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THE STOREKEEPER

A STAGE PLAY IN THREE ACTS

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THE STOREKEEPER -
A STAGE PLAY IN THREE ACTS

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Synopsis

A general store, old and all worn out, sits alone on a long-forgotten highway. On the porch sits the Storekeeper, one arm draped across the back of the comfortable bench. He welcomes each of the new arrivals, one by one, as they come in off the highway, all on foot. Seven strangers, arriving from very different pasts, different times. An ethereal tale with a strong Twilight Zone atmosphere.

Cast of Characters

THE STOREKEEPER	The man behind whatever is going on. Middle-aged, friendly, outgoing but not giving anything away. Casual clothes; flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up.
WILL DAWSON	Quiet, confident loner. Mid-30s. Wears black jeans, light windbreaker. Appears comfortable being on his own. He has a thoughtful manner and doesn't let the unexpected surprise him.
PETER HARRIS	In his 20s. He dresses in light slacks and a short-sleeved button shirt. He and his wife, Emily, appear as deer-in-headlights in their current situation.
HELEN HARRIS	In her 20s. She dresses in summer shorts and a pullover blouse. She and her husband, Peter, appear as deer-in-headlights in their current situation.
MOLLY CHANDLER	Teenager with secrets. About 16 years old, wears faded jeans and light jacket. Has a knit cap on her head, what hair is showing could use a brushing. She's withdrawn, on edge, as if she may jump at the next loud noise. She's been through some trauma.
MRS. MAYFIELD	Elderly Black woman. Hair more gray than black, pulled back and bound in a bun. She's carrying a few extra pounds, wears a clean but well-worn dress, and clutches at a black plastic purse. She's kind but defensive.
WAYNE SAUNDERS	Disgruntled. About 30, dresses in loose slacks and sport jacket. Disgruntled with a world that just won't give him a break.
EDIE PAULSEN	Woman with a bit of a past. About 30, but she looks worn out, as if life has beaten her down. Her clothes may have been nice at one time, but now look as worn out and used as their owner. She's a good person who's been around the block too many times.

Where

An old general store sits alone on a long-forgotten highway.

Director Notes

STAGE PLAY STRUCTURE

Three acts, each with a different set. Each act has 2 scenes; no set change between scenes.

THE SETS

ACT 1 : FRONT OF STORE

A wooden porch runs the width of the weathered storefront. On the porch is a wooden bench and an old, rickety rocking chair. A faded sign above the store reads “General Store”. A sign on the wall next to the front screen door reads “Lunch Counter”. At the corner of the building is a small sign with an arrow pointing behind the store that reads “To Trains”.

Optional: To one side of the store is a very old gas pump with an equally old sign on it that reads “No Gas”.

ACT 2 : GENERAL STORE INTERIOR

There is a small checkout counter with cash register near the screen door that leads outside. The lunch counter is long enough to accommodate two tall stools. On the wall behind it a sign reads “Sandwiches”. Nearby are two small tables, each with three chairs. To one side stands a single, six-foot long row of store shelves filled with boxed and canned goods. A small sign with an arrow pointing to a hallway leading offstage reads “To Trains”.

ACT 3 : TRAIN STATION INTERIOR

There is a single ticket window behind a counter. A sign beside the ticket window reads: “Southbound 8:00 AM”. There is a long, worn, wooden bench for passenger waiting. A sign over an opening at stage rear reads “Gate 1”. Hanging on the wall beside the opening is the small sign with an arrow pointing to the opening that reads “To Trains”.

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: The front of the store. The porch.

At Rise: MRS. MAYFIELD sits primly in the rocking chair, gently rocking. She clutches a black, plastic purse in her lap. THE STOREKEEPER sits on the bench next to the rocking chair. He's relaxed, has one arm draped along the back of the bench. The screen door opens and WAYNE SAUNDERS steps out onto the porch. He has a bottle of cola in hand. Hinges screech noisily as the screen door closes behind him.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

I put a pair of quarters on the counter.

(He doesn't sound all that pleased about it.)

THE STOREKEEPER

I thank you, Mr. Saunders.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Yeah. Whatever.

(He takes a long pull on his cola, sighs tiredly and looks out at the highway.)

Ya' get many cars come by here?

THE STOREKEEPER

Not a one.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Doesn't that make it tough to earn a livin'? Ya gotta have customers to run a store, don't ya?

(THE STOREKEEPER gives a slow nod. He wears a

knowing, confident smile.)

THE STOREKEEPER

You are here, Mr. Saunders. And you have made a purchase. That would make you a customer.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

(holds the bottle up in salute)

Glad to help, Storekeeper.

(He takes another swallow of his cola. He looks then to MRS. MAYFIELD.)

So what's your story, lady?

MRS. MAYFIELD

I beg your pardon?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

What brings you here?

(hint of sarcasm)

You a customer, too?

MRS. MAYFIELD

(defenses going up)

I'm sorry, sir. I don't believe—

THE STOREKEEPER

Oh, dear. Where are my manners? Mrs. Mayfield, allow me to introduce Mr. Wayne Saunders. Mr. Saunders, this wonderful lady is Mrs. Mayfield.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Mrs. Mayfield.

MRS. MAYFIELD *(composed)*

Mr. Saunders.

THE STOREKEEPER

Mrs. Mayfield is on her way to visit her sister. Isn't that right, Mrs. Mayfield?

MRS. MAYFIELD

That's right. Cecilia asked if I might stay with her for a spell. She's all alone, now that her husband Walter passed away.

(She eyes WAYNE. She continues to maintain distance, but certainly doesn't want to appear rude.)

And you, Mr. Saunders?

WAYNE SAUNDERS *(shrugs)*

Leavin' one city, headin' for another.

MRS. MAYFIELD

I see.

(She thinks on that. Her rocking slows to an easy stop. She pauses, begins rocking again, slow and steady.)

That sounds sad.

THE STOREKEEPER

I'm sure Mr. Saunders is simply seeking out new and exciting opportunities. Isn't that right, Wayne?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Exactly. I'm not one to sit still. Heck no. Ya' gotta reach out and take life by the scruff a' the neck.

THE STOREKEEPER

Of course.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

The system works against folks like me. The breaks are never gonna go my way all on their own.

(sharp, sure nod)

So I gotta work that much harder'n everybody else.

THE STOREKEEPER *(supportive)*

Make your own breaks, so to speak.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Exactly.

MRS. MAYFIELD

(attempting to sound genuine)

Good for you, Mr. Saunders.

(She is now finished with this particular conversation, having met whatever etiquette requirements may have been due here. She returns her focus to her rocking.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Yeah, well...

(WAYNE finishes his cola. He looks around for where to dispose of the bottle. THE STOREKEEPER motions to the screen door.)

THE STOREKEEPER

The recycling bin is inside, sir, next to the pop cooler.

(Hint of annoyance from WAYNE at having to take the empty back into the store and return it to right near where he got it to begin with. He nonetheless goes to the screen door, opens it and goes inside.)

MRS. MAYFIELD

That young man does have issues.

THE STOREKEEPER

Yes, he does, Mrs. Mayfield. Yes, he does.

(A few moments later he looks offstage, smiles.)

Ah. The Harris couple.

(PETER HARRIS and HELEN HARRIS walk onto the stage. MRS. MAYFIELD stops her rocking yet again. She leans forward just a might and looks in the direction of the newcomers.)

MRS. MAYFIELD

You know them?

THE STOREKEEPER

Oh, but of course.

(PETER and HELEN approach the porch steps. THE STOREKEEPER gives a pleasant, welcoming nod and smile from his seated position on the bench.)

THE STOREKEEPER

Hello, dear friends.

(Both PETER and HELEN appear disoriented, bewildered. This is reflected in their lost gaze and muffled speech.)

HELEN HARRIS

Hello.

PETER HARRIS

Yes. Yes, hello.

(looks offstage)

I... our car broke down.

THE STOREKEEPER

Of course it did. Of course it did.

PETER HARRIS

Out on... out on the uh... highway.

(HELEN clutches her husband's arm.)

HELEN HARRIS

We've been walking...

(the statement fades away)

MRS. MAYFIELD

You poor dear.

HELEN HARRIS

A long time.

(HELEN looks now in the direction from which they came. She looks to PETER, and then up at THE STOREKEEPER and MRS. MAYFIELD.)

Our car.

PETER HARRIS

That's right. Our car. It broke down.

THE STOREKEEPER

Why don't you go inside and get freshened up? It's a warm morning. And it's going to get warmer.

(beat)

PETER HARRIS

Yeah. Sounds good...

(PETER and HELEN take the steps up onto the porch. As they approach the screen door, HELEN smiles meekly at THE STOREKEEPER.)

HELEN HARRIS

Yes. Thank you... so much.

THE STOREKEEPER

My pleasure, Helen.

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ACT III

Scene 1

Setting: The interior of the train station.

At Rise: THE STOREKEEPER stands behind the ticket window. He now wears a black suit coat and a cap on his head. MRS. MAYFIELD sits at one end of the bench, her purse in her lap. EDIE and MOLLY are sitting together at the other end. PETER and HELEN are beyond the gate opening, visible through the opening, standing with their backs to the stage. They are watching for the train. WILL steps into view at the gate opening, enters onstage. He steps up to the ticket window and rests an elbow on the counter. From here he can talk with those on the bench in the middle of the station and to THE STOREKEEPER.

WILL DAWSON

Wayne is out there putting pennies on the track.

MOLLY CHANDLER

How is he going to collect them if he's going with us?

WILL DAWSON

That's what I asked him.

(shrugs)

He said he'd have time.

(EDIE turns to THE STOREKEEPER with the hint of a smirk on her face.)

EDIE PAULSEN

What do you say to that, Storekeeper? Will he have enough time? Maybe all the time in the world?

THE STOREKEEPER

If you mean is he going to be on the train when it leaves, I couldn't say. Not for certain. Not just yet.

EDIE PAULSEN

Not just yet? Well, that's downright intriguing. You don't know yet, but you will? Are you saying that you will know? That you'll know who is going and who isn't?

THE STOREKEEPER

(finger to the brim of his hat)

I wear the hat of the ticket agent now, Miss Paulsen. The ticket agent usually knows who's getting on the train...

(tip of the hat)

... and who isn't.

EDIE PAULSEN *(smiling)*

More mysterious yet...

MOLLY CHANDLER

(increasingly anxious)

But... shouldn't we all go? Shouldn't we all get on the train?

(EDIE continues to look at THE STOREKEEPER as she answers MOLLY.)

EDIE PAULSEN

I guess that's not really up to us, Molly. The decision is out of our hands.

(directly to THE STOREKEEPER)

That right, Storekeeper?

THE STOREKEEPER

That's right.

EDIE PAULSEN

But it's not in your hands, either. Is it?

THE STOREKEEPER

No, ma'am. It certainly is not.

EDIE PAULSEN

And you don't know where the train is going.

THE STOREKEEPER

Won't know that until it gets there.

EDIE PAULSEN

Yes. So you said.

THE STOREKEEPER

Yes, ma'am.

MOLLY CHANDLER

I don't want to be left behind.

(She scoots forward and stands up. She looks at THE STOREKEEPER.)

I don't want to be left behind.

(EDIE leans forward on the bench, reaches out and places a hand gently on MOLLY's arm.)

EDIE PAULSEN

It's all right, sweetie. I'm sure you'll be going.

MOLLY CHANDLER

(looks back at EDIE)

You don't know that.

(back to THE STOREKEEPER)

You don't know that.

THE STOREKEEPER

No I don't.

MRS. MAYFIELD

Don't you worry, dear. Comes to that, I'll stay here with you.

THE STOREKEEPER

That's very thoughtful of you, Mrs. Mayfield. But you know very well that's not how it works.

(This comment makes just about everyone mighty curious.)

WILL DAWSON

Is that right, Mrs. Mayfield? You know how this works?

MRS. MAYFIELD

Odd, really. But I think so. Not that I could put any of it into words, mind you, but there's things spinnin' round in my head. Bits o' knowledge and curiosities, and I've no idea how any of it got there. But it's all there just the same.

(sigh)

I just can't seem to wrap my head 'round any of it. Seems, more I focus, the more it slips away.

WILL DAWSON

I'm really sorry to hear that.

(to THE STOREKEEPER)

I'll bet you could, though, couldn't you? Ya' got your mind wrapped around it?

(THE STOREKEEPER considers the question for a moment, answers with sincerity.)

THE STOREKEEPER

What I need to know comes to me when I need to know it. I cannot reach out for it. It must come to me.

MRS. MAYFIELD *(distant)*

It's like shadows in a mist. If you try to make out the shapes, they fade to gray.

THE STOREKEEPER

Just so, Mrs. Mayfield. Just so.

MOLLY CHANDLER

I'm gonna go outside.

(She starts toward the gate. EDIE stands up and follows after her.)

EDIE PAULSEN

I'll go with you, Molly. I seem to recall that I enjoy standing at the tracks, watching for the train. Although... I don't ever remember ever actually doing that.

(The two of them step through the gate and disappear offstage. PETER and HELEN, still visible beyond the opening, follow them and also disappear from view.)

WILL DAWSON

Well, Storekeeper, Mr. Ticket Agent... you appear to be frightening off the clientele.

THE STOREKEEPER

Not to worry, Will. All shall be right enough before the train gets here.

(He glances to his right. He sees something on the counter that wasn't there before.)

Ah! Here we go. So it begins in earnest.

(He picks up a brochure-sized piece of paper. It's a TRAIN TICKET. He takes an envelope sleeve from a stack on the counter and slips the ticket into the sleeve.)

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Scene 2

Setting: Same as Scene 1

At Rise: LIGHTS slowly return to normal. THE STOREKEEPER puts together another ticket packet, slips a ticket into a sleeve. He smiles as EDIE comes through the gate and into the station.

THE STOREKEEPER

Ah, Miss Paulsen. I have your ticket.

EDIE PAULSEN

Thank you. I must admit, this is a relief.

(to counter, collects ticket)

Though for the life of me, I couldn't tell you why.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Probably because it is for the life of you.

EDIE PAULSEN

What would make you say such a thing?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Really? Tell me, what do you think is going to happen to anyone left behind? Might this poor lost soul simply walk out of here? To where?

EDIE PAULSEN

I couldn't say.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Let's make it a little more personal. If you hadn't been given a ticket, where would you go once the train pulled out of the station, leaving you standing out there on the platform waving bye-bye?

EDIE PAULSEN

I don't know...

THE STOREKEEPER

Now, Wayne... no need to upset the lady. She has her ticket, after all.

(WAYNE turns his attention to THE STOREKEEPER.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Yes. And that leaves just me and the girl now, doesn't it?

(beat)

How many you figure are going to be stayin' on here after the train leaves, Storekeeper?

THE STOREKEEPER

I have no way of knowing.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Is that right?

THE STOREKEEPER

That is a fact.

EDIE PAULSEN

(looking around the station)

Um, I have to... uh...

THE STOREKEEPER

(points offstage)

Of course. Right through there, Miss Paulsen.

EDIE PAULSEN

Thank you.

(EDIE quickly leaves. For the moment, only WAYNE and THE STOREKEEPER are in the station. WAYNE lets his defenses drop, shows trepidation.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

I'm not going, am I?

THE STOREKEEPER

I really don't know. I had been fairly certain that you were, but now... now I don't know.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

What made you so sure? Before?

(THE STOREKEEPER stumbles in his thoughts.)

THE STOREKEEPER

I just thought... you were... needed.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

I'm not now. I'm not... needed...

THE STOREKEEPER

Something has changed. At least, I think something has changed. Something is different.

(beat)

I can feel it.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Yeah.

(leans back, hands clasped in his lap)

Me too.

(THE STOREKEEPER looks to one side. Another train ticket. He picks it up.)

THE STOREKEEPER

Another train ticket.

(places it in a sleeve)

It's Molly's.

WAYNE SAUNDERS *(genuine)*

I'm glad. Good for her.

THE STOREKEEPER

Yes. Good for her.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

I wonder what role she will play? Once the train arrives at its destination.

THE STOREKEEPER

Odd you should ask that, in just that way. I was wondering the very same thing.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

What about you, Storekeeper? Will you be going? When the train leaves?

THE STOREKEEPER

No. My own role, as you say, will play itself out here.

(admiring his station)

My train station. My general store.

(long pause)

My world.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

The center of the universe.

THE STOREKEEPER

We are at its very heart.

THE STOREKEEPER (CONT)

(THE STOREKEEPER steps from behind the counter, starts toward the gate.)

I think I'll give Molly her ticket.

(He walks through the gate opening, turns right and disappears from view. WAYNE sits up, leans forward. He stands, pauses, walks to the ticket counter and leans over, calmly looks at where the tickets usually show up. EDIE comes back into the station from the restroom.)

EDIE PAULSEN

Where is everyone?

(WAYNE shrugs, wanders back to the bench.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Waitin' for the train, I expect. Growing impatient, no doubt.

(EDIE walks to the gate opening, looks out. She turns back and looks around the station.)

EDIE PAULSEN

But not you?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

I am yet to be blessed with a ticket.

(He climbs up on the bench, sits on the back, feet on the seat. He clasps his hands together.)

You do remind me of someone, you know... but you're not her.

EDIE PAULSEN

I know.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

You are her, but you're not.

(EDIE walks to the bench, sits at the far end.)

EDIE PAULSEN

Friend of yours?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Nah. Not really. Just someone I knew.

EDIE PAULSEN

And I'm her, but I'm not her...

WAYNE SAUNDERS

The two of you were written different. You came later, I think.

EDIE PAULSEN

Okay... that's deep. I guess. Very weird, but probably deep.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

That's me. Deep all over.

(beat)

Now, anyway.

EDIE PAULSEN *(thoughtful)*

I do sense the change.

(more thoughtful still)

And then there's the Storekeeper. He knew me, too.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

The Storekeeper knows everyone who comes to his store.

EDIE PAULSEN

I don't get it. We've never met. I'm certain of that.

(taps at her temple)

There's a lot I'm missing in there, but I would definitely remember him.

(WAYNE slides down from the back of the bench, sits down properly.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

The Storekeeper knows us because he knows the books we come from.

EDIE PAULSEN *(bewildered)*

What? Sorry, but that doesn't make any sense.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

The woman you reminded me of? She's a dancer. Pretty good one. She works at a club I used to go to when I was living in Chicago.

EDIE PAULSEN

What does that have to do with me? Or with books?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

She's a character from the book I'm from. And you, I'm guessing you're a rework of that same character, only in another book.

EDIE PAULSEN

That's crazy. Mr. Saunders, you have most assuredly lost it.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

(WAYNE continues unperturbed.)

And Molly... she's from a book with no televisions. Will Dawson, he's probably from fifty, sixty years ago, his character spent a lot of time living out of motels while doing his archeology stuff.

(beat)

We're all from different stories... different worlds. We know as much as our characters needed to know... as much as the writer thought we needed to know. The worlds we know are only as complete as our stories needed them to be.

EDIE PAULSEN

Does he know?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

He's starting to figure it out. Same as me. Heck, even ol' Mrs. Mayfield is starting to get it.

EDIE PAULSEN

How did you? Figure it out, I mean? Where'd you get all this?

WAYNE SAUNDERS *(shrug)*

It's been coming to me in bits and pieces. More and more as we get closer.

EDIE PAULSEN

Closer to what?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

For you? Gettin' on the train, taking it to the final destination. Taking on your 'role of a lifetime'.

(slowly shakes his head)

But me? I figure I'm done.

(EDIE looks as though she may finally accept all that WAYNE has revealed. She believes it.)

EDIE PAULSEN

I'm sorry. I really am.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Hey, I was in the running for a while.

(shrug of shoulder)

Who knows? Maybe I can head back to Chicago. Maybe hook up with that dancer.

(From a distance comes the haunting SOUND of the

TRAIN WHISTLE. They both look upward, outward...)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

That'd be for you. You better go.

EDIE PAULSEN

This isn't right. He can't just...

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Just what? Not write me into the story?

EDIE PAULSEN

Not now... not now that we're...

(struggles)

We're here. We're not just characters in a book. We're not...

(She stands then, looks about the station.)

We're... alive.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

(beat)

I'll be all right. Really. You need to get out there.

(There is a final, single TRAIN WHISTLE.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

It's here. You go on.

EDIE PAULSEN

Maybe your ticket is here. Maybe it came late.

(EDIE hurries over to the ticket window, leans over the counter.

Nothing...

(WAYNE stands.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Don't worry about me.

(He takes her hand, guides her toward the gate opening.)

Who knows? Maybe I'll see you in his next book.

EDIE PAULSEN

Hey, that's right. You said you were in the running for this one. He must like you.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Absolutely. I figure he just didn't have a part for me in this one.

EDIE PAULSEN

Yeah. Yeah...

(She steps away, has trouble letting go of his hand.)

I'll see you?

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Absolutely.

EDIE PAULSEN

'kay.

(EDIE hesitates, finally turns away. She steps through the gate opening and is gone. WAYNE turns from the gate. He takes a moment to look about at the empty station. He takes several steps back into the station. He stops near the bench. He rests a hand on the back of the bench, gazes offstage. The SOUND of the TRAIN WHISTLE. It rises, then slowly fades. THE STOREKEEPER appears in the gate opening. He steps toward WAYNE.)

THE STOREKEEPER

You should go collect your pennies.

(WAYNE half turns, speaks without looking at THE STOREKEEPER.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS *(questioning)*

Pennies?

(slow realization)

Ah. Yes. Pennies. The tracks.

(beat)

Maybe later.

(THE STOREKEEPER looks warily at WAYNE.)

THE STOREKEEPER

Wayne?

(WAYNE puts on a genuinely warm smile.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Wayne...

(shakes his head... no...)

Wayne is on his way to Chicago.

THE STOREKEEPER *(realization)*

So you are... him...

(WAYNE takes his time. He looks about then, indicates their surroundings.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

Nice place you have here. And I really like your store.

THE STOREKEEPER

Thank you. It comes from your second book.

WAYNE SAUNDERS

(comfortable smile)

Yes. That's right.

(He indicates the station.)

(nostalgic)

And this... this comes from my very first. I loved that book.

(starts around the bench)

I worked on it for almost three years.

(He sits down. He leans back, admires the station. THE STOREKEEPER steps around and sits beside him.)

THE STOREKEEPER

And... how is the latest book coming? I see you have all the characters.

(LIGHTS slowly begin to DIM, though it remains bright enough to see.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

It's coming together real nice, Storekeeper. Real nice. Story is outlined, characters are already getting comfortable. Real nice.

(beat)

It's gonna be great. I can feel it. This one... this one is going to be my masterpiece.

THE STOREKEEPER

That's good. I'm glad.

(beat)

And I'm happy for them. They're good people.

(WAYNE nods, relaxes, continues to admire the station.)

WAYNE SAUNDERS

We should go over to the store later. Get a soda or something.

(beat, sigh, another easy nod)

Ah, Storekeeper... I do love this place...

(LIGHTS continue to DIM. The CURTAIN LOWERS.)

(END OF PLAY)



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