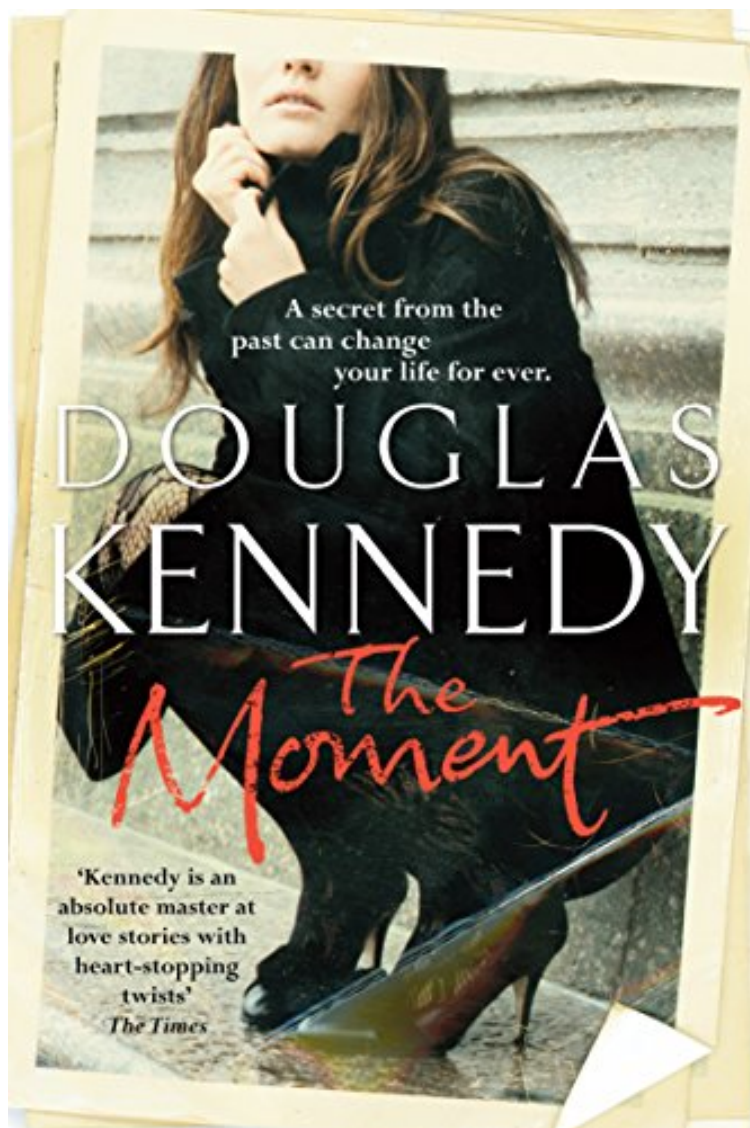


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The Moment



Par Douglas Kennedy
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA secret from the past can change your life for ever. A heart-breaking love story set in Cold War Berlin by the author of The Pursuit of Happiness and Five Days.Thomas Nesbitt is a divorced American writer living a very private life in Maine. Until, one wintry morning, his solitude is disrupted by the arrival of a package postmarked Berlin.But what is more unsettling is the name accompanying the return address on the package: Petra Dussmann. For she is the woman with whom Thomas had an intense love affair twenty-five years before in a divided Berlin, where people lived fearfully under the shadows of the Cold War.And so Thomas is forced to grapple with a past he has always kept hidden. For Petra Dussman was a refugee from the police state of East Germany. And her tragic secrets were to re-write both their destinies.ExtraitONE I was served with divorce papers this morning. Ive had better starts to the day. And

though I knew they were coming, the actual moment when they landed in my hand still threw me. Because their arrival announced: this is the beginning of the end. I live in a small cottage. Its located on a back road near the town of Edgecomb, Maine. The cottage is simple: two bedrooms, a study, an open-plan living/kitchen area, whitewashed walls, stained floorboards. I bought it a year ago when I came into some money. My father had just died. Though broke by the time that his heart exploded, he still had an insurance policy in place from his days as a corporate man. The policy paid out \$300,000. As I was the sole child and the sole survivor my mother having left this life years earlier I was also the sole beneficiary. My father and I werent close. We spoke weekly on the phone. I made an annual three-day visit to his retirement bungalow in Arizona. And I did send him each of my travel books as they were published. Beyond that, there was minimal contact a long-ingrained awkwardness always curtailing any ease or familiarity between us. When I flew out alone to Phoenix to organize the funeral and close up his house, a local lawyer got in touch with me. He said that hed drawn up Dads will, and did I know I was about to receive a nice little payoff from the Mutual of Omaha Insurance Corporation? But Dad was hard up for years, I told the lawyer. So why didnt he cash in the policy and live on the proceeds? Good question, the lawyer said. Especially as I advised him to do that myself. But the old guy was very stubborn, very proud. Tell me about it, I said. I tried sending him some money once, not that I had much to offer him. He returned my check. The few times I saw your dad, he bragged to me about his son the well-known writer. Im hardly well known. But you are published. And he was very proud of what you had accomplished. Thats news to me, I said, remembering how Dad had hardly said anything about my books. That generation of men they often couldnt articulate a damn thing they were feeling, the lawyer said. But he obviously wanted you to have some sort of legacy from him so expect a payout of three hundred grand in the next couple of weeks. I flew back east the next day. Instead of returning home to the house in Cambridge that I shared with my wife, I found myself renting a car at Logan Airport and pointing it in the direction of places north. It was early evening when I left the airport. I guided the car onto Interstate 95 and drove. Three hours later, I was on Route 1 in Maine. I passed through the town of Wiscasset, then crossed the Sheepscot River and pulled into a motel. It was mid-January. The mercury was well below freezing. A recent snowfall had bleached everything white, and I was the only guest at the inn. What brings you up here at this time of year? the clerk at the reception desk asked me. No idea, I said. I couldnt sleep that night and drank most of the fifth of bourbon I had packed in my travel bag. At first light I got back into my rental car and started driving. I followed the road east, a narrow two-lane blacktop that snaked its way down a hill and around a curvy bend. Once that bend was negotiated, the payoff was spectacular. For there in front of me was a frozen expanse, shaded in aquamarine, a vast sheltered bay, fringed by iced woodlands, with a low-lying fog hovering above its glaciated surface. I braked, then got out of the car. A boreal wind was blowing. It chafed my face and nettled my eyes. But I forced myself to walk down to the waters edge. A meager sun was attempting to light up the world. Its wattage was so low that the bay remained dappled in mist, making it seem both ethereal and haunted. Though the cold was brutal, I couldnt take my gaze off this spectral landscape. Until another blast of wind made me turn away from it. And at that precise moment I saw the cottage. It was positioned on a small plot of land, elevated above the bay. Its design was very basic a one-storey structure, sided in weatherbeaten white clapboard. Its little driveway was empty. There were no lights on inside. But there was a For Sale sign positioned out in front. I pulled out my notebook, writing down the name and number of the Wiscasset real estate agent who was handling it. I was going to approach it, but the cold finally forced me back to the car. I drove off in search of a diner that served breakfast. I discovered one on the outskirts of town. Then I found the agents office on the main street. Thirty minutes after I crossed his threshold, we were back at the cottage. Now I have to warn you that the place is a bit primitive, the real estate agent said. But its got great bones. And, of course, its right on the water. Better yet, its an estate sale. Its been on the market for sixteen months, so the family will accept a reasonable offer. The agent was right. The cottage was the wrong side of rustic. But it had been winterized. And thanks to Dad, the \$220,000 asking price was now affordable. I offered one eighty-five on the spot. By the end of the morning, the offer had been accepted. The next morning I had courtesy of the real estate agent met a local contractor who was willing to redo the cottage within my budget of \$60,000. By the end of the same day I finally called home and had to answer a lot of questions from my wife, Jan, about why I had been out of contact for the last seventy-two hours. Because on the way back from my fathers funeral I bought a house. The silence that followed this statement was an extended one and, I realize now, the moment when her patience with me finally cracked. Please tell me this is a joke, she said. But it wasnt a joke. It was a declaration of sorts, and one with a considerable amount of subtext to it. Jan understood that. Just as I knew

that, once I informed her of this impulse buy, the landscape between us would be irreparably damaged. Yet I still went ahead and bought the place. Which, in turn, must mean that I really did want things to turn out this way. But that moment of permanent schism didn't happen for another eight months. A marriage—especially one of twenty years' duration—rarely ends with a decisive bang. It's more like all the phases you go through when confronting a terminal illness: anger, denial, pleading, more anger, denial . . . though we never seemed to reach the acceptance part of the journey. Instead, during an August weekend when we came up to the now-renovated cottage, Jan chose to tell me that, for her, the marriage was over. And she left town on the next bus. Not with a bang, just with a . . . Subdued sadness. I stayed on at the cottage for the rest of the summer, only returning once to our house in Cambridge when she was away for the weekend to pack up all my worldly goods (books and papers and the few clothes I owned). Then I headed back north. Not with a bang, just with . . . Months passed. I didn't travel for a while. My daughter, Candace, visited me at the cottage one weekend per month. Every second Tuesday (her choice) I would drive the half hour from my house down to her college in Brunswick and take her out for dinner. When we got together we talked about her classes and friends and the book I was writing. But we rarely mentioned her mother, except for one night after Christmas when she asked me: You doing okay, Dad? Not bad, I said, knowing that I was sounding reticent. You should meet someone. Easier said than done in backwoods Maine. Anyway I've a book to finish. Mom always said that, for you, the books came first. Do you agree with that? Yes and no. You were away a lot. But when you were home, you were cool. Am I still cool? Way cool, she said, giving my arm a squeeze. But I wish you weren't so alone. The writer's curse, I said. You have to be alone, you have to be obsessive, and those nearest to you frequently find that hard to bear. And who can blame them? Mom once said that you never really loved her, that your heart was elsewhere. I looked at her carefully. There were many things before your mom, I said. Still, I did love her. But not always. It was a marriage with all that that implies. And it did last twenty years. Even if your heart was elsewhere? You ask a lot of questions. Only because you're so evasive, Dad. The past is very much the past. And you really want to dodge that question, don't you? I smiled at my far too precocious daughter and suggested we have another glass of wine. I have a German question, she said. Try me. We were translating Luther the other day in class. Is your professor a sadist? No, just German. Anyway, while working our way through a collection of Luther's aphorisms, I found something pertinent . . . Pertinent to whom? No particular person. But I'm not certain if I got the quote exactly right. And you think I can help you? You're fluent, Dad. Du sprichst die Sprache. Only after a couple of glasses of wine. Modesty is tedious, Dad. So, go on: tell me the quote from Luther. *Wie bald nicht jetzt nie wird.* I didn't flinch. I just translated. How soon not now becomes never. It's a great quote, Candace said. And, like all great quotes, it speaks a certain truth. What made you single it out? Because I worry I'm a not now sort of person. Why do you say that? I can't live in the moment; I can't let myself be happy with where I am. Aren't you being a little hard on yourself? Hardly. Because I know that's how you are, too. *Wie bald nicht jetzt nie wird.* The moment . . . , I said, as if trying out the word for the first time. It's a very overrated place. But it's all we have, right? This night, this conversation, this moment. What else is there? The past. I knew you'd say that because that's your obsession. It's in all your books. Why the past, Dad? It always informs the present. And because you can never really escape its grip, any more than you can come to terms with that which is terminal in life. Consider: my marriage may have started to disintegrate a decade ago, and the first sign of the endgame may have been that day last January when I bought the cottage in Maine. But I didn't really accept the finality of it all until the morning after my dinner with Candace, when a knock came on my cottage door around eight fifteen. Now the few neighbors I have do know that I am not a morning person. This makes me rare in this corner of Maine, where everyone seems to get up an hour or so before dawn and where nine a.m. is already considered the middle of the day. But I never emerge into the world before noon. I'm a night man. I usually start writing after ten in the evening and generally work until three, at which point I nurse a nocturnal whiskey or two, watch an old film or read, and eventually climb into bed around five. I've been living this way since I started writing twenty-seven years ago—a fact my wife found somewhat charming at the beginning of our marriage and a source of great frustration thereafter. Between the travel and the all-night work binges, I have no life with you was a common lament to which I could only reply, *Guilty as charged.* Now, with my fiftieth birthday well behind me, I'm stuck with my vampiric lifestyle, the few times I ever see the dawn being those occasional nights when I'm on a roll and write until first light. But on this January morning a series of loud authoritarian knocks snapped me awake just as the tentative rays of a winter sun were cleaving the night sky. For a befuddled moment I thought I was in the middle of a mad Kafkaesque reverie with the forces of some sinister state about to arrest me for unspecified thought crimes.

But then I came to. Glancing at my bedside clock I saw that it was just after seven thirty a.m. The banging intensified. There really was someone pounding on the front door. I got out of bed, grabbed a bathrobe, and wandered to the front door. When I opened it I saw a squat man in a parka and a knitted hat standing outside.

One hand was behind his back. He looked cold and aggrieved. So you're here after all, he said, a fog of frozen breath accompanying his words. Sorry? Thomas Nesbitt? Yes . . . Suddenly the hand behind his back emerged. It was holding a large manila envelope. Like a Victorian schoolteacher using a ruler to discipline a child, he slammed the envelope right into the palm of my right hand. You've been served, Mr. Nesbitt, he said. Then he turned and got into his car. I stood in the doorway for several minutes, oblivious to the cold. I kept looking down at the large legal envelope, trying to come to terms with what had just transpired. When I felt my fingers going numb I finally went inside. Sitting down at the kitchen table I opened the envelope.

Contained within was a petition for divorce from the State of Massachusetts. My name Thomas Alden Nesbitt was printed alongside that of my wife Jan Rogers Stafford. She was named as the Petitioner. I was named as the Respondent. Before my eyes could take in anything else, I pushed the document away from me. I swallowed hard. I knew this was coming. But there a vast difference between the theoretical and the hard-faced typography of the actual. A divorce no matter how expected is still a terrible admission of failure.

The sense of loss especially after twenty years is immense. And now . . . This document. This definitive statement. How can we let go that which we once held so essential? On this January morning I had no reply to such a question. All I had was a petition telling me that my marriage was over, and the relentless disquieting question: could we have found a way through this dark wood? Mom once said that you never really loved her, that your heart was elsewhere. It wasn't as facile as that. But there's no doubt that the historic so informs everything in our lives, and that it is so hard to break free of certain immutable things that continue to burden us. But why look for answers when none will balm anything? I told myself, glancing across the table at the petition. Do what you always do when life gangs up on you. Run. So while waiting for a pot of coffee to percolate I worked the phones. A call to my lawyer in Boston, who asked me to sign the petition and send it back to her. She also gave me a fast piece of advice: don't panic. A call to a small hotel five hours north of here to find out if they had a room available for the next seven days. When they confirmed they had a vacancy, I told them to expect me around six that evening. Within an hour I had showered and shaved and packed a bag. I grabbed my laptop and a set of cross-country skis, then loaded everything into my Jeep. I called my daughter on her cell phone and left her a message that I would be away for the next seven days but would see her for dinner two weeks from Tuesday. I closed up my cottage. I checked my watch. Nine a.m. As I climbed into my vehicle snow had begun to fall. Within moments the conditions were near-blizzard. But I still forced my vehicle out onto the road and carefully navigated myself toward the intersection with Route 1. Looking in my rearview mirror, I saw that my cottage had vanished. A simple climatic shift and all that is concrete and crucial to us can disappear in an instant, whited out from view. The snow remained heavy as I turned south and stopped at the post office in Wiscasset. Once the now-signed documents were dispatched, I drove on, heading due west. Visibility was now nonexistent, making any sort of speed impossible. I should have abandoned ship, finding a motel and holing up until the blizzard passed. But I was now locked into the same ornery frame of mind that would overtake me when I found myself unable to write: you will push your way through this . . . It took almost six more hours to reach my destination. When I finally pulled into the parking lot of my hotel in Quebec City, I couldn't help but wonder what I was doing here. I was so tired from all the events of the day that I fell into bed at ten. I managed to sleep until dawn. When I woke up, there was the usual moment of befuddlement, followed by the arrival of anguish. Another day, another struggle to keep the pain tolerable. After breakfast I changed into the appropriate clothing and drove north along the St. Lawrence River to a cross-country skiing center I'd once visited with Jan. The temperature according to the gauge in my car was minus ten. I parked and climbed outside, the chill lacerating and vindictive. I pulled my skis and poles out of the hatchback door and walked over to the trail head. I stepped into the skis, my boots slotting into the bindings with a decisive click. Immediately I pushed off into the dense forest through which the trail had been cleaved. The cold was now so severe that my fingers stiffened. It was impossible to close them around the poles. But I forced myself to gain speed. Cross-country skiing is an endurance test especially in subzero temperatures. Only when you have gained enough forward propulsion to warm your body does the unbearable become acceptable. This process took around a half hour, each finger gradually thawing with the buildup of body heat. By the third mile I was actually warm and so focused on the push-glide-push-glide rhythm of the ski movement that I was oblivious to all around me. Until the trail turned a hairpin bend and suddenly sent me charging down a

vertiginous hill. This is what you get for choosing a black run. But my past training clicked into gear and I carefully raised my left ski out of the rutted track and positioned it on the groomed snow. Then I turned its tip inward toward the other ski. Normally this maneuver should reduce your speed and allow you to control the dips and dives of the track. But the trail was so frozen, so slick with the travails of previous occupants, that I simply couldn't slow down. I tried dragging my poles. No use. That's when I suddenly pulled my ski back into the track, lifted my poles, and let go. I was now on a ferocious downhill trajectory all speed, no logic, no sense of what was up ahead. For a few brief moments there was the exhilaration of the free fall, the abandonment of prudence, the sense that nothing mattered but this plunge toward . . . A tree. It was right there, its massive trunk beckoning me forward. Gravity was sending me into its epicenter. Nothing to stop me slamming into oblivion. For a nanosecond I was about to welcome it . . . until I saw my daughter's face in front of me and found myself overwhelmed by one thought: she will have to live with this for the rest of her

life. At which point some rational instinct kicked in and I threw myself away from sudden impact. As I crashed into the snow, I skidded for yards. The snow was no pillow, rather, a sheet of frozen tundra. My left side slammed into its concrete surface, then my head, the world went blurry, and . . . I was aware of someone crouching down beside me, checking my vital signs, speaking fast French into a phone. Beyond that, all was hazy, vague. I wasn't aware of much, bar the fact that I was in pain everywhere. I blacked out, waking again as I was hoisted onto a stretcher, loaded onto a sled, strapped down, and . . . I was now being dragged along undulating terrain. I regained consciousness for long enough to crane my neck and see myself being pulled along by a snowmobile. Then my brain began to fog in again and . . . I was in a bed. In a room. Stiff white sheets, cream walls, institutional ceiling tiles. I craned my neck and saw assorted tubes and wires emanating from my body. I began to gag. A nurse came hurrying toward me. She grabbed a pan and held it in front of me as I retched. When everything was expunged, I found myself sobbing. The nurse put an arm around me

and said: Be happy . . . you're alive. A doctor came around ten minutes later. He told me I'd had a lucky escape. A dislocated shoulder which, while I was unconscious, they'd managed to relocate. Some spectacular bruising on my left thigh and ribcage. As to the state of my head . . . he'd run an MRI on my cranium and could find nothing wrong with it. You'd been knocked cold. A concussion. But you evidently have a very hard head, as there was no serious damage whatsoever. Would that my head was so hard. I subsequently discovered that I was in a hospital in Quebec City. I would remain here for another two days as I underwent physiotherapy for my battered shoulder and was kept under observation for any unforeseen neurological complications. The physiotherapist, a Ghanaian woman with a rather wry take on everything, told me I should thank some divine force for my well-being. It is evident that you should be in a very bad place right now.

But you came away with very little damage, so someone was watching over you. And who might that someone be? Maybe it's God. Maybe it's some extrawordly power. Or maybe, just maybe, it's all down to you. There was a skier behind you . . . the man who called for help . . . who said that you were racing down the hill, as if you couldn't care less what happened to you. Then, at the very last minute, you jumped away from the tree. You saved yourself. Which evidently means that you wanted to see another day.

Congratulations: you are back with us. I felt no exhilaration, no pleasure in having survived. But as I sat in that narrow hospital bed, looking up at the pockmarked ceiling tiles, I did keep replaying that moment when I threw myself into the snow. Up until that split second, I was in thrall to the declivitous, as there was a part of me that welcomed such existential purity, an immediate cure to all that plagued me. But then . . . I saved myself, ending up with nothing more than some bruising, a sore shoulder, a sore head. Within forty-eight hours of being admitted to the hospital I was able to make it out to a taxi, return to the ski area, and collect my abandoned Jeep. Though I wasn't in a sling, my shoulder hurt every time I had to turn the wheel sharply

all the way down to Maine. But the journey back was otherwise uneventful. You may find yourself becoming depressed now, the physiotherapist told me during our last session together. It often happens in the wake of such things. And who can blame you? You chose to live. I reached Wiscasset just before dark in time to collect my mail at the local post office. There was a yellow slip in my box, informing me an oversized parcel was being held behind the main counter. Jim, the postmaster, noticed me wincing when I picked up the package. You hurt yourself? he asked. That I did. An accident? Something like that. The package he handed over was, in fact, a box and came from my New York publishers. I made a mistake of tucking it under my left arm and winced once more as my weakened shoulder told me not to do that again. As I signed the form acknowledging that I had collected it, Jim said: If you're feeling poorly tomorrow and can't get yourself to the supermarket, call me with a shopping list and I'll take care of it all for you. There were many virtues about living in Maine but the best of all was the way everyone respected each other's

privacy, yet were also there for you if needed. I think Ill be able to push a cart around the vegetable aisle, I said. But thanks for the offer. That your new book in the box? If it is, someone else must have finished for me. I hear ya . . . I walked to the car and drove on to my cottage, the January darkness augmenting my gloom. The physiotherapist was right: escaping death turns you more inward, more alive to the melancholic nature of being here. And a failed marriage is also a death a living one, as the person you are no longer with is still sentient, still walking among us, very much existing without you. You were always ambivalent about me, us, Jan said on several occasions toward the end. How could I explain that, with the exception of our wonderful daughter, I remain ambivalent about everything? If youre not reconciled with yourself, how can you ever be reconciled with others? The cottage was dark and drafty when I arrived. I carried the box in from my car and placed it on the kitchen table. I cranked up the thermostat. I built a wood fire in the potbellied stove that took up one corner of the living room. I poured myself a small Scotch. As I waited for all three forms of central heating to kick in, I shuffled through the handful of letters and magazines that I had retrieved from the mailbox. Then I turned my attention to the package. I used scissors to cut through the thick tape that had sealed it shut. Once the lid was pried open I peered inside. There was a letter from Zoe, my editors assistant, positioned on top of a large, thickly padded envelope. As I picked up the letter I saw the handwriting on this envelope and the German postmark and stamps. In the left-hand corner of this package was the name of the sender: Dussmann. That stopped me short. Her name. And the address: Jablonski Strasse 48, Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. Was this her address since . . . ? Her . . . Petra . . . Petra Dussmann. I picked up the letter from Zoe. This showed up here for you c/o us a few days ago. I didnt want to open it in case it was personal. If its anything questionable or weird, do let me know and well deal with it. Hope the new book goes well. We all cant wait to read it. My best . . . If its anything questionable or weird . . . No, its just the past. A past that I had tried to entomb long ago. But here it was again, back to disturb an already troubled present. Wie bald nicht jetzt nie wird. How soon not now becomes never. Until a package arrives . . . and everything you have spent years attempting to dodge comes rushing back into the room. When is the past not a spectral hall of shadows? When we can live with it. *Revue de presse* An observant, compassionate, and romantic portrait. *Publishers Weekly* Kennedy is astonishing at communicating his characters emotional turmoil . . . and he tosses tough ethical questions our way as he ponders the moment that could change everything and the very nature of love. *Library Journal* (starred review) Kennedys narrative virtuosity drives a story that blends romance and thrills in the right proportion. . . . The sense of place is palpable. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* The revelation in the middle is the kind of gut-punch that subverts everything its narrator has found out so far without destabilizing the rich, dark novel in progress. *The Onions A.V. Club* The denouement will have you feeling about as intense as printed words can make you. *The Times (UK)* A passionate love-story-cum-spy-thriller set amid the secrets and shadows of Cold War era West Berlin. (People) Douglas Kennedy vividly re-creates the tense atmosphere of a Berlin cut into two by the Wall. As the book moves between times and narrators, we too can marvel at the changes that have taken place since reunification and understand the long-lasting effects of the evils that were perpetrated by both sides under the old regime.

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