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# Interior Landscape

by Mary Soon Lee

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COMING TO, Richard tried to open his eyes, but his left eyelid seemed to have been gummed shut and his right eyelid was numb. His neck throbbed as if it had been pummeled by a rhinoceros, and his mouth was dust-dry and tasted of mold.

After a minute, Richard managed to open his left eye. Dim light: a bank of monochrome graphics screens to one side, the glass blink of cameras clustered overhead. A tube snaked from a transparent bag of fluid down to a bandage on his arm.

Lisa?the operation?he inched his free arm upward, probed the numbness of his right eyelid, pushed the

eyelid up. His fingers touched a cool round bulge with a sliver of glassy smoothness in the center.

Good. He let his arm fall back to the sheets. Christ, he probably looked like one of those weird teenagers, a Node. The last Node he'd seen had had both eyes replaced by implants, twin bio-ceramic balls each decorated with a skull and crossbones, the implants? radio links continually exchanging information with the computer nets.

He hadn't thought to specify the appearance of the implants. Not that it really mattered, but if?when?Lisa recovered enough to realize what they'd done to her, the argument would last quite long enough without her discovering that she had skulls or lizards or spiders? webs painted on her implant.

Footsteps crossed toward him. He saw a junior doctor in a green cotton tunic, her face familiar, but his eyelid was too heavy to hold open. The doctor's smile reminded him of Lisa's, a wide and slightly uneven grin. That was the first thing he'd noticed about Lisa, that grin, and the warm rich brown of her skin, and the solid sound of her laugh.

The woman with Lisa's smile was saying something. Her words slipped sideways before Richard could catch them. Going away, Lisa was going away and it was his fault. He tried to call out, but his thoughts dissolved into a warm haze.

\* \* \* \*

?This is a simulation of your optic nerve and forebrain during the first six hours after the operation,? said Matilda Haller, the senior neurosurgeon. ?The data is based on the MRI scan and initial feedback from the biodes.

Richard took one glance at the screen by his bedside?an army of lurid red and blue specks advanced along the bundle of nerve tissue, the red specks clustering on the optic nerve, the blue specks creeping out the far end into part of his brain. Immediately his scalp itched as he pictured the tiny biodes wriggling inside, nanotechnology robots sheathed in an artificial membrane that mimicked his own tissues. Resisting the urge to scratch, he focused on Matilda Haller instead.

Haller was plump, with the kind of face that advertisers used to sell homemade cookies, but once she spoke the detached authority of her voice dispelled that image.

?The operations went very well. The biodes are now positioned at selected synapses in your diencephalon, and your occipital and parietal lobes. We're ready to activate the link between you and your wife, provided you are certain you want to proceed.?

?Yes. I do.? His throat was abruptly dry, like the first time he'd woken up after the operation.

?I remind you that there is no guarantee the procedure will succeed in rousing your wife from her coma, but once activated the radio link is irreversible. The biodes in your brain will integrate themselves into the synaptic structure, forming an interdependent network with the biodes in your wife's brain. Disabling the network would cause massive synaptic damage.?

?Just give me the disclaimer and I'll sign it,? Richard said.

Haller's back stiffened but she gestured at a nurse who handed Richard the form. He signed without reading it. He'd been through this twice already, once with Haller and once with his lawyer. Biode linkups between two people were much more complex than the crude human-computer connections. Of the ten linkups so far performed, only two couples had survived for more than three months. But he couldn't wait

for Haller and her team to perfect the technique. Lisa's condition deteriorated every day.

?The nurse will sedate you now. When you wake up, the link will be operating.? Haller walked briskly out of the room.

Richard laid his hand on the nurse's wrist as she reached to inject him. ?Wait. Before you give me that, could you switch the monitor to show my wife??

?Sure.? The nurse adjusted the unit, then turned it to face him.

Lisa was lying in the intensive care unit, a mass of tubes feeding into her body. They'd shaved away her tight black curls, and her scalp stood out paler than her face. Her eyelids were closed, so he couldn't see the implant, didn't want to think about that. His fingers bit into the side of his bed: why hadn't she told him she was unhappy?

\* \* \* \*

Richard ran through the house, searching for Lisa. The rooms connected in a never-ending maze, strange echoing bedrooms he'd never slept in, libraries filled with leather-bound books. He knew he was dreaming, but he couldn't wake up, mustn't wake up until he found her.

?Richard!/? shouted Lisa.

He turned toward the sound, but there was no one there, just a brick-red book lying on the tiled floor. He grabbed the book. A message, he knew it was a message, but every page was blank. He flicked through the pages a second time and something fluttered to the ground.

He picked it up: a photo of a stroller.

He couldn't breathe. The photo crumbled in his hand like a sheet of ash, nothing left but grey powder. When he looked up again, he was in the nursery. Lisa stood in front of the bare crib, dry-eyed. Behind her a parade of teddy bears stared from the wallpaper.

?It wasn't your fault,/? Richard said. Lisa didn't answer. ?Come back to me. Please.?

Her face flared into bright white, and Richard sat up in bed. His headache was back and the walls wavered around him. After a moment, the room steadied, only occasional patches of color dancing out of place.

Matilda Haller nodded to him. ?Good morning, Mr. Thorpe. So far, so good. Your wife woke up for a few minutes??

?Why the hell didn't you wake me?/? Richard stopped, took a deep breath, and then said more quietly, ?Can I speak to her??

?Soon. The biode network has locally stabilized and she appears to be fine at present.?

Richard cleared his throat. ?Did she?did she say why she took the pills? Did she talk about the miscarriage??

?We didn't discuss that, Mr. Thorpe.?

?The baby would have been due about now?I thought she might have mentioned it.?

?No. I'll return soon to take you to see her. I want to run some tests to see how much information you can exchange across the link, but there will be some time for the two of you to talk.?

Embarrassed, Richard looked away from Haller's cool scrutiny. ?Could you bring me my portable to use while I'm waiting? I'd like to check the business nets, mail some people at the company.?

?Fine.?

But when Haller had left and a nurse had brought him the computer, Richard's attention kept drifting away from the trade reports and account predictions. Lisa had woken up: everything was going to be fine.

Bright patches of color floated in front of the screen, side-effects from the biodes inside his brain. Once when he tilted his head, a wave of smells burst inside him: roasted coffee beans, bonfire smoke, the sharp sweetness of crushed mint. Before he could identify more, the sensation vanished, leaving only the background smell of hospital disinfectant.

He lifted his right eyelid, pressed the cool bio-ceramic implant. When he shut his left eye, the patches of color still floated in front of him: scraps of scarlet and citrus yellow and cyan. Bits and pieces of Lisa dancing in the air. He stretched out his hand to touch one, then realized how foolish he must look.

He pulled the portable closer, focused on the next company report.

?Mr. Thorpe.? Haller stood in the doorway. One of the porters waited behind her with an empty wheelchair. ?We're ready for you to see your wife now.?

?Thanks.? Richard stood up too quickly and had to clutch onto the edge of the bed for a second to steady himself. With careful precision, he walked the few steps over to the wheelchair and sat down again gratefully. His palms were clammy as a kid on a first date, and he couldn't decide what to say when he saw Lisa.

Before he could make up his mind, the porter wheeled him into intensive care. Lisa was half-sitting, supported by a stack of pillows. She stared at him, her face thrown out of balance: one brown eye and one opaque white ceramic ball. An unsmiling stranger.

She tapped her implant, then pointed at Richard's. ?Now we're a perfect match. Two odd balls make a home together.?

Brittleness spanned the gap between them. He wanted to touch her, to clutch onto her, never to let her go again. Only he thought she might push him away, and Haller and the rest of the medical staff were watching. ?Lisa?it's . . . good to see you.?

Her face softened fractionally. ?And you. Thanks for doing this. It's not your style anymore, gambling on long shots.?

?It was the only game in town.? A memory of Lisa: head dangling over the side of the sofa, her limbs a spread-eagled cross. He forced that aside, looked round, acutely aware of the medical staff spectating. ?So, Doctor Haller, what tests do you want to do??

?We'll start with simple visual perception. You close your eye while we show a picture to Ms. Thorpe, and tell us what images you see, if any. With practice, half the linked couples were able to send detailed images. It's important that you both try to develop the link between you; that helps to stabilize the biode network.?

Richard couldn't concentrate on what Haller was saying, but the flow of her words gave him time to adjust. He relaxed his grip on the arms of the wheelchair, folded his hands in his lap. He half-smiled at Lisa. She grinned back and the tension in his neck eased.

One of the nurses set up a screen partly blocking Richard's view of Lisa.

Haller stepped between them. ?Ms. Thorpe if you would focus on the card. Mr. Thorpe, close your eye and describe what you see.?

?A jumble, bits of color.?

?Relax, wait for the images to steady.?

The colors bounced, then suddenly settled into a flat green circle on a white background. Richard jerked forward, lost the picture. ?For a moment I saw a green circle.?

?Good. And now??

?Nothing?wait?maybe something red. A square? A triangle??

Lisa laughed. ?Kindergarten here we come.?

?Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall,? sang Richard, deliberately off-key.

Haller's voice broke in, ?If you're ready for the next card, thank you.?

And sitting there, his eye closed, answering Haller's questions and listening to Lisa's half-joking sarcasm, Richard could almost believe that everything was back to normal. Only as the hour wore on, his head started to throb in a tight line from temple to temple. He thought of the other couples sitting in this hospital or one of Haller's labs, answering questions while time ran out. Half the other couples had died within the first two months of being linked, the others within four months. In each instance both partners died within an hour of each other. The biode networks developed negative feedback loops that bubbled through the network like acid, eating away the synapses in their brains.

It wasn't that he regretted his decision. Not at all. Sometimes?okay, maybe most of the time lately?he'd done a poor job of showing it, but Lisa was the pivot that centered his life. He just wanted to get out of hospital and take whatever time they had.

\* \* \* \*

By the end of the first week, Richard had learned how to interpret most of the sensory input from Lisa's half of the link. If he concentrated, he could see what she was seeing perfectly, like a transparent overlay across his normal vision. The double perspective gave him a headache, so most of the time he filtered it out.

Occasionally, he thought he heard Lisa speaking and would swing around only to find he was alone in the room. He didn't tell Haller, in case she saw it as evidence that he was mentally unbalanced. He did ask

Lisa if she ever heard his voice, but she gave him an odd look and he dropped the subject.

They chatted to each other as if they were at the company's annual dinner party: politely witty, steering the conversation away from anything substantial.

On the eighth day Haller reluctantly certified Richard as psychologically stable. He signed the discharge papers for himself and Lisa, ignoring Haller's objections. He refused to waste another hour in a hospital.

On the taxi-ride home, neither of them spoke. Lisa stared out at the Boston-Manhattan skyroad, the braids of car lights flowing past them, glowing in the early evening. Richard watched her expressionless profile, her full lips pressed in a straight line. After a while, he gazed out the opposite window. Half the vehicles they passed were mobile bubble homes, cruising along on auto-pilot while the owners slept inside. His secretary had a bubble, cheaper than renting even a one-room apartment in the East Coast megalopolis.

The cab pulled onto the exit ramp, down toward the coast road. Skyscrapers gave way to tall townhouses, then to small detached buildings with their own front gardens, ornamental trees white with blossom. On the coast road itself, electric fencing obscured most of the houses.

When the cab drew up outside their gate, Richard gave the voice-code to the lock, and the cab eased through the metal entrance. He keyed in his authorization code to the cab's billing service, lifted the suitcase out of the trunk. The air was moist with sea-spray, salting his lips.

The cab pulled away, and Lisa walked silently up to the front porch.

Putting the suitcase down beside her to open the door, Richard's breath caught in his throat as he saw her standing there. Without thinking, he buried his head in the hollow between her neck and her shoulder, folded his arms around her. ?I love you,? he mumbled into her neck. ?I'm so sorry about the baby. I want to help.?

Something shivered through the link: sharp as broken glass, and Lisa pushed him away.

?Don't be sorry. I didn't want the baby.? Lisa pressed the door-pad, told the computer to let them in. She lifted the suitcase and marched upstairs.

?Wait?? But Richard couldn't think what to say next. What was wrong now?

She stopped on the landing and turned to face him. ?It's not about the baby, Richard. It's about you. When we're alone at home, you hug me and I want you to stay so badly I ache. But you don't stay; you're hardly ever at home except to fall asleep. And when we're out together you barely touch me. Why? In case someone sees you??

?That's not fair?I'm home now, and I'm going to stay. It'll be like it used to be. I promise.?

?I don't believe you,? Lisa said flatly. ?You may believe it yourself, for a week or two. And then Tim or Jacob will phone with the latest company crisis and you'll leave.?

?It's not like that. I'd rather stay with you, but work??

??Pays the bills. At least change your excuses, Richard.? Lisa's fingers closed on a carved lump of wood, the top a detail of a wolf's head, its neck merging into the abstract curves of the base. He remembered

Lisa finishing the piece, the way her face had frozen when he wrongly guessed it was a dog not a wolf. As if it mattered, it was just a hobby. Sometimes he thought that the longer they lived together, the less he understood her.

Lisa held the carving poised over the edge of the bannister. 'We have enough money. You just want to work.' She set the carving back down on the dresser. 'I'm tired. I'll see you in the morning.'

She walked into the bedroom, and the door clicked shut behind her.

For a long minute, Richard stood motionless. Finally he stepped outside, sat down on the front doorstep. Overhead, the gibbous moon crept across the sky. He wasn't going to think about what Lisa had said. He'd have a drink or two, and deal with it in the morning.

Sand scrunched under his shoe. He picked up a handful, let the coarse grains dribble through his fingers. What did she mean? she didn't want the baby? They bought this house because it would be good for kids. He wanted children. He wanted Lisa. He reached for the link, glimpsed water swirling round the bathroom sink, Lisa's reflection in the bathroom mirror, the round heaviness of her breasts.

He pushed the image away. Shit. How long did they have? Two months? Three? Evidently enough time to argue. He ought to apologize, tell Lisa he was quitting work, retiring. Tell her he needed her.

Instead he sat on the doorstep, one hand trailing loose patterns in the sand. He had wanted kids. He still did, but it wasn't going to happen. Dimly, he heard the sea surge and fall behind the house, waves breaking against the vast empty sweep of the shoreline.

\* \* \* \*

Richard and Lisa stood by a shallow pool, staring down at the clear water. Beneath the reflection of their clasped hands, ripples condensed into solid shapes: the branch of a tree, a whorled sea-shell spiral. Leaning forward, Richard caught glimpses of color, the blue glaze on the curve of a pottery urn.

Crouching down, he put his hand in the pool to get the urn, but his fingers closed on a fistful of water.

A phone rang from the opposite side of the pool.

Lisa grabbed at him, and abruptly Richard realized he had to answer the phone.

'Let go?' He twisted free, waded into the pool. His feet plowed through a gallery of watery shapes. A jug broke against his knee, its yellow handle shattering. Splashes of ivory and primrose yellow washed upward, staining the surface of the pool. Lisa was shouting something behind him, but he couldn't stop. He had to get to the phone.

He took another step forward and stumbled, fell, down, down through a void of clear water.

Richard's arm jerked reflexively and jarred him awake. He was lying on the living room sofa, and he wasn't sure he'd ever get his neck straight again. Blearily, he sat up. He needed a mug of lemon tea? no, he shook his head, winced as his neck muscles protested. He didn't even like tea.

He wandered into the kitchen, put the kettle on. He reached up for the tea bags, stopped: that was Lisa. Lisa wanted the tea. The packet of tea bags shook in his grip and for a second he couldn't see anything, just a tangle of bright multicolored lines. Slowly, the room steadied into place.



Okay. He took a deep breath. It was only a momentary side effect of the biodes, nothing to worry about. Carefully, he poured out two mugs of tea, walked upstairs. He paused outside the bedroom, staring at the carving on the dresser. Now that he looked at it carefully, maybe it was more like a wolf than a dog. Strange, it wasn't so much the animal's head that suggested a wolf as the lean abstract curves of the base, somehow more independent than a dog. He frowned and pushed open the bedroom door.

Lisa was sitting up in bed, using the portable computer. She was wearing that floppy cotton nightshirt her mother had given her, and he could see a prickle of black fuzz growing back on her scalp.

?Uh, I thought you might like some tea.?

?Thanks. I'm sorry about??

?I'm sorry?? Richard said at the same time. ?You first.?

?I'm sorry about last night.? Her fingers clenched round the mug. ?I've been looking through the letters from your lawyer. He thinks you're crazy, and I'm beginning to agree. No one at the hospital would give me exact figures, but according to Peterson's letters, none of the other linked couples survived more than four months.?

?You sound like Tim and Jacob, all gloom and doom,? said Richard. ?They wanted to get a court injunction to stop me, so I had Peterson send them copies of the Thirty-Second Amendment: ?Every person has the right to modify their body as they choose, provided such modifications do not injure other parties,? et cetera, et cetera.?

Lisa had that look on her face which meant she wanted an in-depth discussion, and Richard wasn't ready for that. Spending hours on mutual soul-searching only to end up back where they started.

He sat down on the corner of the bed, grabbed for the bump of her feet under the covers, tickled.

Lisa wriggled, her lips working furiously, finally burst into laughter. ?Stop it. Be serious for a minute. You shouldn't have gone ahead with the link. I wouldn't have in your place.?

The flatness with which she said the last sentence convinced him she meant it. And that stung more than he'd expected. For a moment he didn't trust himself to answer.

?Lisa, I know I've been away too much lately. But I love you. I'd rather spend two months with you than the rest of my life missing you.? He shrugged, feeling acutely awkward. ?Hey, look on the bright side. Now I can't go away and leave you: the range of the implants is only six hundred meters. If I get any further away, we'll both get migraines.?

?Perfect,? Lisa said, her lips quirking upward. ?So now you'll be dragging me into work with you every day. I'll have to handcuff you to the bed to thwart you.? She circled his wrists with her hands, pulled him toward her.

?Thanks,? she whispered. And then she was kissing him, her fingers climbing under his shirt to rub against his chest, her tongue probing his ear, and neither of them spoke for quite some time.

\* \* \* \*

Richard tried not to count the days as April gave way to May. Lisa and he swam each day, spurning wet suits, the sea a cold, spray-bright world, Lisa's lithe body hot to the touch. They practised verbalizing



across the link, and by the end of the first month, Richard could hear Lisa's silent commentary as distinctly as if she was speaking.

Jacob called from the office late one morning while Lisa was showering. The Canadian deal had fallen through, and the shares were plummeting. In two hours, the losses had wiped out last year's profits. Richard changed into his suit, sat down by the video-phone to start making calls, and only then remembered that he'd promised Lisa not to do this anymore.

He glanced at the bathroom door: he could hear the shower still running. One or two calls wouldn't hurt. He dialed the Munich office, clicked yes when the phone software offered automatic translation.

When he glanced at his watch again, six hours had vanished. ?Lisa! I'm sorry?I lost track of time.?

No answer.

He reached for the link: she was in a kitchen he didn't recognize, talking to a thin, grey-haired woman. Must be one of the neighbors. He had no idea which one. He tried the link: Lisa?

He knew she'd heard him, but she refused to answer. Christ, it was only a few hours, and he hadn't been into work once since the operation. He slammed his fist into the back of the chair, again and again, harder. Finally, he noticed the sheet of paper on the table by the phone.

I told you nothing would really change. You got the implant because you were scared of being alone, not because you cared about me.

Garbage. He tore the note into tiny scraps. If she was going to be so unreasonable, then he hoped she stayed at the neighbor's. At least it gave him a chance to do something useful. He picked up the video-phone, dialed Jacob's number, clicked the phone off again before it started ringing.

What the hell was he doing? He closed his eye, his arms trembling. *Lisa, I'm sorry. It'll never happen again.*

He sensed her listening through the link as he walked up to the house computer. ?New command: refuse all incoming calls from the offices of Thorpe and Mayers. Lisa, please come home.?

She withdrew from the link without a word.

Richard shivered, suddenly cold. The walls pressed in on him like a mausoleum. Silent. Barren. She'd be back soon, she must come back soon. But he couldn't stand waiting in here. He paced outside, slouched down on the porch in the thickening twilight.

He stared at the main gate. Waiting. Hoping.

*Hello, Richard.* The metal gate slid apart, and Lisa walked up the driveway and sat down beside him.

Something prickled under his eyelids. He leaned over, buried his head against her. ?Don't ever leave me.?

\* \* \* \*

They were in the sea late one afternoon, nine weeks after the operation, the surf rough, waves crashing onto the sand with bruising force. Lisa mentally nudged him across the link: *Maybe we should get out, swim again tomorrow.*

*No*, he cupped her against his chest, tried to convey what he was feeling through the link. Water stretching to infinity, the salt taste, the sound of the surf pounding onto the shore, chaos and rhythm blended into a seamless whole. Nothing ever certain, except this one stolen instant, the texture of her damp shoulder under his hand.

He wasn't sure how much of it Lisa received. Sentences and images were much easier to share, but she wrapped her legs around his torso, pressed against him as a wave broke, drowning them both in spray: *I love you.*

They clung together, their bodies rotating in the waves, his head now under the water, now hers. He closed his eye, concentrated on the feel of Lisa moving against him, licked the brine from her cheek.

?Richard!?

A wave towered above them: too large, a curled white-rimmed weight of water. He pushed Lisa down, into the body of the wave, lost hold of her. A slab of water fell onto his back, bruising, turning him over, burying him in a rushing torrent. His mouth filled with salt and bile, and he couldn't make his legs move. Dragged along under water, he saw the view from somewhere above, more waves crashing, drops of water burning like fire as they trapped the sun.

Fire. Electric fire raced through his nerves, spasming his muscles. He tried to make for the surface, but he couldn't move, couldn't see anything except a dizzying view from Lisa's perspective: a man's figure?himself?slammed onto the sand beneath a wall of water.

\* \* \* \*

He woke in the hospital, his vision doubled with Lisa's. It took him longer than usual to filter out Lisa's perspective and focus on the room. Matilda Haller busy at a medical console, Lisa sitting by his bed. He reached over and squeezed her hand.

?Good, it's about time you woke up.? Haller walked over to survey him.

?What happened??

?By all accounts, you had a worthy attempt at drowning yourself.?

He shook his head. ?Not that. It was as though I was frozen: I could see what Lisa was seeing but nothing else. I couldn't move?why??

?I'm not sure. There is an increasing discrepancy between our computer simulations and the behavior of the biodes. The biode network has synchronized your nervous systems to an unprecedented degree, but there are some disturbing low-level anomalies.?

?Meaning??

?It's possible that the network is beginning to fail. I'd like to conduct a comprehensive survey of the network, checking each biode individually.?

Lisa's hand tightened around his, her reluctance echoing through him.

?How long would that take?? said Richard.

?A week, ten days at most.?

Lisa leaned forward. ?But they would be lost days: even if you identify the problem, you can't reprogram our biodes now. It won't help.?

?That is correct. But the better we understand the biodes? behavior, the greater the chances of success for future links.?

For future links: it sounded so neutral, so distant, balanced against his life and Lisa's, the little time they had. And Matilda Haller's expression was equally detached, not offering blame, or approval, or anything very human. If she'd smiled, or put her hand on his shoulder, he might have agreed automatically. Was that deliberate? A decision not to manipulate her patients? emotions?

He opened his mouth to refuse, but he couldn't quite do it. He'd spent his life being selfish. Maybe even his decision to go ahead with the implant had been primarily selfish; the past two months had been the happiest of his life. He couldn't repay that directly, but he could improve the odds for other couples down the line.

In the end it was Lisa who answered, wrapping her fingers round Richard's as she said, ?We agree.?

\* \* \* \*

They were dreaming, the boundaries smudged so that Richard was no longer sure where he began and Lisa ended. They chose to spend most of their time dreaming these days, their waking bodies harder and harder to coordinate. A forest glade surrounded them, the grass underfoot thick with dew.

?How long has it been since the operation?? asked the one who was mostly Lisa.

?Nearly seven months.?

A knocking sound interrupted them. Puzzled, Richard looked around.

?It's up there. A woodpecker. I saw one years ago.?

And there it was, a tiny blob silhouetted against a tree trunk, bobbing back and forth like a wind-up mechanical toy. The hammering noise beat time like a frantic metronome, fast, fast, fast. He'd never seen a woodpecker, and abruptly he wanted to scream, to weep, to grab hold of the world and slow it down.

?We still have some time,? said Lisa. ?Tomorrow we'll get a taxi to the park, sit on a bench and listen for woodpeckers.?

?Tomorrow,? Richard said. ?A woodpecker hunt. That sounds good.?

Above them, the bird attacked the tree with clockwork persistence.

In his sleep, blindly, Richard tightened his grip on Lisa's hand, the two of them curled together in the bed.

## The End

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