

The Mediator

A psychological thriller by Erica Pensini

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This story is a work of fiction and all names, characters, and places are nothing but fantasy.

Thrillers by the same author:

The Missing Link

Forget Me Not

Lethal Discoveries

Chapter 1

In the broadness of my minimalistic living room the shadows of the dimming day wrap around my silhouette, black against the whiteness of the couch.

“Ms. Dawson...”, starts the journalist

“John, why don’t you call me Iris”, I say

The journalist is silent for a moment, before he replies, *Sure Iris*. His reply is accompanied by a brief laughter and a barely detectable tinge of embarrassment.

“Good”, I smile

John’s eyes elude mine for a moment, trading unspoken questions in the empty space. I sit immobile, waiting for his words.

“You’ve written ten books worth millions of copies each”, he starts, “but the beginning of your first book is what always stroke me the most”

“Why?”, I ask

John knows, but he cannot tell me.

I see John brought the book with him, and I ask him to read the passage to me.

“Perhaps you could”, he says after a pause, handing me the book

I recite from memory instead, my eyes locked onto his.

I am not an object of desire because of who I am, but because there is something I know how to do better than anyone else. I show people their deepest desires, the ones they cannot get themselves to acknowledge.

Hold my hand as we head to hell, I know that’s where you want to be. It will seem so natural to go down that path when you and I walk side by side.

My innocence is infinite.

After I finish we sit silent for a moment.

“Why?”, I ask again

Instead of offering an answer John clears his throat and pulls out his notebook.

I smile and pour us drinks.

“Perhaps you want to hear the full story behind these words”, I say, as I patiently begin to weave the path to John’s answer.

Chapter 2

I had spent the day in a conference room, and I was ready to have some time on my own. I excused myself from the social activities planned for the evening and started heading to my hotel alone.

The fall chilled New York City. It could start pouring any moment, and passers-by hastily pushed their way forward, barely aware of each other’s presence. It was not a good day for walking, and I could have taken a cab. The streets were jammed though, and I relished the shuffles of wind ruffling my hair, they felt liberating after the atrophy in which the previous hours had plunged me.

But when I reached 5th Ave. hell suddenly broke loose, the slashes of rain fell hard, drenching me within minutes. I tried to hail a cab, but I couldn’t get anybody to stop for me. I silently cursed the drivers, and looked around for somewhere to shelter myself till the rain would subside.

There was a hotel at the corner. I stood at the entrance, monitoring the sky for some sign of respite from the downpour.

A man stepped out of a limousine, accompanied by a guy holding an umbrella over his head. I observed the scene, fascinated by the perfection of the man’s attire and disgusted by the way he strived to overstate his power. I smiled a sarcastic smile at the hidden weakness this overstatement implied.

The man noticed, and he was not the type to let go.

“Not a good day for walking, is it?”, he told me, stopping in front of me

I took my time to reply, a detached smile clinging on my lips.

“There are worse things in life than getting wet”, I said at last, my tone plain

The man’s light blue eyes scrutinized me, before locking onto my dark gaze. I could sense strength in the lightness of those cold eyes, and my smile warmed, yielding. For a moment I felt tenderness at the man’s Achilles heel.

“And there are better things than standing in front of a hotel, soaked to the bones. Be my guest for a drink”, he asserted

It didn’t seem strange to accept, so I did. And this is how it all started.

Chapter 3

My memories are so clear it could all be happening now.

Voices from the hotel restaurant are in the background. There's only one other customer at the bar. The guy is hunched over a newspaper as he drinks, wrapped in a black trench coat. He looks in my direction every now and then, but I soon forget about his presence.

"Two gin tonics", says the man, defining my choice

I approve with the flicker of a smile.

The man smiles back, the curved mouth hardened by his full control of the moment.

I observe the barista as he blends our drinks and I say "Iris Dawson", without diverting my eyes or losing track of the barista's moves.

"Iris Dawson is your name?", the man asks, a frown of sudden surprise dissolving the hard edges in his smile

My gaze shifts towards him at the same time the barista places our drinks on the counter.

"Yes", I reply

The man sips his drink and says "Rob Neilson", while looking straight ahead

After a moment he turns towards me, staring me down with a resolute lack of expression. Then he suddenly smiles and shakes his head.

"You are strange", he tells me

"What would you be doing now if you weren't with me?", I ask

"What would I be doing?", Rob echoes back

I nod

"I'd be ordering dinner in my room and watching some show before organizing the documents for tomorrow", he tells me

I nod again

"Why did you ask?", Rob wants to know

"To understand why you are with me", I say

Rob scrutinizes me, trying to grasp my intentions

“What do you mean?”, he insists, his arched brows marking the sarcastic façade he chooses to show me

“Why are we having drinks instead of dinner when we’re both hungry?”, I reply without thinking

The authenticity of the question shifts my perception of the moment.

I swing left and right on the stool while sipping the gin tonic, eyes smiling as my mouth clings onto the glass.

Rob cocks his head, he doesn’t understand my attitude but he’s amused.

“Where do you want to go for dinner?”, he asks

“We can order dinner from your room and watch some show, before you organize the documents for tomorrow”, I tell him, resting my chin on the palm of my hand, a hopeful smile sprawled on my face

Rob laughs, and his laughter is hearty, liberating.

“God”, he replies, shaking his head

I keep looking at Rob with rounded eyes, my expression unchanged

“Ok Iris, let’s go”, he capitulates, and I swing myself off the stool, smiling playfully, my brows peaking as an exclamation mark at the end of a happy sentence

Chapter 4

The hour is undefined. The curtains are closed, the light in the bathroom seeps through the half open door, illuminating the bed where Rob and I are lying naked. A pile of empty dishes is lying on the floor.

Rob turns towards me, and studies me for a moment, wanting to ask a question but hesitating to formulate it. I smile, pulling the blankets up to my chin as I turn to face him.

“Why did you do this?”, he asks at last

“Really, I don’t know”, I say without lying

“Do you often get yourself in similar situations?”, he wants to know

“No, I don’t. This is the first time”

He struggles to believe me.

“Really?”, he insists

“You’re the one who asked me for a drink”, I reply

“Yes, I asked you for a drink but now we are in my hotel room, naked, and we had sex”, he argues

“Yes”, I shrug

He looks at me, as if trying to read the plan underlying my actions, and I keep smiling

“How long are you here for?”, he asks

“In New York? The conference I’m here for ends tomorrow, and I’ll be flying out tomorrow night”, I say

Rob nods.

Leaving as planned is the only thing that makes sense, and yet I realize I’d want to stay here for an extra day.

“How long are you here for?”, I ask, returning his question

“I have a meeting tomorrow morning, and I’ll be flying out tomorrow night”, he says

“Good timing”, I smile

We’re silent for a moment

“What’s your meeting about?”, I’m curious to know

“It’s about esthanol, a new chemical we’d like to have in our product line”, he tells me

“I see”, I say

“But it’s not that easy”, he continues

“Why?”

“Because someone else is already producing it, and they have the know-how”, he explains

“So you are trying to negotiate the purchase of the know-how?”

Rob shakes his head

“No, they’ll never give it away”

“So?”, I insist

“So there’s really no easy way to achieve this”

I’m silent for a moment

“Is there a hard way to achieve this?”, I want to know, and Rob laughs

“Bribe the inventor of the chemical to tell us all about it and screw over our competitors”, he says, laughing again

“Is this hard?”, I ask

Rob scrutinizes me, pondering if I am joking or if I am truly as clueless as my statement makes me sound

“Well, bribing a guy is much easier than re-building his knowledge from scratch. As long as your target guy is a well-defined person it shouldn't be that hard”

Rob looks at me, intrigued. His is a purely theoretical curiosity, he doesn't believe that my logic can be applied to the real world but he feels compelled to hear about it.

“Someone knows about this chemical, yes? So who's the man?”, I start

Rob doesn't answer

“Ok, let's assume you know the man's name”, I say

“Let's assume I do. So you want me to walk up to the guy and tell him, I'll pay you millions if you spill your secrets?”, Rob replies ironically

He's losing interest

“Not really. Maybe you can't buy the guy with money”

“So what do you propose to do?”, Rob asks again, his thoughts shifting beyond my reach

I take the remote and turn on the TV.

“Let's look for inspiration”, I say

I mean it as a joke, but now Rob is wondering if he just slept with a deranged woman. He gets up and starts donning his pants.

I zap for few seconds before landing on the show I want.

Lying in bed naked, I look at the images rolling on the screen and I look at Rob, waiting.

His shirt still undone, Rob stops short, his attention suddenly alert. Rob's hands cling to the button he was about to close, immobile.

Unnoticed, I smile as I witness the unfolding of Rob's hidden self.

Chapter 5

The darkness has deepened around us, but I can still discern the signs that John has been impressing in his notebook as I spoke.

“So the Neil Robson in your first novel is the alias of Rob Neilson ...”, John says, eyes lowered, as if talking to himself

Our conversation pauses. All is apparently still but I sense John’s body twitch ever so slightly.

There’s a metal box beside the sofa. In it I find a story I cut off from the short fiction section published on the New Yorker years ago. The date is October 20, 1999.

“You’re a journalist, so of course you remember Rob Neilson”, I say

I observe John as he waits for my words.

“But have you ever read this?”, I continue after a moment, handing him the story

John struggles to make out the words, black against the blackness of the room, and even after deciphering them he’s at a loss.

I leave the couch to slide the paper off his hands and refill our glasses. Then I lay back and let the alcohol blow its evanescent flame through me, slowly melting in my body.

Eyes closed, I sense John’s eye on me.

“You’ve read my book, and yet you never saw this episode the way you are seeing it now. The question never occurred to you before”, I say, eyes closed

John keeps silent.

“But now you want to know if Leslie Carson is a fictional character inspired by the night I spent with Rob Neilson, or if she’s more than that. You want to know more about Leslie Carson”, I continue

“Yes, I want to know”, he tells me

“John, if you want something just ask”, I say

John doesn’t reply, and I allow time to flow by, eyes closed, laying back on the couch.

I sense John shift his body forward, and pull back. I smile, and opening my eyes I see that John has taken his glass from the table.

The amber liquid oscillates in John’s glass, ever so slightly, unveiling the invisible shiver in his hand.

I shift my body forward to pick up my glass, and pull back.

“Can you tell me more about Leslie Carson?”, John asks

“I sure can”, I smile, satisfied with the question

My memories resurface with untainted clarity in the impinging nightfall.

Chapter 6

The conference has come to an end and I am lining up to board on my plane.

Rob Neilson reverberates within me, and yet our night together could have happened centuries before. It feels like one of those old memories that are tattooed inside you and emerge at random moments with almost physical intensity.

I turn around absent mindedly, when I catch a glimpse of a name tag hanging on the woman beside me. The woman is labelled “Carlie Lester”. Carlie Lester notices me looking, and realizes she had forgotten to remove her badge. She slides it off her neck with a sigh, a contained outburst of frustration after a day that has weighed on her.

I give Carlie a smile and she returns it, radiating a different self for a flashing instant. Carlie is intriguing when she frowns, and beautiful when she smiles.

Carlie and I have not been assigned neighbouring seats. Beside me is instead a heavy woman, who anxiously twists her head in all directions in the vain attempt to spot somebody. She grips the armrests, holding on to them as she swings her bulky torso towards the aisle, and she collapses back with a sigh, just to start all over again few seconds later. I am starting to get unnerved when a hostess comes to interrupt the woman’s routine by telling her the passenger next to her husband is willing to trade seats.

Carlie appears after a moment and when she sees me a smile of relief crossed her face.

“I couldn’t stand my neighbour”, she says

“I couldn’t stand your neighbour’s wife”, I reply, and we laugh

“Iris”, I introduce myself, and Carlie says, “I’m Carlie”

“I know”, I say, and Carlie looks lost for a moment

“You were sick of wherever you had been, you needed to get out of there so fast that you forgot about the badge hanging on your neck”, I smile

“Oh yeah...”, Carlie remembers, letting herself lie back, eyes closed

And without opening her eyes, she begins.

“I was always thrilled to be a scientist, a *real* scientist. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes”, I say

“You do? I was coming up with discoveries and solutions, I had good reasons to drive to work in the morning. But now things have changed”, Carlie says and pauses

“Why?”

“They’ve given me new tasks, and now I’m something in between a salesman and a manager”

“Well, find a new job then”

“I could”, she says

Carlie pauses again, a long pause floating on the background noise of the aircraft’s engines before takeoff. They roar and roar, and I wonder why we’re still stuck to the ground.

Overcoming their sound, Carlie speaks again.

“They pay me well, so it’s hard to let go, but there’s no thrill anymore. What’s worst is that every day that passes plunges me in a deeper state of torpor. I used to blow it all up when things didn’t work for me, I used to go for a fresh start without too many worries. But now...I don’t know”

“So you want the fun and the money, but it seems like you can’t get both at the same time. Is this it?”

“It is and it isn’t”

“They’ve gotten you bored to death and now you don’t know what you want anymore”, I say

Carlie opens her eyes when we finally get off the ground. The motors push the aircraft upwards, compressing us against our seats.

“I love this”, says Carlie

“I do too. I feel free only during transitions”, I tell her

“At this moment I believe anything is possible”, Carlie says

We are silent for a while.

“Anything is possible”, I say, my words reverberating Carlie’s

The trajectory of the aircraft plateaus, Carlie and I face each other.

On the background, beyond Carlie, there's a man. The guy is hunched over a newspaper as he drinks, wrapped in a black trench coat. I sense we had met before, but I can't place him. The man glances in my direction, before going back to his paper.

Seeing the man I think, Rob Neilson, but it is only a fraction of a second later that I realize why. He was at the bar the night before. Intriguing coincidence?, I wonder.

"What I want is the thrill", Carlie tells me, oblivious of my momentary distraction

"What if you could have the thrill *and* the money?", I ask smiling

Chapter 7

"What if I could have the thrill and the money?", Carlie echoes me

My plain face offers no suggestions.

"I'd be happy, I suppose", she concludes, giving me a shrug and an ephemeral giggle

"You'd be happy whatever it takes to have both?", I want to know

"Yes", Carlie admits, after the briefest hesitation, and I smile

"So what can thrill you?", I want to know

"Being a scientific spy", is the answer, given without a time gap

The screenplay playing in Rob Neilson's hotel room unwinds within me, taking new turns.

"A scientific spy?", I ask, wanting more details

"Imagine sneaking in corporate labs and blowing up all their secrets. Of course human beings create the knowledge corporations treasure as secrets, but human beings are nobodies to the corporations. The profit they make is valuable, but they – as human beings – are worth nothing"

I listen to the tirade without speaking.

"So you want to steal corporate secrets and then what?"

"You know wiki-leaks? Yeah, I want to make it all public", says Carlie, a bitter bend twisting her mouth

Hunched over an empty glass and a newspaper, the man wrapped in his black trench coat adsorbs flecks of our conversation with discreet glances.

“This would give you the thrill, but what about the money?”, I say

Carlie’s thoughts swirl for a moment.

“I’d sell the secrets and then make them public. I’ll get the thrill, the money and the fun for playing the best prank ever on everyone”, she says angrily

But then Carlie’s horizon closes, her revengeful dreams deflate.

“I must be crazy to discuss this nonsense with someone I just met”, she says

Lying back on my seat, cheeks touching the headrest, I see Carlie beside Rob Neilson as I look at an imaginary TV screen.

“Most certainly Carlie, and I have a crazy idea for you”, I smile

Chapter 8

John is tensed towards the crazy idea I carry within me. The darkness should conceal him, and yet his tension vibrates in the air with almost physical intensity.

I know he’s waiting, and let us savour the peculiar taste of expectation. When the moment comes, I speak again.

“I intended the crazy idea as nothing more than a fantasy. Planting its seed out there meant that the realization of the idea could not be absolutely discounted, but it was nonetheless unlikely”, I continue

“So the Leslie Carson in the short fiction you published on the New Yorker is Carlie”, John says and I nod

“Tell me more about the idea”, he says, no longer able to brace his curiosity

In the obscure silence of the room my voice traces the promise of a trail.

“I signed the piece, but as I wrote I made believe that Carlie was the author. Truth be told, she and Rob were. I’ve been nothing but the medium through which Carlie and Neil manifested themselves. You’ve read the plot. Carlie, alias Leslie, is a law abiding woman. Most and foremost though, she is a brilliant scientist looking for new turns in life, and in a crazy discussion with a stranger she figures she wants to be a scientific hacker. Somewhere out there there’s someone looking for her, let’s say someone like Rob Neilson. Rob Neilson is a law abiding man. Most and foremost though, he is a businessman aiming at profit and in a surreal night spent in a hotel room with a perfect stranger he sees some cynical frames on a TV screen, and those frames click with him. He is mesmerized by the actress playing a sexy MIT girl, paid by someone to manipulate a rational man, win his trust and have him reveal all his secrets about a

drug not yet released and on which he has worked for years. Carlie Lester wants to meet Rob Neilson. She writes about herself in the short fiction section and includes her contact information in the story. And then I, a perfect stranger, cut off the story from the New York Times, place it in an envelope and send it to Rob Neilson's company. The name of the company is easy enough to find, the likelihood of my letter being actually handed to Rob, let alone read, is close to zero. Sitting at her desk, swamped by admin tasks she hates, Carlie Lester smiles at the possibilities implied by the infinitesimal gap between zero and close to zero"

My narration subsides, and I let the realm of possibilities shimmer beyond my words.

"Did Carlie Lester and Rob Neilson really meet?", John wants to know

For a moment I wish John could feed my imagination as I'm feeding his.

"What is your gut feeling?", I ask

"I don't know. Perhaps they did", John says undecidedly

"I didn't know either for the longest time the same way I knew nothing about the inventor of the chemical of the century, that esthanol substance Rob had told me about. Was the inventor a rational but naïve man? Would Carlie be able to win his trust and secrets if given the chance?", I tell him

John still needs my words, but I have faith in his potential.

"How do you picture the inventor of esthanol?", I ask

"As a man at least in part naïve", John replies, emerging from his hidden cocoon

"Why?", I want to know

"Because only dreamers can invent what is not yet a reality", John beautifully says

There's a lamp on the side table, and I light it. Its dim reflections are soft around John's features and mine.

The change is unexpected. John's fingers contract in his shoes for the briefest instant. Then I lock my eyes onto John's, and his fingers relax as I smile.

"Let me show you something", I tell him

I take the metal box beside the sofa on my lap and find a story I cut out the short fiction section published on the New Yorker on December 10, 1999.

“Here, John. Meet Steven Meyers, alias Meyer Stevenson. He’s your dreamer”, I say, handing him the story

Chapter 9

Bondage Breaker – December 10, 1999, The New Yorker

The rush hour wave had almost subsided, and yet the subway train felt packed when I stepped in. I negotiated my way through the crowd, trying to dig out a square of empty space. There were free seats here and there, but I couldn’t get myself to pick one. I had set my mind on standing when a woman looked up from her book and brushed her eyes on me for a split moment.

I sat in front of her.

For a while she ignored my presence, the subway, anything beyond the black and white world of words elating from her book. But when the train came to a halt at the next station, brakes squeaking loudly, she noticed me again.

“I should get myself a novel like yours”, I said

What did I expect? Only deranged people interact on subway trains. And yet something in her ways had created a shift in the set of rules. I sensed she would not pull back.

She wanted to know what brought me to New York, and I wondered what made my lack of belonging to the city so blatantly clear.

I told her I was taking a break, she smiled at my generic answer and said, “Seems like you are seeking some answers around here”

She knew so much already, so why not tell her everything?

“I’ve created lethanol”, I said

She couldn’t know about lethanol, but I thought I’d lost my mind to talk about this. When she nodded as if I were telling her I was a math teacher in junior high I relaxed.

Of course the name hadn’t rang a bell. Or had it?

“The economic value of this molecule is huge, there has been a time when I was proud of my creation. But not anymore”, I continued, unable to stop

How so, she asked, and I explained what I figured lethanol could do to ecosystems and people. Anxiousness was starting to foam within me when she shrugged and told me, mistakes happen.

“But I can’t let myself be responsible for a massive disaster”, I fought back, my tone pitching, as if winning this argument could change the facts

Then don’t, was her calm reply.

“I communicated the risks. My company knows, but profit rules. They want lethanol. I thought about ingesting the bloody stuff to reach the public. If I die *somebody* will have to ask questions”, I replied, the high pitch escalating in my tone

Few people turned my way before for the briefest instant, their irritated indifference echoing my feeling of impotence.

Is dying the only solution?, she wanted to know, the calmness in her tone unaltered. This woman had faith, or maybe what I saw was my own faith, reflected in her empathetic eyes.

I shook my head no. No, dying is not the only solution. Not for now, at least.

A man with a black trench coat hunched on his newspaper glanced my way. The glance was brief, but he was not irritated and he was not indifferent.

The woman looked at him strangely, and was silent for a moment.

I looked at him too. He was now engrossed in the black symbols populating his newspaper, and all of a sudden it dawned on me. How simple.

“Of course”, I said

“Of course”, the woman repeated, “I know about lethanol and that man over there might have overheard our conversation about it too, who knows. There are people who might want to listen, all you have to do is reach out and find them”

I grinned. She smiled, and asked my name.

I am Meyer Stevenson, and now you know about my story too. From now on I’ll keep telling it to whoever cares to hear it. You can broadcast it or forget it.

What you do with it is up to you, but bear this in mind.

- They can only have you if you let them, and I won’t.

Iris Dawson

Chapter 10

John is looking at me with a peculiar expression painted on his face and an undefined question finding its way through him.

“Is this really how the Steven Meyers case started?”, he asks at last

“Yes”, I say

John ponders my answer, plays with combinations and possibilities.

“What do you think happened next?”, I ask him

“Carlie Lester finds the story. She remembers you, but she’s not sure at all that you’re making this up. She probably thinks that following the trail you gave her is nothing but a game. She can’t really believe it will go anywhere, and yet she needs out of her present life and she catches the hook”, John says

I smile.

Needing more than his own imagination, John waits for my words. But I too want his story.

“What do you think happened next?”, I ask again

John seems lost for a moment, and yet I know it is worth waiting.

“Carlie doesn’t have an exact plan, but she knows that if she can hook up Steven she’ll be a step closer to putting her hands on esthanol”, he says after a pause

I nod

“When she compares your short stories she notices how you change names...how lethanol is esthanol, how her own name – Carlie Lester – has been translated into Leslie Carson. She envisions that Meyer Stevenson is probably the alias for Steven Meyers”, John hypothesizes

“You sure know how to follow your trails, Mr. Journalist”, I smile

“And so Carlie finds Steven”, John continues

“She does”, I say

“And perhaps she even lands a job in his company”, John speculates

“How does she land this job?”, I want to know

“You’re such a tease”, John replies, laughing for the first time

I pretend to frown, before my smile melts into John's laughter.

"You want to know? I feel we can find some answers here", John says, opening my book on a page marked by a small fold on the top right corner

I cock my head sideways, now frowning in genuine surprise.

"Let me read you a chapter you might have forgotten about", John smiles

I sit back, the expectation flowing within me in rivulets of warmth, as I wait for my own words to reshape themselves through John.

Chapter 11

"Carlie, how did you meet Steven?", John asks, reading from the book, and Carlie gives her account, speaking sentences as gaunt as her features.

I looked him up on a social network, she remembers, and he accepted my invite to connect. I wasn't sure about how to strike a conversation after contact was established, but Steven reached out after about a week we had connected. He told me he read some of my publications and enjoyed them. I replied on a similar professional and neutral tone, and few similar messages were bounced back and forth without much more happening. He never mentioned esthanol, and neither did I, but I kept an eye on job postings in his company, Rick Hanson's Corporation, hoping to find a research opening that could lead me to it. And soon enough I did. I applied, and told Steven about it. After sending him the message I realized for the first time that what I had been doing could be more than a hypothetical reality. Iris Dawson had sent Rob Neilson a letter with a short fiction story I posted on the New Yorker as a cover letter, an improbable attempt to sell myself as a spy able to find out about esthanol. Of course *that* letter had received no reply, but my logic was that if I showed up with actual material in my hands things could change. When I contacted Steven about the job he diverted the conversation, and told me about a seminar in the city where I lived. He was planning on attending, and said he'd be glad if I joined. The seminar was about ethics in science, I assume it was Steven's way to warn me about what I was getting into. Perhaps it was just a way to meet me, to know if I was worth helping. Perhaps it was both. Whatever Steven's reasons, I took a day off work and went to the seminar. I should have guessed at the trouble ahead that first day we met, but I chose to neglect all signs and move on with my plan. Had I dropped it, I could have taken a stance about being an ethical researcher and enjoyed my time with Steven from that first afternoon together. The irony is that if I hadn't felt for Steven, if I had been truly cold, he would have probably been indifferent to me too. We would have not started meeting every

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