

A winter forest scene with snow-covered trees and a low sun casting long shadows.

HOW THE
LIGHT
GETS IN

A CHIEF INSPECTOR GAMACHE NOVEL

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ONE



Audrey Villeneuve knew what she imagined could not possibly be happening. She was a grown woman and could tell the difference between real and imagined. But each morning as she drove through the Ville-Marie Tunnel from her home in east-end Montréal to her office, she could see it. Hear it. Feel it happening.

The first sign would be a blast of red as drivers hit their brakes. The truck ahead would veer, skidding, slamming sideways. An unholy shriek would bounce off the hard walls and race toward her, all-consuming. Horns, alarms, brakes, people screaming.

And then Audrey would see huge blocks of concrete peeling from the ceiling, dragging with them a tangle of metal veins and sinews. The tunnel spilling its guts. That held the structure up. That held the city of Montréal up.

Until today.

And then, and then . . . the oval of daylight, the end of the tunnel, would close. Like an eye.

And then, darkness.

And the long, long wait. To be crushed.

Every morning and each evening, as Audrey Villeneuve drove through the engineering marvel that linked one end of the city with another, it collapsed.

“It’ll be all right.” She laughed to herself. At herself. “It’ll be all right.”

She cranked the music louder and sang loudly to herself.

But still her hands on the steering wheel tingled, then grew cold and numb, and her heart pounded. A wave of slush whacked her windshield. The wipers swept it away, leaving a half moon of streaky visibility.

Traffic slowed. Then stopped.

Audrey's eyes widened. This had never happened before. Moving through the tunnel was bad enough. Stopped in it was inconceivable. Her brain froze.

"It'll be all right." But she couldn't hear her voice, so thin was her breath and so great the howl in her head.

She locked the door with her elbow. Not to keep anyone out, but to keep herself in. A feeble attempt to stop herself from flinging open the door and running, running, screaming out of the tunnel. She gripped the wheel. Tight. Tight. Tighter.

Her eyes darted to the slush-spattered wall, the ceiling, the far wall.

The cracks.

Dear God, cracks.

And the half-hearted attempts to plaster over them.

Not to repair them, but hide them.

That doesn't mean the tunnel will collapse, she assured herself.

But the cracks widened and consumed her reason. All the monsters of her imagination became real and were squeezing out, reaching out, from between those faults.

She turned the music off so she could concentrate, hyper-vigilant. The car ahead inched forward. Then stopped.

"Go, go, go," she pleaded.

But Audrey Villeneuve was trapped and terrified. With nowhere to go. The tunnel was bad, but what waited for her in the gray December sunlight was worse.

For days, weeks, months—even years, if she was being honest—she'd known. Monsters existed. They lived in cracks in tunnels, and in dark alleys, and in neat row houses. They had names like Frankenstein and Dracula, and Martha and David and Pierre. And you almost always found them where you least expected.

She glanced into the rearview mirror and met two frightened brown eyes. But in the reflection she also saw her salvation. Her silver bullet. Her wooden stake.

It was a pretty party dress.

She'd spent hours sewing it. Time she could have, should have, spent wrapping Christmas gifts for her husband and daughters. Time she could have, should have, spent baking shortbread stars and angels and jolly snowmen, with candy buttons and gumdrop eyes.

Instead, each night when she got home Audrey Villeneuve went straight to the basement, to her sewing machine. Hunched over the emerald green fabric, she'd stitched into that party dress all her hopes.

She would put it on that night, walk into the Christmas party, scan the room and feel surprised eyes on her. In her clingy green dress, frumpy Audrey Villeneuve would be the center of attention. But it wasn't made to get everyone's attention. Just one man's. And when she had that, she could relax.

She'd hand over her burden, and get on with life. The faults would be repaired. The fissures closed. The monsters returned to where they belonged.

The exit to the Champlain Bridge was in sight. It wasn't what she normally took, but this was far from a normal day.

Audrey put on her signal and saw the man in the next car give her a sour look. Where did she think she was going? They were all trapped. But Audrey Villeneuve was more trapped. The man gave her the finger, but she took no offense. In Québec it was as casual as a friendly wave. If the Québécois ever designed a car, the hood ornament would be a middle finger. Normally she'd give him a "friendly wave" back, but she had other things on her mind.

She edged into the far right lane, toward the exit to the bridge. The wall of the tunnel was just feet away. She could have stuck her fist into one of the holes.

"It'll be all right."

Audrey Villeneuve knew it would be many things, but all right probably wasn't one of them.

TWO



“Get your own fucking duck,” said Ruth, and held Rosa a little closer. A living eiderdown.

Constance Pineault smiled and stared ahead. Four days ago it would never have occurred to her to get a duck, but now she actually envied Ruth her Rosa. And not just for the warmth the duck provided on the bitter, biting December day.

Four days ago it would never have occurred to her to leave her comfortable chair by the bistro fireplace to sit on an icy bench beside a woman who was either drunk or demented. But here she was.

Four days ago Constance Pineault didn’t know that warmth came in many forms. As did sanity. But now she knew.

“Deee-fenssssse,” Ruth shouted at the young players on the frozen pond. “For God’s sake, Aimée Patterson, Rosa could do better.”

Aimée skated past and Constance heard her say something that might have been “duck.” Or “puck.” Or . . .

“They adore me,” Ruth said to Constance. Or Rosa. Or the thin air.

“They’re afraid of you,” said Constance.

Ruth gave her a sharp assessing glance. “Are you still here? I thought you’d died.”

Constance laughed, a puff of humor that floated over the village green and joined the wood smoke from the chimneys.

Four days ago she thought she’d had her last laugh. But ankle-deep in snow and freezing her bottom off beside Ruth, she’d discovered more. Hidden away. Here in Three Pines. Where laughter was kept.

The two women watched the activity on the village green in silence, except for the odd quack, which Constance hoped was the duck.

Though much the same age, the elderly women were opposites. Where

Constance was soft, Ruth was hard. Where her hair was silky and long, and done in a neat bun, Ruth's was coarse and chopped short. Where Constance was rounded, Ruth was sharp. All edges and edgy.

Rosa stirred and flapped her wings. Then she slid off Ruth's lap onto the snowy bench and waddled the few paces to Constance. Climbing onto Constance's lap, Rosa settled.

Ruth's eyes narrowed. But she didn't move.

It had snowed day and night since Constance had arrived in Three Pines. Having lived in Montréal all her adult life, she'd forgotten snow could be quite so beautiful. Snow, in her experience, was something that needed to be removed. It was a chore that fell from the sky.

But this was the snow of her childhood. Joyful, playful, bright, and clean. The more the merrier. It was a toy.

It covered the fieldstone homes and clapboard homes and rose brick homes that ringed the village green. It covered the bistro and the bookstore, the boulangerie and the general store. It seemed to Constance that an alchemist was at work, and Three Pines was the result. Conjured from thin air and deposited in this valley. Or perhaps, like the snow, the tiny village had fallen from the sky, to provide a soft landing for those who'd also fallen.

When Constance had first arrived and parked outside Myrna's bookstore, she'd been worried when the flurries intensified into a blizzard.

"Should I move my car?" Constance had asked Myrna before they went up to bed. Myrna had stood at the window of her New and Used Bookstore and considered the question.

"I think it's fine where it is."

It's fine where it is.

And it was. Constance had had a restless night, listening for the sirens from the snow plows. For the warning to dig her car out and move it. The windows of her room had rattled as the wind whipped the snow against it. She could hear the blizzard howl through the trees and past the solid homes. Like something alive and on the hunt. Finally Constance drifted off to sleep, warm under the duvet. When she awoke, the storm had blown by. Constance went to the window, expecting to see her car buried, just a white mound under the foot of new snow. Instead, the road had been plowed and all the cars dug out.

It's fine where it is.

And so, finally, was she.

For four days and four nights snow had continued to fall, before Billy Williams returned with his plow. And until that happened, the village

of Three Pines was snowed in, cut off. But it didn't matter, since everything they needed was right there.

Slowly, seventy-seven-year-old Constance Pineault realized she was fine, not because she had a bistro, but because she had Olivier and Gabri's bistro. There wasn't just a bookstore, there was Myrna's bookstore, Sarah's bakery, and Monsieur Béliveau's general store.

She'd arrived a self-sufficient city woman, and now she was covered in snow, sitting on a bench beside a crazy person, and she had a duck on her lap.

Who was nuts now?

But Constance Pineault knew, far from being crazy, she'd finally come to her senses.

"I came to ask if you'd like a drink," said Constance.

"For Chrissake, old woman, why didn't you say that in the first place?" Ruth stood and brushed the flakes off her cloth coat.

Constance also rose and handed Rosa back to Ruth, saying, "Duck off."

Ruth snorted and accepted the duck, and the words.

Olivier and Gabri were walking over from the B and B, and met them on the road.

"It's a gay blizzard," said Ruth.

"I used to be as pure as the driven snow," Gabri confided in Constance. "Then I drifted."

Olivier and Constance laughed.

"Channeling Mae West?" said Ruth. "Won't Ethel Merman be jealous?"

"Plenty of room in there for everyone," said Olivier, eyeing his large partner.

Constance had had no dealings with homosexuals before this, at least not that she knew of. All she knew about them was that they were "they." Not "us." And "they" were unnatural. At her most charitable, she'd considered homosexuals defective. Diseased.

But mostly, if she thought of them at all, it was with disapproval. Even disgust.

Until four days ago. Until the snow began to fall, and the little village in the valley was cut off. Until she'd discovered that Olivier, the man she'd been cool to, had dug her car out. Unasked. Without comment.

Until she'd seen, from her bedroom window in Myrna's loft above the bookstore, Gabri trudging, head bent against the blowing snow, carrying coffee and warm croissants for villagers who couldn't make it to the bistro for breakfast.

As she watched, he delivered the food, then shoveled their porches and stairs and front walks.

And then left. And went to the next home.

Constance felt Olivier's strong hand on her arm, holding her secure. If a stranger came into the village at this moment, what would he think? That Gabri and Olivier were her sons?

She hoped so.

Constance stepped through the door and smelled the now familiar scent of the bistro. The dark wood beams and wide-plank pine floors were permeated with more than a century of maple-wood fires and strong coffee.

"Over here."

Constance followed the voice. The mullioned windows were letting in whatever daylight was available, but it was still dim. Her eyes went to the large stone hearths at either end of the bistro, lit with cheery fires and surrounded by comfortable sofas and armchairs. In the center of the room, between the fires and sitting areas, antique pine tables were set with silverware and mismatched bone china. A large, bushy Christmas tree stood in a corner, its red, blue, and green lights on, a haphazard array of baubles and beads and icicles hung from the branches.

A few patrons sat in armchairs nursing *cafés au lait* or hot chocolates, and read day-old newspapers in French and English.

The shout had come from the far end of the room, and while Constance couldn't yet clearly see the woman, she knew perfectly well who had spoken.

"I got you a tea." Myrna was standing, waiting for them by one of the fireplaces.

"You'd better be talking to her," said Ruth, taking the best seat by the fire and putting her feet on the hassock.

Constance hugged Myrna and felt the soft flesh under the thick sweater. Though Myrna was a large black woman at least twenty years her junior, she felt, and smelt, like Constance's mother. It had given Constance a turn at first, as though someone had shoved her slightly off balance. But then she'd come to look forward to these embraces.

Constance sipped her tea, watched the flames flicker, and half listened as Myrna and Ruth talked about the latest shipment of books, delayed by the snow.

She felt herself nodding off in the warmth.

Four days. And she had two gay sons, a large black mother, a demented poet for a friend, and was considering getting a duck.

It was not what she'd expected from this visit.

She became pensive, mesmerized by the fire. She wasn't at all sure Myrna understood why she'd come. Why she'd contacted her after so many years. It was vital that Myrna understand, but now time was running out.

"Snow's letting up," said Clara Morrow. She ran her hands through her hair, trying to tame her hat head, but she only made it worse.

Constance roused and realized she'd missed Clara's arrival.

She'd met Clara her very first night in Three Pines. She and Myrna had been invited over for dinner, and while Constance yearned for a quiet dinner alone with Myrna, she didn't know how to politely decline. So they'd put on their coats and boots and trudged over.

It was supposed to be just the three of them, which was bad enough, but then Ruth Zardo and her duck had arrived and the evening went from bad to a fiasco. Rosa, the duck, had muttered what sounded like "Fuck, fuck, fuck," the whole night, while Ruth had spent the evening drinking, swearing, insulting, and interrupting.

Constance had heard of her, of course. The Governor-General's Award-winning poet was as close as Canada came to having a demented, embittered poet laureate.

Who hurt you once / so far beyond repair / that you would greet each overture / with curling lip?

It was, Constance realized as the evening ground on, a good question. One she was tempted to ask the crazy poet, but didn't for fear she'd be asked it in return.

Clara had made omelettes with melted goat cheese. A tossed salad and warm, fresh baguettes completed the meal. They'd eaten in the large kitchen, and when the meal was over and Myrna made coffee, and Ruth and Rosa retired to the living room, Clara had taken her into the studio. It was cramped, filled with brushes and palettes and canvasses. It smelled of oil and turpentine and ripe banana.

"Peter would've pestered me to clean this up," said Clara, looking at the mess.

Clara had talked about her separation from her husband over dinner. Constance had plastered a sympathetic look on her face and wondered if she could possibly crawl out the bathroom window. Surely dying in a snow-bank couldn't be all that bad, could it?

And now here Clara was again talking about her husband. Her estranged husband. It was like parading around in her underwear. Revealing her intimates. It was unsightly and unseemly and unnecessary. And Constance just wanted to go home.

From the living room she heard, “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She didn’t know, and no longer cared, whether it was the duck or the poet who was saying it.

Clara walked past an easel. The ghostly outline of what might become a man was just visible on the canvas. Without much enthusiasm, Constance followed Clara to the far end of her studio. Clara turned on a lamp and a small painting was illuminated.

At first it seemed uninteresting, certainly unremarkable.

“I’d like to paint you, if you don’t mind,” Clara had said, not looking at her guest.

Constance bristled. Had Clara recognized her? Did she know who Constance was?

“I don’t think so,” she’d replied, her voice firm.

“I understand,” Clara had said. “Not sure I’d want to be painted either.”

“Why not?”

“Too afraid of what someone might see.”

Clara had smiled, then walked back to the door. Constance followed, after taking one last look at the tiny painting. It was of Ruth Zardo, who was now passed out and snoring on Clara’s sofa. In this painting the old poet was clutching a blue shawl at her neck, her hands thin and claw-like. The veins and sinews of her neck showed through the skin, translucent, like onion paper.

Clara had captured Ruth’s bitterness, her loneliness, her rage. Constance now found it almost impossible to look away from the portrait.

At the door to the studio she looked back. Her eyes weren’t that sharp anymore, but they didn’t have to be, to see what Clara had really captured. It was Ruth. But it was someone else too. An image Constance remembered from a childhood on her knees.

It was the mad old poet, but it was also the Virgin Mary. The mother of God. Forgotten, resentful. Left behind. Glaring at a world that no longer remembered what she’d given it.

Constance was relieved she’d refused Clara’s request to paint her. If this was how she saw the mother of God, what would Clara see in her?

Later in the evening, Constance had drifted, apparently aimlessly, back to the studio door.

The single light still shone on the portrait, and even from the door Constance could see that her host hadn’t simply painted mad Ruth. Nor had she simply painted forgotten and embittered Mary. The elderly woman was staring into the distance. Into a dark and lonely future. But. But. Just there. Just slightly out of reach. Just becoming visible. There was something else.

Clara had captured despair, but she'd also captured hope.

Constance had taken her coffee and rejoined Ruth and Rosa, Clara and Myrna. She'd listened to them then. And she'd begun, just begun, to understand what it might be like to be able to put more than a name to a face.

That had been four days ago.

And now she was packed and ready to leave. Just one last cup of tea in the bistro, and she'd be off.

"Don't go."

Myrna had spoken softly.

"I have to."

Constance broke eye contact with Myrna. It was altogether too intimate. Instead, she looked out the frosted windows, to the snow-covered village. It was dusk and Christmas lights were appearing on trees and homes.

"Can I come back? For Christmas?"

There was a long, long silence. And all Constance's fears returned, crawling out of that silence. She dropped her eyes to her hands, neatly folded in her lap.

She'd exposed herself. Been tricked into thinking she was safe, she was liked, she was welcome.

Then she felt a large hand on her hand and she looked up.

"I'd love that," Myrna said, and smiled. "We'll have such fun."

"Fun?" asked Gabri, plopping onto the sofa.

"Constance is coming back for Christmas."

"Wonderful. You can come to the carol service on Christmas Eve. We do all the favorites. 'Silent Night.' 'The First Noël'—"

"'The Twelve Gays of Christmas,'" said Clara.

"'It Came Upon a Midnight Queer,'" said Myrna.

"The classics," said Gabri. "Though this year we're practicing a new one."

"Not 'O Holy Night,' I hope," said Constance. "Not sure I'm ready for that one."

Gabri laughed. "No. 'The Huron Carol.' Do you know it?" He sang a few bars of the old Québécois carol.

"I love that one," she said. "But no one does it anymore."

Though it shouldn't have surprised her that in this little village she'd find something else that had been all but lost to the outside world.

Constance said her good-byes, and to calls of "*À bientôt!*," she and Myrna walked to her car.

Constance started it to warm up. It was getting too dark to play hockey

and the kids were just leaving the rink, wobbling through the snow on their skates, using their hockey sticks for balance.

It was now or never, Constance knew.

“We used to do that,” she said, and Myrna followed her gaze.

“Play hockey?”

Constance nodded. “We had our own team. Our father would coach us. Mama would cheer. It was Frère André’s favorite sport.”

She met Myrna’s eyes. *There*, she thought. *Done*. The dirty secret was finally out in the open. When she returned, Myrna would have lots of questions. And finally, finally, Constance knew she would answer them.

Myrna watched her friend leave, and thought no more of that conversation.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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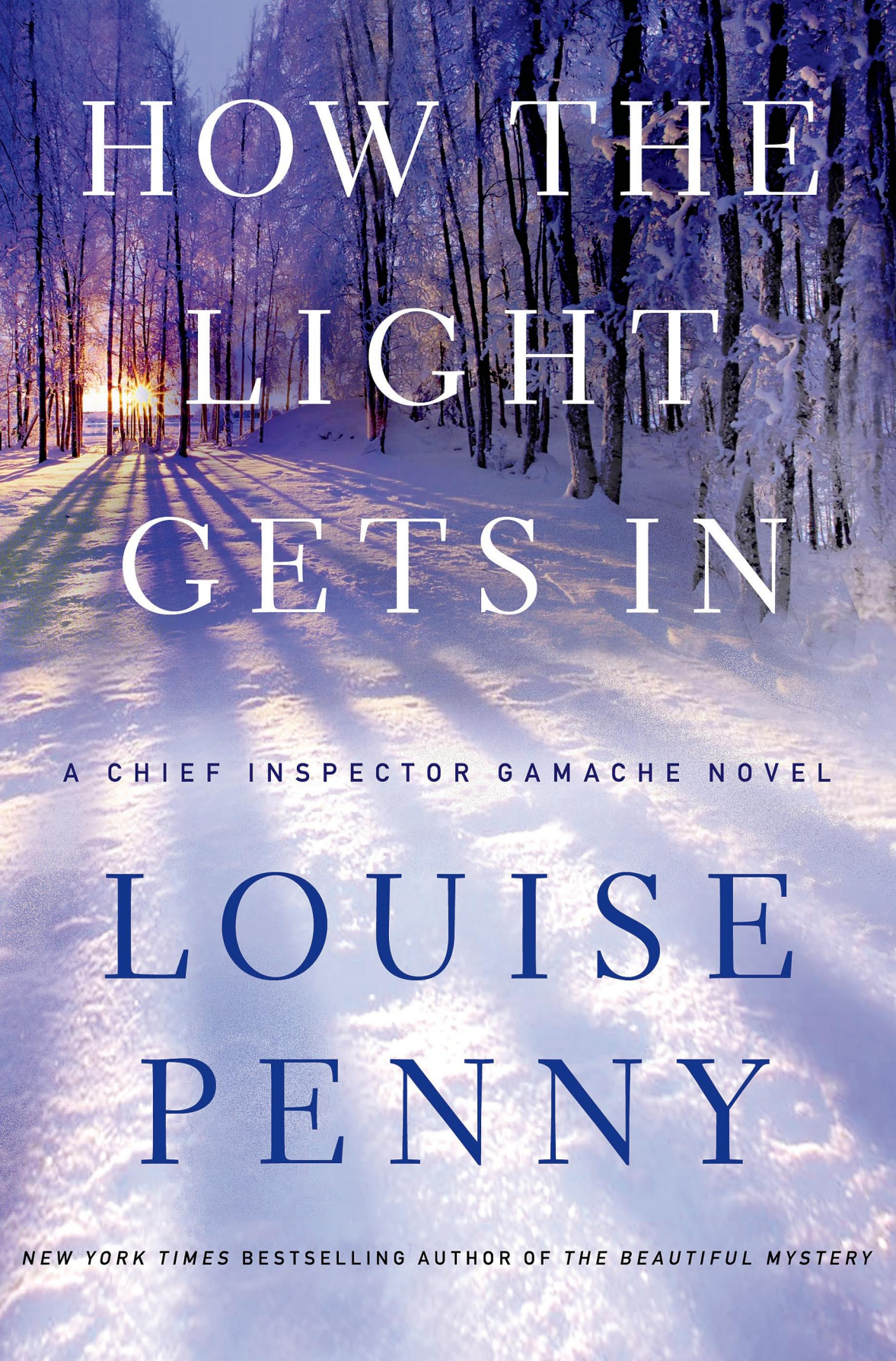
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