HOME ONLINE SHOP ABOUT SUBMIT



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## No More White Boys

**JONATHAN SAPERS** 

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Sempe has a small blue star on her right cheek that everyone thinks is a tattoo. It's not, it's what, when she looks in the mirror, makes her think most of her father whose skin is blue black and the difference between his skin and her mother's which is as pale as the rest of her. She thinks that the relationship between the star and the rest of her body is a lot like her parents: her Dad, who perches quietly in the corner of her mother's life, saying little, meaning everything there is; and her Mom, warm, serene, the soft sandy beach on which her starfish father basks, ruler of a grainy empire.

Until she was 12, Sempe wished with all her being that she could wipe her starfish off. She even tried. But it was, of course, indelible. Worse than a tattoo and better. Not her idea, but looking like it might be. Her friends don't think it looks like a starfish or a star. Jackie calls it her piece of shit. Who hit you on the face with that piece of shit? Shigwa calls it her diamond, calls

her Diamondface. She likes Shigwa's name; likes her almond eyes and the softness of her hair. Like's Jackie's eyes. Smaller and rounder. The three of them could be sisters; except for their skin. It's always the skin, Sempe thinks. Jackie's body is rounded and hard. Shigwa's is slim and soft. Her own is well, angular; nice. She likes it well enough. She isn't complaining. Anyway, when she was 12, a boy kissed her right in the center of her star and she thought afterwards that it had blossomed and turned into a pair of happy lips.

Sempe can dream without moving. This is harder than it sounds. It means, you can't tell if she's dreaming. She can go a long way while you're looking at her. She knows she can't stop you from seeing her, but she also knows that she can stop you from seeing more than she wants you to see. That she can make sure you only see so much. She likes this. Likes to mess with people who assume. She can make them more wrong than they could possibly imagine themselves to be. She thinks it's a good thing for people to suffer for assuming. She sure as hell isn't helping them do it.

Where does she go? It's not always to the same place. Sometimes she just doesn't really know. Other times, it's like a place she might have been once on vacation? She doesn't know. It seems familiar. Her friends say she's crazy. They tell her, "Sempe, stop sleeping."

She knows, though. They're jealous. "It's like time travel," she says. "I start in my head and then I just disappear." And she smiles at them, which they hate, which is something they can't handle. Why? Because she doesn't want to boast, but she knows — and they know — her smile is the best. Turns her face from just a face into THE FACE. Scary pretty. The Face puts them all in their place.

And as for music, Sempe says, she likes anything that reaches in and gets her where she eats, where she loves, where she feels and that all of these are somewhere in the same area, somewhere in her mid section right where her rib cage divides. She can tell if it gets her there and if it doesn't, she doesn't want anything to do with it at all. Sometimes she thinks of herself as swimming through a sea of sensation. What she eats, what she touches, what she hears mix through her head like a rainbow through rain.

That's Sempe. Here's how to find Sempe. Head to the corner, near where she lives. There she is. She's standing on the corner with her friends. They don't quite know which way to go. They meant to go shopping. But then they couldn't decide where. And so they didn't decide where. Instead they just stood where they were, looking around. Like maybe something might beam them up, make the decision for them, and they'd be gone. But as far as they're concerned, just so you understand, the center of the world is right where they're standing. Not somewhere else. It shifts with them. They take it with them. It is definitely theirs. Now Shigwa turns. She sees, incoming, a young gentleman to her liking. She looks. She can look because, well, she has her group. And, as she looks, her friends become aware and realign themselves. Sempe doesn't look. She doesn't care what Shigwa looks at, because, much as she loves her, she doubts her taste. There's what they call the Shigwa false alarm, or the Shigwa sympathy glance.

Jackie isn't paying attention. Or she is, but to the sound of her own voice. She's telling some story, a story that Sempe has quietly stopped listening to. Something about, it was something about—

"And then he said, and then, and I just couldn't keep listening
—"[] She remembers now. It was something about her father.
They were having a conversation about something and Jackie got
mad. All due respect, this was not something new for Jackie. This
conversation happened about once a week. So Jackie had had it.
She thought her father had stopped listening to her when she
turned 12. But Sempe knew that just like Jackie's father didn't
listen, Jackie never stopped talking, even when she was quiet,

there was chatter running through her mind. You could see it on her face. She always wanted to say, "Quiet, Jackie, quiet." But Jackie was like a human telephone wire with ideas, thoughts, conclusions, secrets, gossip, half- truths, deep truths, running through her body all the time. It was sad and yet it was surely true that there was no way that Jackie could stop it. It was her, it was who she was. And the best thing for her to do was to speak. To whomever was near enough to hear. To let it come out; like a voice from a loudspeaker, like music from a boom box. "I said, I said, stop it, stop it already. Don't you ever stop? Well, I'll tell you what, by now, I should know the answer to that question well enough not to ask it. So do I? No. Now he's off and running telling me this, telling me that—."

Meanwhile the other two heads are turning. First Shigwa's, then slowly, Sempe's. Both of them realizing — Shigwa herself realizing — maybe this one's not so bad. He's got jet black hair combed smoothly over, his cheeks are dark brown, cheekbones high, big smile, bright eyes, tall enough, clean jeans, nice coat. Was there any way to get him to stop? And the good thing was — the particularly good thing was — that she saw him look at Shigwa, look at Jackie, and then, after passing over those two, and that was a long distance to pass over, his eyes stopped right on her star and blinked and widened the way certain guys' eyes do. "What are you looking at?" [] Jackie just had to say.

"Shut up" Sempe said, smiling. "I'm Sempe."

"Nice to meet you!" [] This was from someone in the crowd of people who were gathered around by now, trying to get by, the four of them were blocking the corner; nobody could get past, around or anywhere.

"Who asked you!?" ☐ said Jackie.

"Sorry," Sempe said, mumbling, giggling. She pulled his arm and they melted back.

"David," he said.

"What?" ∏ said Jackie.

"Jackie, he said his name was David. Shut up!"

Jackie looked at her in shock, then looked at David. "You better \_ "

David smiled.

Shigwa said, "Where are you from?"

"Here, just like you," he said.

The crowd around them had dispersed. They were all silent for a minute.

"Well, you going to let him go or what?" Sempe still held his arm, David was still smiling.

Sempe giggled again. "Okay," she smiled. He didn't move, as if afraid. The next two minutes felt like three hours.

"When am I going to see you again?" he said; Jackie gasped.

"I don't know," she said. She knew what she wanted to say, and what she couldn't say. Could hear her mother talking. I got nothing against boys, but you have to think long term. Boys, even good boys, want to see short term. Girls have to think long term. Past this time, to the next time. And to the time after that. It's no fun being the one who has to do that, but that's the way boys and girls are made up biologically.

But, she wanted to say, you didn't tell me that he would smell good. He did smell good — what she could smell over the smell of Jackie's gum. Maybe his smell was just clean. Not girlish. Clean, sweet. She had to let go of his arm. She pulled her hand back and for a minute, his arm hung alone in the air.

"My name is Shigwa," Shigwa finally said. "And this is Jackie."

"Thank you Miss Slut, maybe I don't want him to know my name," Jackie said, but she smiled.

"We're here most days," Sempe offered shyly.

"What do you mean we're here most days? What are we whores? Where are you from?"

"Here, he already said. If you'd just listen. If that's not too difficult for you. If you could keep your mouth shut for one —"

"Jackie, my name is Jackie. Jackie Burr. Nice to meet you."

David smiled. He hesitated for a moment. "Well, I'll see you," he said. He looked at Sempe for a while, as if there were not another soul on the street.

"Yeah," said Sempe.

When he was finally out of sight, which took forever (he looked back twice), they all three burst out laughing.

"Girl, he like you," Jackie said.

"I think he was looking at me," [] said Shigwa.

"No," said Jackie.

"No," said Sempe softly. "He was looking at me."

It didn't usually go this way. They usually looked at Shig because of her hair. And the black boys always looked at Jackie. To like Sempe, they had to like strange, or at least a little unusual. And the minute they liked unusual, that meant something about them.

"Usually the ones that hit on you, they're ugly," [] Jackie said. "Nice, but ugly. Act like they're doing you a favor, which they're not. You must have been doing something right today."

Sempe tried to think of what it was. Her hair was the same — half curly, half not. Her clothes were the same. What she mixed together with bright red scarves around her ankles. "Just the usual," she said.

"Yeah, I guess so," said Jackie.

"That's good so you don't have to worry about doing something special the next time. Just be yourself." Shig reached out and took Sempe's hand. Jackie took her other hand.

"You guys are great," Sempe said.

\*

Sempe's the living room was dim, the shades drawn. Her mother greeted her.

Sometimes her mother did this. But not her father. She could count on her father to be up bright and early with her and not to reappear until night. Her mother, on the other hand, occasionally decided that the world's schedule was inconvenient.

"You sick, Mom?"

"How do you mean that question?"

"Ma?"

"Yes?"

"You're here in the middle of the afternoon."

"Perhaps I just want — "[] Her mother was distracted. "What do you want for dinner?"

Sempe had no idea.

"Did you walk home with the girls?"

"Yes."
"How are they?"
"Mom?"
"What?"
"What are you doing here in the middle of the afternoon?"
"Paisley died."
"Ma, Paisley died weeks ago."
"Yes, but I miss him."
"Ma, you have to go to work. I have to go to school. These are the things we do."
"I'm worried about you."
"Don't be."
"I can't help it."
"Yes you can."
"Don't give me —"
"Ma, hello how are you, it's three-thirty in the afternoon, how am I, how was my day? Be normal."
"Sweetie, that's the problem. If I was normal, you wouldn't be here. It would just be me, by myself, in the land of nothing-at-all."
"Mom, can't you worry about me on the weekend like everyone

else, or in the evening? I mean, I'm happy to see you and all, but

Her mother turned to look at her. Sempe could see that she had been crying. When she saw her mother had been crying, which was not unusual, she had learned not to care. It was a cruel lesson, one she could not believe she had ever learned.

Jackie said, "Your mother — "[] but even she stopped, knowing this was sensitive. Tears for her mother were like hives, rashes, which came too easy and meant little.

Sempe thought that her mother was delicate, like glass, like tissue paper. And the cat, Paisley, had been gentle too. It wasn't that her mother was meek. That was different. She could be as tough as — she was really mostly tougher than — Sempe's father.

Sempe could win almost any argument with her father if she just smiled enough. If she stuck with it. She thought her father looked at the mark on her cheek and the more he looked at it, the more he wanted to take her side. But her mother was more easily affected by things. She was excitable. The way Paisley would jump a foot in the air if you surprised her.

"You're getting older," her mother said, suddenly. "We should have a conversation."

Sempe felt each part of her body that was going to be discussed, react. She felt like a diagram of a growing teenager with highlighted sections. You are going to get breasts. You will begin to menstruate.

"You know, they never gave us a big discussion when we were babies about pissing and shitting. Can you imagine if they did that?" [] Shigwa had whispered this and wrinkled her nose in Sex Education. And Jackie and Sempe had nearly died laughing. Of course, Mrs. Rooter had misinterpreted it and thought they were embarrassed. She'd come over, with this smile on her face, and put her arms around the three of them and had said, "Does this make you girls feel funny?"

And they had laughed and howled so hard that Sempe had almost peed herself. It was mortifying, but what else were they supposed to do? Now she had gone and told their parents. Probably said something mean about how they were brought up.

She knew what was coming next.

"Sempe" — soft intake of air, signaling profound disappointment — "Do you think as parents that we are kind of ridiculous?" []

How could she answer a question like that? She wasn't even through Sex Ed yet. Was she really saying, are they embarrassing? Of course they were embarrassing. What parents weren't. Not as embarrassing as some. Shigwa's mother fussing over her hair. Picking at it. Like she was looking for lice. Jackie's father stumbling over the word, "Tampon." No, not necessarily embarrassing. Predictable was a better word.

"You don't have to answer that one, I guess. It is kind of a dumb question. I can answer it myself. Here's me and your father and we don't. Well, we're like oil and water aren't we? But we're together. And as the blessed result of that, you're here. So I guess what I'm trying to say is —"

"WHAT?!" the words came out about a hundred times louder than she had meant them to. Sometimes her voice was like a gangly, uncontrollable limb. Especially when she was talking to her mother. She braced herself.

"Don't talk to me like that. Let's start out from don't talk to me like that. I'm on your side aren't I? For a little bit longer. Just a little bit? We're both female. I went through the same stuff."

"So?"

"So? Don't say so. Just listen. Listen to me. If I thought, If I thought—"

Sempe bit her tongue til it hurt.

"If I thought, after all I've done bringing you up that you thought sexuality, a woman's body, the things she has to know about sex, about men were funny, I think that I would be paralyzed with grief."

"Mom, what does it matter?"

"A child can ask a question like that because a child doesn't care, one way or another."

"Why do you care whether I laugh or don't laugh in Sex Ed? Everyone laughs. It's funny. I hear you laughing with Daddy."

"Listening outside our door? You have to give people their privacy."

"No, but sometimes I hear. Remember, when I was little. I heard you laughing once."

Sempe's mother smiled, to her relief. "Sometimes it's funny. I guess I have to agree with you. In fact if it weren't — but that doesn't mean you don't have to take the parts that are serious deadly serious."

"Ma, I'm not even seeing anyone."

"Thank God."

"But today I saw this boy—"

"What's he look like?"

"Good."

"And?"

"And I felt good. Like laughing. That's how you feel, isn't it?"

Her mother stared at her for a long minute. "Yes, I suppose. You done your homework?"

"Yes."

"All of it."

"No."

"Then have you done it?"

"Some."

"It's not all like laughing. Sometimes it's like screaming and crying. Like pulling off an arm. It's just awful."

"Mom."

Sometimes it wasn't so bad having her mother examining, up close, each of the various passing developments of her life. It was like having someone to go ahead of you to protect you. Push bad things out of the way. Sometimes she was glad to find her mother when she came home from school. If something had happened at school, the story tumbled out of her, her mother caught it, and her mind was clear for the afternoon.

Jackie was skeptical. "What does your mother do at home all day?" she asked.

She tried to think. "Remembers," she said, which didn't adequately capture it. "Dreams. I don't know, sits on the couch thinking."

Her mother hadn't always been this way. Once upon a time her mother had been the kind of mother who — and here she stopped and tried to think for a minute. Was it really true that there were certain kinds of mothers? After all, if Jackie had no mother and Shigwa had a mother who was always around and Sempe had one who happened to like to sit on the couch in the

afternoon and stare out the window, who could say what a normal mother was like? Did she want a normal mother?

One day Sempe had been home sick for a few days and she'd watched. When the breakfast dishes were done, her mother would bring a blanket into the living room and take out her computer and type for a while. Then she'd have lunch. And then she'd write some more. Then about 2 p.m., she'd look up from her computer and out the window and all of a sudden, she'd stop. And she'd look and look and look. A while after she'd started looking, she'd pick up the computer and move it off the couch and then continue looking. At 3 p.m. on the dot, she'd stop. As if in preparation for Sempe, who was due back at 3:30. Sempe thought her mother always seemed sad when she came home, at first, and after watching her, she thought it might be because she had had to come back from whatever distant place she went to in her mind. It seemed like she was disappointed, even to see her daughter. Sempe meant to tell her mother she knew what this was like, but didn't. Could she be sure it was the same?

Her father was different. As quiet as her mother was chatty. As self-effacing as her mother was judgemental. She sometimes wondered if he really went anywhere, he had so little to say about it when he came home at night. He was a lawyer and he worked in an office somewhere. He read big notebooks of documents, filled them with small marks, came back home. At the end of the day, when he came home, he gave her mother a look of such tenderness it almost made Sempe want to cry. Almost, although it also made her feel as if she wasn't even in the room. A witness to her parents' marriage rather than its supposedly blessed result.

Then he would turn to Sempe. And with similar, though less interest, ask her how her day was, how she felt, whether she needed anything. Mostly she didn't. Nothing she knew how to ask for, at any rate. She needed to know whether she was going to fall in love with anyone the way her parents had fallen in love. She

had a sneaking suspicion that whatever love she fell into was not going to be as gentle as the one her parents had between them. So far, for example, there had been this white boy she liked, Jamie. They had gone out places together. And since they were voung, it had been movies or a lunch date or maybe a walk in the Park. Nothing in particular. But it was hard, because after all, he looked a little like what she thought whatever boyfriend she ended up with should look like. Or they looked like that together. His skin wasn't pale white, it was a little darker; her skin wasn't black, it was lighter. He said he was a mutt, but not like she was a mutt; not so you could tell from looking. She thought they looked good together. A mixture of segments. Walking home from a movie, she was thinking about this, smiling about this, when a black boy yelled out, "Stop taking our women!" [] From a distance, did nothing, casual. But she suddenly felt like a statistic, a number, a fad. She noticed this when Jamie kissed her goodnight and she put her hand up against his and his seemed gray, discolored in comparison. No more whiteboys, she said.

But Jackie said, "Don't worry about that shit. Boy wish he could get you."

Next to Jackie's skin, hers seemed pale. Jackie's was chocolate cake brown, chocolate frosting brown, while Sempe's was more like cardboard box brown. In the cold, Sempe's skin turned a little grayish too. She loved Jackie's skin; especially when she'd been running and it shined. Shigwa's had a kind of lemony tint to it. Sempe didn't want to be dating someone whose skin had no tint to it at all. She couldn't help hating the way her mother's skin turned pink in the cold; looked like bones under thin coats of pink. Her father's skin was ashy-black: old-looking. Once, it had been like Jackie's. She envied the color, but she wasn't sure whether she always wanted to have it. She thought that maybe, just maybe, she didn't mind being in the middle. A mix. A mutt.

What Shigwa likes, more than her friends: cartoons. Sempe can't understand why. She can stare at them all afternoon long.

Sometimes Sempe thinks that Shigwa has cartoons inside her mind; that she sees the world that way. That's why she thinks everything is funny, even things that really aren't. She thinks that Shigwa has a hard inside and a soft outside, while Jackie is the reverse. She doesn't know which she is. Some of both, some of neither. She isn't sure. But when she spends the afternoon with Shigwa alone, they just sit and watch television a lot in the living room of Shigwa's house, which has a warm smell; a soft smell. The smell of new furniture. Shigwa's mother loves to buy furniture. It's her thing, Shigwa says, excusing her. She wants to refill and refill their apartment; she wants to overpopulate it to make up for the fact that she doesn't have any other children except Shigwa. Sempe thinks maybe Shigwa is drawing them for her; with all those cartoons.

Oh Shigwa Oh Shigwa. You're so silly. Why are you so silly all the time? I don't think I could be silly like you so much. I don't think I have the time. It would make me dizzy. Why are you so dizzy? Shigwa says, it's just me and I can't help it. And then she draws a stick figure version of Sempe and Sempe can't help laughing. They sit, floating on the cloud of Shigwa's silliness, until the end of the afternoon comes and she has to leave.

"Don't leave," she almost says, but doesn't, because she doesn't want to embarrass Shigwa or make her feel bad. Once she'd said that to her and Shigwa had remained throughout dinner, until her mother had called in a panic and she'd heard Shigwa and her mother exchanging frantic talk over the phone. The words sounded hard edged, full of recrimination, accusation, anger. "She was afraid," Shigwa said. "But I told her, these are my friends. I have to help my friends. She understood."

It was important, once in a while, to be without Jackie. Jackie was the hard one, the one who never took anything as a joke. Who they always had to be careful of, tiptoe around. Three-way friendships were hard. She and Shigwa could say that. If Jackie were there, she'd have to offer a strong opinion. With which they

would either have to agree or disagree. Sometimes, it was too much to add to an already complicated day.

Jackie said, "What do you two do?" But she never complained. Their friendship was remarkably peaceful. For all that could go wrong, not a great deal did. Sometimes this worried Sempe, and she made sure to remind herself to knock on wood every time she thought it. Too much else was not dependable, could not be relied on. This had to be. Always. Like her name.

That night, Sempe's father did not come home. Her mother was not alarmed. "Men are like that," her mother said. "They have a restlessness." Sempe knew this wasn't true. Or she knew it about her Dad. And about Jackie's Dad. "I WISH he would leave for a few days," Jackie said, the next day.

But her Dad did not come home the next night either. He stayed away a week. Her mother looked placid, guiltless. "It could be worse,' she said, the very idea of which made Sempe shiver. "He could drink, he could sleep around. He's just being a little dreamy. He's kind of forgotten that this is where he's supposed to go. Don't worry about it."

But Sempe worried. How could she not? If you were used to being part of a group of three, when one was gone, it didn't make sense. He was always so quiet, so level headed. "He's gone and he'll come back," her mother said. "He's allowed that."

But Sempe thought, if I go and come back is that allowed too?

"And how are you supposed to operate under these conditions?" [] Jackie wanted to know.

"They're confused, your parents. They want to be the children. They can't be the children. You are the child. Big hips and everything. You're still the child."

"You're the one with the hips," Sempe says. And then she says, to herself, and not to Jackie.

"You're the one with the Dad who acts like a child."

"I couldn't accept that. If I accepted that, I'd just be too scared. It would be too much for me."

Now they're walking down the street. Where they going? It's sunny, hot, too hot, summer's coming. Saturday. Nothing for them to do, but talk. They have to find something. So they're walking. Sempe thinks, out looking for the tail end of a breeze. If they find one, she's hoping to maybe bottle it, put it somewhere, keep it for later in the day when it will get even worse. The pavement is hot. Hot where they are. Her body feels like a weight she's carrying from some place to another place.

She thinks it's probably worse for Jackie. All dressed in those tight clothes. "Aren't you hot?" she asks.

"Uh huh, yes, I am hot," says Jackie. And she smiles. "I would think you would know that by now. I am definitely hot."

There is sweat on Jackie's forehead. Sempe can feel her t-shirt sticking to her back and pulls it away from her skin. "I would never do it to any child of mine," Jackie says, suddenly.

"Never. No disrespect, but I think he might be wondering if it was such a great idea after all."

"What was?"

"You, your mother, the whole arrangement. I'm sorry, You know I love you like a sister, but I'd feel the same way. It's so complicated and everything. People in your business all the time. And all you've got to hold you together through that is love. Love? I mean, love's great, but that's a lot it's got to get you through."

"Shut up Jackie. Just shut the fuck up. No, if you don't shut up, we might never ever be friends again. What you're saying is fucked up. Don't say you love me and say that. That's like saying, really, don't you agree, it would be better if you didn't exist?"

Jackie's face changed; she got it. Then she started crying. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said.

It was hard for Sempe to talk to her anymore. For a while, Jackie just stood there looking at the ground. Then Sempe took her hand. "It's okay," she said.

"I know it's not,"∏ Jackie said.

But it was. And Sempe couldn't help thinking that maybe Jackie was right. Maybe her Dad had just decided that being married to two people who could travel so far away they sometimes didn't even notice you were gone was not worth the trouble.

She went home. Her mother was sound asleep on the couch. Sempe went into her room and she must have fallen asleep because when she woke up, her room was dark. The living room looked blue where the television had been on. She saw the door turn in its handle and heard the door creak. Saw his hand push the door open and his face peek in the door. She wanted to keep in her mind what his expression was; was he happy? Was he sad? He did not look drunk. He did not look tired. What did he look? She thought that maybe he looked magical. Like he'd just done something magic. He came in the room and closed the door. It did not make a sound. Not even a click. How did he do that? He took off his shoes. In the dark, her father's skin was blue, just like the television light, and she had the strange feeling that maybe he would slip into the television; that that was somehow where he belonged. She would see him on television and say, that's my Dad, right next to Bill Cosby and Chris Rock. He held up his shoes and did an exaggerated tiptoe across the room to where her mother was sleeping. He looked down at her and all at once Sempe felt as if she were in the middle of a fairy tale. So what if Prince Charming had been away and her mother had fallen asleep waiting. He bent down and kissed her with the utmost gentleness. And he slipped off past her humming a tune.

\*

"He loves her," she said to Shigwa. "What's more important than that?"

They were watching television at Shigwa's house. It was another Saturday. A week later.

They were eating cookies and drinking soda and Shigwa's mom was out somewhere. Sempe said this in relation to absolutely nothing at all. But Shigwa knew what she was talking about because that's the way they always were.

"Jackie doesn't understand that things just are the way they are. All you can do is be the way you are. That kind of thing," Shigwa said.

"That's a load of crap. We all have to be something different. Everyone wants us to be something different. That's growing up. Change, change, change. I don't want to be something different, just this bitch me."

"Sounds kind of like a song."

"This Bitch Me. Makes me want to climb a tree. But she's this bitch me."

"Sing it. Sing it."

"This bitch me. This bitch me. Makes me want to climb a tree. But she's just like me. This bitch me." 4.04 / APRIL 2009

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