

## FICTION

### A POOR-AUNT STORY

by HARUKI MURAKAMI

Issue of 2001-12-03

Posted 2001-11-26

It started on a perfectly beautiful Sunday afternoon in July—the very first Sunday afternoon in July. Two or three chunks of cloud, white and tiny in a distant corner of the sky, were like punctuation marks placed with exceptional care. Unobstructed, the light of the sun poured down on the world. In this kingdom of July, even a crumpled silver sphere of a chocolate wrapper discarded on the lawn gave off a proud sparkle, like a crystal at the bottom of a lake. If you stared at the scene for long enough, you could see that the sunlight was enfolding yet another kind of light, like one Chinese box inside another. The inner light seemed to be made up of countless grains of pollen—grains that hung in the sky, almost motionless, until finally they drifted down to the surface of the earth.

I had gone for a stroll with a friend, and on the way home we stopped in the plaza outside the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery. Sitting by the pond, we gazed across the water at two bronze unicorns on the opposite shore. A breeze was stirring the leaves of the oak trees and raising tiny ripples on the pond's surface. Time seemed to move like the breeze: starting and stopping, stopping and starting. Soda cans shone through the clear water, like the sunken ruins of a lost city. Before us passed a softball team in uniform, a boy on a bicycle, an old man walking his dog, a young foreigner in jogging shorts. We caught snatches of music from a large portable radio on the grass: a sugary song about love soon to be lost. I thought I recognized the tune, but could not be certain. It may have just sounded like one I knew. I could feel my bare arms silently soaking up the sunlight. Summer was here.

Why a poor aunt, of all things, should have taken hold of my heart on a Sunday afternoon like this I have no idea. There was no poor aunt to be seen in the vicinity, nothing to make me imagine the existence of one. But a poor aunt came to me, nonetheless, and then she was gone. If only for a hundredth of a second, she had been inside me. And when she moved on she left a strange, human-shaped emptiness behind. It felt as if someone had raced past a window and disappeared—I ran to the window and stuck my head out, but no one was there.

*A poor aunt?*

I tried the words out on my companion. "I'd like to write something about a poor aunt," I said.

"A poor aunt?" She seemed a bit surprised. "Why a poor aunt?"

I didn't know why. For some reason, the things that grabbed me were always things I didn't understand. I said nothing for a time, just ran my finger along the edge of that human-shaped

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emptiness inside me.

"I wonder if anybody would want to read a story like that," my companion said.

"True," I said. "It might not be what you'd call a good read."

"Then why write about such a thing?"

"I can't put it into words very well," I said. "In order to explain why I want to write a story about a poor aunt, I'd have to write the story. But once the story was finished there wouldn't be any need to explain the reason for writing the story—or would there?"

She smiled and lit a crumpled cigarette she'd taken from her pocket. Her cigarettes were always crumpled, sometimes so badly they wouldn't light. This one lit.

"Do you have any poor aunts among your relatives?" she asked.

"Not a one," I said.

"Well, I do. Exactly one. The genuine article. I even lived with her for a few years."

I watched her eyes. They were as calm as ever.

"But I don't want to write about her," she added. "I don't want to write a single word about that aunt of mine."

The portable radio started playing a different tune, much like the first, but this one I didn't recognize at all.

"You don't have a single poor aunt in your family, but still you want to write a poor-aunt story.

Meanwhile, I have a real, live poor aunt, but I don't want to write about her."

I nodded. "I wonder why that is."

She tipped her head a little and said nothing. With her back to me, she allowed her slender fingers to trail in the water. It seemed as if my question were running through her fingers and down to the ruined city beneath the water.

*I wonder why. I wonder why. I wonder why.*

"To tell you the truth," she said, "there are some things I'd like to say about my poor aunt. But it's impossible for me to come up with the right words. I just can't do it, because I know a real poor aunt." She bit her lip. "It's hard—a lot harder than you seem to realize."

I looked up at the bronze unicorns again, their front hooves thrust out as if in angry protest at the flow of time for leaving them behind. She wiped her fingers on the hem of her shirt. "You're going to try to write about a poor aunt," she said. "You're going to take on this task. I wonder whether you are capable of it just now. You don't even have a real poor aunt."

I released a long, deep sigh.

"Sorry," she said.

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"That's O.K.," I replied. "You're probably right."

And she was.

Huh. Like lines from a song.

Chances are you don't have a poor aunt among your relatives, either. In which case we have something in common. But you must at least have seen a poor aunt at someone's wedding. Just as every bookshelf has a book no one has read and every closet has a shirt that has never been worn, every wedding reception has a poor aunt.

No one bothers to introduce her. No one talks to her. No one asks her to give a speech. She just sits at the table, like an empty milk bottle. With sad little slurps she consumes her consommé. She eats her salad with her fish fork, and she's the only one who doesn't have a spoon when the ice cream comes.

Her picture is there, all right, whenever they pull out the wedding album, but her image is as cheering as a drowned corpse.

"Honey, who's this woman here, in the second row, with glasses?"

"Never mind, that's nobody," the young husband says. "Just a poor aunt of mine."

No name. Just a poor aunt.

All names fade away, of course. There are those whose names fade the minute they die. There are those who go out like an old television set, leaving snow flickering across the screen, until suddenly one day it burns out completely. And then there are those whose names fade even before they die—the poor aunts. I myself fall into this poor-aunt state of namelessness now and then. In the bustle of a train station or airport terminal, my destination, my name, my address are suddenly no longer there in my brain. But this never lasts long: five or ten seconds at the most.

And sometimes this happens: "For the life of me, I can't remember your name," someone says.

"Never mind. Don't let it bother you. It's not much of a name, anyway."

Over and over, he points to his mouth. "It's right here, on the tip of my tongue, I swear."

I feel as if I've been buried in the earth with half of my left foot sticking out. People trip over it and start to apologize. "I swear, it's right here, on the tip of my tongue."

Where do the lost names go? The probability of their surviving in this maze of a city must be extremely low. Still, there may be some that do survive and find their way to the town of lost names, where they build a quiet little community. A tiny town, with a sign at the entrance that reads

"No Admittance Except on Business." Those who dare to enter without business receive an appropriately tiny punishment.

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Perhaps that was why a tiny punishment had been prepared for me. A poor aunt—a little one—was stuck to my back.

It was the middle of August when I first realized that she was there. Nothing in particular happened to alert me to her presence. I simply felt it one day: I had a poor aunt on my back. It was not an unpleasant sensation. She wasn't especially heavy. She didn't puff bad breath across my shoulder.

She was just stuck there, on my back, like a shadow. People had to look hard even to see that she was there. True, the cats I shared my apartment with gave her suspicious looks for the first few days, but as soon as they understood that she had no designs on their territory they got used to her.

She made some of my friends nervous. We'd be sitting at a table with drinks and she'd peek over my shoulder.

"She gives me the creeps," one friend said.

"Don't let her bother you. She minds her own business. She's harmless enough."

"I know, I know. But I don't know—she's depressing."

"So try not to look."

"Yeah, I guess." Then a sigh. "Where'd you have to go to get something like that on your back?"

"It's not that I *went* anywhere. I just kept thinking about some things. That's all."

He nodded and sighed again. "I think I get it. It's your personality. You've always been like this."

"Uh-huh."

We downed several whiskeys over the next hour without much enthusiasm.

"Tell me," I said. "What's so depressing about her?"

"I don't know. It's like my mother's keeping an eye on me."

Judging by the impressions of a number of people (since I myself was unable to see her), what I had on my back was not a poor aunt with a single, fixed form: she seemed to change shape according to the person who was observing her, as though she were made of ether.

For one friend, she was a dog of his, an Akita, who had died the previous fall from cancer of the esophagus.

"She was on her last legs, anyway, I guess. Fifteen years old. But what an awful way to die, poor thing."

"Cancer of the esophagus?"

"Yeah. It's really painful. All she did was cry—though she had pretty much lost her voice by then. I wanted to put her to sleep, but my mother wouldn't let me."

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"Why not?"

"Who the hell knows? We kept the dog alive for two months on a feeding tube. Out in the shed.

God, what a stench."

He was silent for a while.

"She wasn't much of a dog. Scared of her own shadow. Barked at everybody who came by. A really useless animal. Noisy, covered with scabs."

I nodded.

"She'd have been better off born a cicada. Could have screamed her head off and nobody would have given a damn. No cancer of the esophagus, either."

But there she was, up on my back still, a dog with a plastic tube sticking out of her.

For a real-estate agent I knew, my poor aunt was his old elementary-school teacher.

"Must have been 1950, the first year of the Korean War," he said, using a thick towel to wipe the sweat from his face. "I had her two years in a row. It's like old times seeing her again. Not that I missed her, exactly. I'd forgotten she even existed."

The way he offered me a cup of ice-cold barley tea, he seemed to think I must be some kind of relative of his old elementary-school teacher.

"She was a sad case, come to think of it. Husband got drafted the year they were married. He was on a transport ship, and *boom!* Must have been '43. She stayed on teaching school after that. Got bad burns in the air raids of '44. Left side of her face, down to her arm." He drew an arc from his cheek to his left arm. Then he drained his cup of tea and wiped his face again. "Poor thing. She must have been pretty before that happened. Changed her personality, too. She'd be near eighty if she's still alive."

At the same time, my friends began to drop away from me, the way teeth fall out of a comb. "He's not a bad guy," they would say, "but I don't want to have to look at my depressing old mother"—or the dog that died of esophageal cancer, or the teacher with her burn scars—"whenever I see him."

I was beginning to feel like a dentist's chair—not hated but avoided by everyone. If I bumped into friends on the street, they'd find some reason to get away as soon as possible. "I don't know," one girl confessed with difficulty—and honesty. "It's hard to be around you these days. I wouldn't mind so much if you had an umbrella stand on your back or something."

An umbrella stand.

While friends avoided me, the media couldn't get enough of me. Reporters would show up every couple of days, take photos of me and the aunt, complain when her image didn't come out clearly, 5 of 12

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and shower me with pointless questions. I kept hoping that if I cooperated with them they'd lead me to a new discovery or explanation with regard to the poor aunt, but instead they just exhausted me.

Once, I appeared on a morning show. They dragged me out of bed at six o'clock, drove me to the TV studio, and filled me full of terrible coffee. Incomprehensible people ran around me doing incomprehensible things. I thought about leaving, but before I could bring myself to do it they said it was my turn. When the cameras weren't on, the show's host was a grumpy, arrogant bastard who did nothing but attack the people around him, but the second the camera's red light lit he was all smiles and intelligence: your regulation middle-aged nice guy.

"And now it's time for our daily feature, 'Look What Else Is Out There,' " he announced to the camera. "Today's guest is Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, who suddenly found he had a poor aunt on his back. Not many people have this particular problem, and what I'd like to do today is ask our guest how it happened to him, and what kind of difficulties he's had to face." Turning to me, he continued, "Do you find having a poor aunt on your back in any way inconvenient?"

"Well, no," I said. "I wouldn't exactly call it inconvenient. She's not heavy, and I don't have to feed her."

"No lower-back pain?"

"No, none at all."

"When did you find her stuck there?"

I briefly summarized my afternoon by the pond with the bronze unicorns, but he seemed unable to grasp my point.

"In other words," he said, clearing his throat, "she was lurking in the pond near where you were sitting, and she possessed your back. Is that it?"

No, I said, shaking my head, that was not it.

How had I let myself in for this? All they wanted was jokes or horror stories.

"The poor aunt is not a ghost," I tried to explain. "She doesn't 'lurk' anywhere, and she doesn't

'possess' anybody. The poor aunt is just words," I said. "Just words."

No one said anything. I would have to be more specific.

"A word is like an electrode connected to the mind. If you keep sending the same stimulus through it, there is bound to be some kind of response, some effect. Each individual's response will be different, of course, and in my case the response is something like a sense of independent existence.

What I have stuck to my back, really, is the phrase 'poor aunt'—those words, without meaning, without form. If I had to give it a label, I'd call it a conceptual sign or something like that."

The host looked confused. "You say it has no meaning or form," he observed, "but we can clearly see . . . something . . . some real image there on your back. And it gives rise to some sort of meaning in each of us."

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I shrugged. "Of course," I said. "That's what signs do."

"So," the host's young female assistant interjected, in the hope of easing the atmosphere, "you could just erase this image or this being, or whatever it is, if you wanted to."

"No, I can't," I said. "Once something has come into being, it continues to exist independent of my will. It's like a memory—a memory you wish you could forget but you can't. It's just like that."

She went on, seemingly unconvinced: "This process you mentioned of turning a word into a conceptual sign, is that something even I could do?"

"I can't say how well it would work, but in principle, at least, you could," I answered.

Now the host got into the act. "Say if I were to keep repeating the word 'conceptual' over and over every day, the image of 'conceptual' might appear on my back, is that it?"

"In principle, at least, that could happen," I repeated mechanically. The strong lights and stale air of the studio were beginning to give me a headache.

"What would a 'conceptual' look like?" the host ventured, drawing laughter from some of the other guests.

I said I didn't know. It was not something I wanted to think about. My hands were full already with just one poor aunt. None of them really gave a damn about any of this. All they were concerned about was keeping the patter alive until the next commercial.

The whole world is a farce. From the glare of a TV studio to the gloom of a hermit's cabin in the woods, it all comes down to the same thing. Walking through this clownish world with the poor aunt on my back, I was the biggest clown of all. Maybe the girl had been right: I'd have been better off with an umbrella stand. I could have painted it a new color twice a month and taken it to parties.

" *All riiight!* Your umbrella stand is pink this week!" someone might say.

"Sure," I'd answer. "Next week I'm going for British racing green."

Perhaps there were girls out there who were eager to get into bed with a guy wearing a pink umbrella stand on his back. Unfortunately, though, what I had on my back was not an umbrella stand but a poor aunt. As time passed, people's interest in me and in the poor aunt on my back faded. My friend in the park had been right: nobody was interested in poor aunts.

"I saw you on TV," my friend said. We were sitting by the pond again. I hadn't seen her for three months. It was now early autumn. The time had shot by. We had never gone so long without seeing each other.

"You looked a little tired."

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"I was."

"You weren't yourself."

I nodded. It was true: I hadn't been myself.

She kept folding and unfolding a sweatshirt on her knees.

"So you finally succeeded in getting your own poor aunt."

"Yes."

She smiled, caressing the soft sweatshirt on her knees as if it were a cat.

"Do you understand her better now?"

"A little," I said. "I think."



"And has it helped you to write something?"

"Nope." I gave my head a little shake. "Not a thing. The urge to write just isn't there. Maybe I'll never be able to do it."

She was silent for a while.

"I've got an idea," she said finally. "Ask me some questions. I'll try to help out a little."

"As the poor-aunt authority?"

"Uh-huh." She smiled. "Fire away. I feel like answering poor-aunt questions right now, and I may never want to again."

I didn't know where to start.

"Sometimes," I said, "I wonder what kind of person becomes a poor aunt. Are they born that way?"

Or does it take special poor-aunt conditions? Is there some kind of bug that turns people into poor aunts?"

She nodded several times as if to say that these were very good questions.

"Both," she said. "They're the same thing."

"The same thing?"

"Uh-huh. Well, look. A poor aunt might have had a poor-aunt childhood. Or she might not. It really doesn't matter. There are millions of reasons floating around the world for millions of results.

Millions of reasons to live, and millions of reasons to die. Millions of reasons for giving reasons.

Reasons like that are easy to come by. But what you're looking for is not one of those, is it?"

"Well," I said, "I guess not."

"She exists. That's all. Your poor aunt is there. You have to recognize that fact and accept it. She exists. And that's what a poor aunt is. Her existence is her reason. Just like us. We exist here and 8 of 12

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now, without any particular reason or cause."

We sat by the pond for a long time, neither of us moving or speaking. The clear autumn sunlight cast shadows on her face.

"Well," she said, "aren't you going to ask me what I see on your back?"

"What do you see on my back?"

"Nothing at all," she said with a smile. "I see only you."

"Thanks," I said.

Time, of course, topples everyone, but the thrashing that most of us receive is frightfully gentle.

Few of us even realize that we are being beaten. In a poor aunt, however, we can actually witness the tyranny of time. It has squeezed the poor aunt like an orange, until there's not a single drop of juice left. What draws me to the poor aunt is that completeness of hers, that utter perfection.

She is like a corpse sealed inside a glacier—a magnificent glacier with ice like steel. Only ten thousand years of sunshine could melt such a glacier. But no poor aunt can live for ten thousand years, and so she will have to live with her perfection, die with her perfection, and be buried with her perfection.

It was late in autumn when the poor aunt left my back. Recalling some work I had to complete before the winter, I boarded a suburban train with my poor aunt on my back. Like any suburban train in the afternoon, it was practically empty. This was my first trip out of the city for quite some time, and I enjoyed watching the scenery go by. The air was crisp and clear, the hills almost unnaturally green, and here and there along the tracks there were trees with bright-red berries.

Sitting across the aisle from me on the return trip were a skinny woman in her mid-thirties and her two children. The older child, a girl in a navy-blue serge dress and a gray felt hat with a red ribbon—a kindergarten uniform—sat on her mother's left. On the mother's right sat a boy who was perhaps three years old. Nothing about the mother or her children was particularly noteworthy.

Their faces, their clothing were ordinary in the extreme. The mother held a large package. She looked tired, but then most mothers look tired. I had hardly noticed them boarding the train.

Not long afterward, however, sounds from the little girl began to reach me across the aisle. There was an edge to her voice, an urgency that suggested pleading.

Then I heard the mother say, "I told you to keep still on the train!" She had a magazine spread open on top of her bundle and seemed reluctant to tear her eyes from it.

"But, Mama, look at what he's doing to my hat," the little girl said.

"Just shut up!"

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The girl made as if to speak, but then she swallowed her words. The little boy was holding the hat that she'd been wearing earlier, and he kept pawing it and pulling on it. The girl reached out and tried to grab it back, but he twisted himself away, determined to keep it out of her grasp.

"He's going to ruin my hat," the girl said, on the verge of tears.

The mother glanced up from her magazine with a look of annoyance and went through the motions of reaching for the hat, but the boy clamped both his hands on the brim and refused to give it up.

"Let him play with it for a while," she said to the girl. "He'll get bored soon enough." The girl did not look convinced, but she didn't try to argue. She pursed her lips and glared at the hat in her brother's hands. Encouraged by his mother's indifference, the boy started yanking at the red ribbon.

He clearly knew that this would drive his sister crazy—and it had that effect on me as well. I was ready to stomp across the aisle and snatch the thing out of his hands.

The girl stared at her brother in silence, but you could see that she had a plan. Then, all of a sudden, she got to her feet and slapped him hard on the cheek. In the stunned moment that followed, she grabbed the hat and returned to her seat. She did this with such speed and dispatch that it took the interval of one deep breath before the mother and brother realized what had happened. As the brother let out a wail, the mother smacked the girl's bare knee. She then turned to comfort the boy, but he kept on wailing.

"But, Mama, he was ruining my hat," the little girl said.

"Don't talk to me," the mother said. "You don't belong to me anymore."

The girl looked down, staring at her hat.

"Get away from me," the mother said. "Go over there." She pointed at the empty seat next to me.

The girl looked away, trying to ignore her mother's outstretched finger, but it continued pointing to my left, as if it were frozen in midair.

"Go on," the mother insisted. "You're not part of this family anymore."

Resigned to her fate, the girl stood up with her hat and schoolbag, trudged across the aisle, and sat down next to me, her head bowed. Hat on her lap, she tried to smooth its brim with her little fingers.

It's *his* fault, she was clearly thinking. He was going to tear the ribbon off my hat. Her cheeks were streaked with tears.

It was almost evening now. Dull yellow light filtered down from the train ceiling like dust from the wings of a doleful moth. It hovered there to be silently inhaled through the passengers' mouths and noses. I closed my book. Resting my hands on my knees, I stared at my upturned palms for a long time. When had I last studied my hands like this? In the smoky light, they seemed grimy, even dirty—not like my hands at all. The sight of them filled me with sadness: these were hands that would never make anyone happy, that would never save anyone. I wanted to place a reassuring hand on the shoulder of the little girl sobbing next to me, to tell her that she had been right, that she had done a great job, taking the hat that way. But of course I didn't touch her or speak to her. It would only have confused and frightened her more. And, besides, those hands of mine were so 10 of 12

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dirty.

By the time I left the train, a cold winter wind was blowing. Soon the sweater season would be over, and the time for thick winter coats would be upon us. I thought about coats for a while, trying to decide whether or not to buy myself a new one. I was already down the stairs and out the gate before I became aware that the poor aunt had vanished from my back.

I had no idea when it had happened. Just as she had come, she had gone. She had gone back to wherever it was that she had existed before, and I was my original self again.

But what was my original self? I couldn't be sure anymore. I couldn't help feeling that this was another me, another self that strongly resembled my original self. So now what was I to do? I had lost all sense of direction. I shoved my hand in my pocket and fed every piece of change I found there into a pay phone. Eight rings. Nine. And then she answered.

"I was sleeping," she said with a yawn.

"At six o'clock in the evening?"

"I was up all last night working. Just finished two hours ago."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," I said. "This may sound strange, but I called just to make sure you're still alive. That's all. Really."

I could feel her smiling into the phone.

"Thanks. That was nice of you," she said. "Don't worry, though. I'm still alive. And I'm working my tail off to *stay* alive. Which is why I'm dead tired. O.K.? Are you relieved?"

"I'm relieved."

"You know," she said, as if she were about to share a secret with me, "life is pretty damn hard."

"I know," I said. And she was right. "How would you like to have dinner with me?"

In the silence at her end, I could sense her biting her lip and touching her little finger to her eyebrow.

"Not right now," she said, emphasizing each syllable. "We'll talk later. You have to let me sleep now. Everything will be fine if I can just sleep a little. I'll call you when I wake up. O.K.?"

"O.K.," I said. "Good night."

"You, too. Good night."

She hesitated a moment. "Was it some kind of emergency—what you wanted to talk about?"

"No, no emergency," I said. "We can talk about it later."

It was true—we had plenty of time. Ten thousand, twenty thousand years. I could wait.

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"Good night," she said again, and she hung up. For a while, I looked at the receiver in my hand, then I placed it in its cradle. The moment I let go of it, I felt an incredible hunger. I'd go insane if I didn't get something to eat. I'd eat anything. Anything at all. If someone offered me something to put in my mouth, I'd crawl to him on all fours. I might even suck his fingers clean. Yes, I would, I would suck your fingers clean. And then I'd sleep like a weathered crosstie. The meanest kick wouldn't wake me. For ten thousand years I'd be sound asleep.

I leaned against the pay phone, emptied my mind out, and closed my eyes. Then I heard footsteps, thousands of footsteps. They washed over me like a wave. They kept walking, on and on, tramping in time. Where was the poor aunt now? I wondered. Where had she gone back to? And where had I come back to?

If, ten thousand years from now, a society came into being that was peopled exclusively by poor aunts—with a town hall run by poor aunts who had been elected by poor aunts, streetcars for poor aunts driven by poor aunts, novels for poor aunts written by poor aunts—would they open the gates for me?

Then again they might not need any of those things—the town hall or the streetcars or the novels.

They might prefer instead to live quietly in giant vinegar bottles of their own making. From the air you'd be able to see tens—hundreds—of thousands of vinegar bottles lined up, covering the earth. It would be a sight so beautiful it would take your breath away.

Yes, that's it. And if, by any chance, that world had room to admit a single poem, I would gladly be the one to write it: the first poet laureate of the world of poor aunts. I would sing in praise of the glow of the sun on the green bottles, of the broad sea of grass below.

But this is looking far ahead, to the year 12001, and ten thousand years is too long for me to wait. I have many winters to survive before then.

( *Translated, from the Japanese, by Jay Rubin.* ) 12 of 12

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