luck in London, Marcus. You've always been such a wonderful dealer for me—not to mention a good friend. I'm going to miss you." I'm not a bad liar, myself, Dana thought.

"Let's stay in touch," Marcus said. "And keep in mind that our London flat can easily accommodate a guest." Marcus waved a friendly goodbye as he left the bar.

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Dana took yet another walk around her overheated studio to check that everything was in the proper order. She'd hung the pink and red painting—whose palette she'd lifted from a Llubov Popova painting she'd seen at MoMA—on her clean, freshly painted wall, and adjusted the dimmer to the overhead floodlights. This was the best place to hang a painting for viewing. The large painting she'd thought was finished at the end of the summer had been reworked countless times since then, but was now really, truly finished. Still wet, and way too heavy to be moved, it was propped against the back wall.

There simply wasn't room to show more than one painting at a time, so Dana decided to use the room where she drew her bears as a staging area. After folding up the drawing table, and carefully packing up in the framer's box the fifteen bears she'd finished the previous day, she dragged the box into the corner of the studio nearest the door. The plan was to use the top of the framer's box, which was the only clean surface in the entire studio, for Kristine Amador and Judd Kramer to lay their coats. The two of them could then sit down in their allotted chairs in front of the clean white wall, and Dana would walk her paintings back and forth from the small drawing room to the lit studio wall for them to look at.

How Kristine had managed to dragoon Judd Kramer into visiting Dana's studio was beyond Dana's comprehension. Kramer's was an elite gallery—easily one of the top 10 or so galleries in New York, and now its owner was coming to see her paintings. It couldn't be about sex, Dana knew. Yes, Kristine was sexy, in that slightly flinty way, but Judd Kramer was gay. Probably it was as simple as Kristine feeling sorry for her, and having enough pull to get Kramer to come take a look.

Kristine had called to say they were running 45 minutes late, but that had been an hour ago. Dana lit another cigarette—her third for the morning—and then quickly stubbed it out. She swished some Listerine around in her mouth, spit it into the paint-splattered sink, and applied some more lip-gloss

When the studio bell rang at last, Dana fluffed her hair and plastered a smile on her face. She opened the door to find Kristine wearing a long black jacket with an asymmetrical hem, a pair of red gloves, and carrying a large red bag. Standing next to her was Judd Kramer—the real Judd Kramer whom Dana had seen heretofore only in photographs. He was dressed in a camel-colored cashmere coat that was so long it brushed the tops of his cowboy boots. After handing their coats to Dana, who, with great show, laid them carefully on top of the box with the teddy bear drawings hidden inside, Kristine and Kramer sat down in their assigned chairs.

“Show us the best, Dana,” Kristine said. “Judd has only so much time, but I've told him all about you and your work, shown him your images and told him he's in for a treat when he sees them in the flesh. He's eager to see your recent paintings, especially.” She flashed Kramer a wide, professional smile.

Dana took a deep breath and tried to sound at ease. “Mr. Kramer, I'm starting off with this pink and red painting, the one that was to be on the cover of the announcement for my show at Marcus's—the show that never happened, of course.”

Dana, who had planted her body in the ten-foot space that lay between Judd and Kristine and her painting, could feel her speech spilling out too rapidly.

“Please call me Judd, Dana. And would you mind stepping just a little more to the side so we can see your painting?”

Judd Kramer crossed his long legs and, having been reassured twice that there was no paint either on the chair on which he sat or the box on which his coat lay, appeared relaxed. His navy-blue jeans seemed as if they’d never been put on before that day, and his chestnut brown cowboy boots looked to be at least a size 12. From the side, Kramer’s head struck Dana as having the exact same shape as Africa, although when he turned and faced her, she thought he looked a lot like an elegant butler in some BBC drama or other. His sharp cologne competed with the smell of oil paint and turpenoid.

For a full minute, Kramer gazed without comment at the large, lone, pink and red abstract painting. Dana stood to the side of the painting, surprised to hear Kristine explain the exceptionally original manner in which Dana’s painting explored the relationship between Jungian archetypes and the subculture of forms, as well as her diversity of influences, ranging from Caravaggio to Joni Mitchell, and the way in which all of this translated into a new visual language whereby Dana created “a captivating hybrid of traditional, modern and postmodern meanings.”

While Dana was aware of Kristine blathering about the new forms of beauty in postmodern painting, as a good reader of faces, she realized Judd Kramer was profoundly bored by her paintings. Quickly, she switched the pink and red painting for another, and then another, and then another, until finally, after 20 minutes, Kramer had seen all of them. Although Kramer was polite enough to suppress his obvious desire to yawn, and glanced down at his phone a mere three times, his foot started tapping the floor while she was putting up the final painting. Kramer stood up.

“Thank you so much, Dana,” he said.

“And thank you so much for your visit,” Dana replied. “I’m truly honored you came. It means so much to me. Really. That you would take a thorough look like this.”

Dana smiled, and turned around to pick up the coats.

“No, no, I’ve got them,” Kramer said, bumping against Dana as they both tried to grab his coat, which was sticking to the corner of the box.

“Don’t pull it! Let me get it!” Kramer practically shouted as he tugged, with some caution, on the garment. Suddenly, the top to the teddy-bear box slid off and toppled sideways onto the floor. There in the box, for all to see, lay a large, black-and-white ink wash drawing of a teddy bear.

Judd, Kristine and Dana stared down at the bear.

“What’s this?” Kramer asked.

At the exact moment that a thick fog rolled across Dana’s brain, her face and neck turned the color of beet juice.

“Nothing,” she said.

“No, wait. Hold it up. I want to see this,” Kramer said, sounding almost excited.

Numb, Dana pulled out the bear that was lying on top and held it up in front of her body as if it were part of a sandwich-board sign that said PARK HERE. Kramer, and then Kristine, both stepped closer to examine the bear. While Kristine tried fumblingly to bring up appropriation, gender stereotypes, and animal rights, Kramer

took out his glasses to study the bear more closely, and used his phone to take pictures of it. Then he looked down at the box, where the next bear lay in wait.

“Do you have more of these?”

“Yes,” Dana said.

“Show me a few. Actually, show me all of them.”

Carefully, one at a time, Dana took out all fifteen bears awaiting pickup, holding each of them up in front of her while Kramer’s eye surveyed them, and then laying them down in a new, slip-sheeted pile on top of a piece of plastic.

“How many of these do you have?” Kramer asked.

Dana, stunned, answered with the truth. “Right now, fifteen. But I’ll have fifteen more by the end of next week. And fifteen after that. I make them. Fifteen a week. For a living, that is. I make them to earn money. A gift company buys them.”

“Can I have these?” Kramer asked. “I’ll take these with me now. Kristine, can you please make up a receipt for Dana.” Who in heaven’s name is Kristine actually working for? was all Dana could manage to think.

Kramer held his coat draped over one arm. He glanced briefly at his phone.

“Your paintings are very nice, Dana,” he said. “They really are very fine. But these drawings—these drawings are something else. You’re *onto* something here. The paintings—well, frankly, there’s nothing much I can do with them. They just don’t fit the program of my gallery. But I can move these drawings. I can make a statement with them—something nobody’s seen yet.”

Dana stared at Kramer, and tried to keep her eyes from popping.

“Of course,” he continued, “they’ll need to be presented right—framed in thick gold, maybe. Definitely something ornate. I see maybe fifty of them, in a frieze that wraps the entire gallery. I’m thinking a sort of a subtle ironic commentary on the way Irving Blum first showed Andy’s soup cans on those shelves at Ferus.”

Kramer looked down at the teddy bear lying on top of the pile on the floor.

“Those eyes! My God, those eyes! And those ears. The eyes and ears—so big! So blank! Those paws, too! Everything’s so—what can I say? Fuzzy, cuddly—and yet, yet somehow so accusing! Yes, that’s it! *Accusing*. This is moving stuff, Dana. People will be blown away as soon as they walk into the gallery.”

Kristine and Dana wrapped up the bear drawings in the framer’s box, after which they carried the box out to Kristine’s BMW X-5. Before he climbed into the passenger seat, Kramer extended his hand for Dana to shake.

“Dana, this has been a wonderful and unexpected find. I can’t say right this moment when your show will be. Let’s just say I’m pretty sure we’re looking at May. I need to know something first, however.”

Standing on the sidewalk without her coat, Dana began to shiver.

“Can you deliver a hundred of these drawings just like the ones I’m taking now by May?” Kramer asked. “I’ll need fifty for the show and fifty for the waiting list. I can’t afford to piss off collectors who can’t get one out of the first show. You understand that without the commitment from you of a hundred bears, I’m not sure I can back this thing.”

Dana hesitated. Her teeth were chattering. A hundred by May? What a crazy question. If need be, she could churn out a hundred in two weeks. She rapidly pictured fifty of her teddy bears hanging in Kramer Gallery, with its pristine white walls and chicly trussed ceiling. She could see herself at the opening to her exhibition, standing in the middle of the gallery, her mother beaming at her side, Jack counting the money in his head, and surrounded by envious admirers. She'd buy one of those black and drapery see-through blouses for the opening, and wear it with her favorite silver pants. Definitely she'd have to buy some new platform heels—probably black. Before the opening, she'd get Brian to do her hair, of course, and definitely spring for a full head of highlights.

“No problem, Mr. Kramer...Judd, I mean. It will be hard, but I'm an extremely motivated artist. Yes, I can definitely deliver a hundred drawings to you by May.”

Then Dana went past the point of no return. “The fact is, these drawings, in spite of the fact that I've always produced them commercially for a living, are actually an expression of my true innermost feelings. Not my paintings, which, mind you, I enjoy making, but, well, they really don't tap into the deepest part of me. These drawings are the true me, and they embody my deepest ideas about contemporary society—about things like the paradox of a woman artist in a male art world, and the way we treat animals. I truly want nothing more than to get them out there for everyone to see.”

“Great. Dana, great. Truly great. Listen, I have to run, but it is so exciting to have found you and your work. Let's keep in touch.”

“Sure thing, Judd,” Dana said woosily.

It was hard to see into the car as Kristine drove away, but from what Dana could tell, Kramer and Kristine were both on their phones.