

# **IN AND OUT OF GREECE**

**THREE STORIES**

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**LEA, PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST**

**TRIBULATIONS OF LOVE**

**AN INDIAN STORY**

# LEA, PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

## PART I : MILITARY SERVICE

It seemed so stupid to Panos this whole business of military service. He had to go through it to become a civil servant. To be allowed to settle permanently in Greece, for that matter, after years of study abroad. He would not be able to take up his post as an instructor at the state polytechnic unless he completed this one-year stint of duty. Did he really have to know how to wield a gun and peel potatoes to teach the abstruse intricacies of mathematical series and infinities?

He was thirty but there was no way around it even at his age. In Greece, it was the inescapable duty of rich and poor, of the clever and the stupid, the educated and the ignorant. He did not mind the exercise and the running. He would have done it on his own in any case but getting up for lookout post duty and the uncomfortable, dreary hours it involved was too much. Moreover, he did not want to think. What else could one do in the chill darkness of midnight to daybreak but think?

The boredom of his activities and mostly of his free time sometimes exasperated him. He felt completely out of place. His only consolation was that the camp was on a hill by the sea and the breeze that constantly caressed it was pure and sea-fragrant. Even when the army trucks moved noisily about spouting thick black fumes it did not last long. The fumes drifted away and the sweetness returned. The subtle scent of the sea almost nourished him. It opened his appetite and the blue, calm Aegean sated his soul.

Right opposite the camp on another rocky promontory, separated by a bay from the camp, was the Castro. A castle built by the Byzantines and later rebuilt and used by the Venetians and Genovese up until the invasion of the Turks. Though only a flock of deer now inhabited the extended ruined fortifications, it dominated the landscape of Myrina, the village-capital of Limnos. Poised high above the village, it stamped it most emphatically with a sense of history.

History was not lacking in that picturesque but not especially beautiful island. The numerous archeological sites and ruins that studded Limnos reached back to the Bronze Age and evidence of Paleolithic Age settlements of hunter-gatherers and fishermen were recently discovered. It made Panos marvel that even a small, relatively infertile, mountainous island could generate tomes of detailed history books researched and written by archeologists and learned native lovers of the island. Places like Moudros with its natural deep-water harbor sheltered the British Navy in the failed Dardanelles Campaign and the Greek Navy in the Balkan Wars. This, however, is modern history. Limnos's history and prehistory though minuscule in the great events of the world was, nevertheless, a molecule of the whole.

Panos loved its beautiful, sandy beaches and crystal-clear waters that had survived pristine the millennia and felt satisfaction that this island provided aquatic resting grounds for migrant birds and tall flamingos. He wondered if the extraordinary natural environment would survive another two decades.

He arrived in Limnos in early spring, near the end of March. The sky was cloudy and the flight turbulent in the small twin-engine plane. As he walked with his

provincial-looking fellow passengers from the aircraft to the small airways terminal, a slight drizzle sprinkled the runway. The weather was cold but the aroma of the wet earth and thyme of the mountains sparked a little hope in him. The scents of spring were already eloquent. He often wondered what life would be like in a village. A village is not an army camp but the army camp was almost part of the village and he would soon find out.

A few taxis were stationed outside the airport terminal but he took the Olympic Airways shuttle bus to Myrina. It weaved along an unexciting narrow road past meadows and farms, a few grazing cows and donkeys and two small villages. Three other recruits were in the bus and they started chatting amongst themselves trying to overcome the sense of disorientation that Panos also felt. They were probably just out of secondary school, not more than eighteen or nineteen. Half an hour later, they reached the capital and the bus snaked into a few narrow streets, entered a square and stopped. The passengers silently filed out into the large oblong square with a small park in the middle.

A neat stone-slatted sidewalk surrounded the park with freshly painted wooden benches for the passengers of local itineraries. In the park were one or two flowerbeds and a few hefty eucalyptus trees with grass all around. The only sizeable road was the one that led into the square. The huge country buses that connected the other villages to the capital came into it, went around the park and out the same way. A few narrow streets exited the square on all sides and a larger one that was obviously the main street traversed the village and led to the port. It had shops and restaurants and the famous Greek *periptera*, or kiosks, where one could find besides newspapers, cigarettes, soft drinks and sweets, the most unexpected and vast array of useful articles that might be needed at a moment's notice. Large vehicles could reach the port by other venues but not directly from this square.

Panos asked the boys whether they were going to the camp and suggested they share a taxi. He did not need to share it but wanted to avoid the arrogance of going off on his own. They piled into a taxi and the driver remarked that his bag must be full of rocks. It was very heavy.

"Just some books," Panos said.

The driver smiled.

"Are you an officer?" he asked.

"No," said Panos.

"Then a gun will be more useful to you than books," he said and laughed. "The Turks are lurking just beyond the horizon."

"The books are heavy," Panos told him, "if the worst comes to the worst, I shall break open their skulls with them." The young boys guffawed.

The camp was barely a two-minute drive beyond the village. The drizzle had stopped and his first impressions were favorable. The camp itself was nondescript with casernes, depots and ugly buildings but also with a luxurious officers' club affording a civilized note. The setting, however, was glorious. From that height, Panos felt the Aegean hugging the island. It was an indifferent benefactor. A provider of fish and fresh air, of clouds and rain for the inhabitants' crops but unable, throughout a long history, to prevent predatory foreign invasions, slavery and the raids of pirates. This fear and uncertainty was transmitted in their genes from one generation to the next and now it was the Turkish threat again. Perhaps it had never abandoned them together with the unrealistic dreams of grandeur, of regaining the Poli, the City, *our* Constantinople. Five centuries on, accomplished native writers bemoaned its loss in detailed and moving historical novels.

The cool air braced him up. He left Athens early in the morning and it was already noon. With his three young companions, he presented his papers to the officer in charge and after the inevitable paperwork went on to a sergeant who assigned them their bunks and issued them uniforms, stockings and army boots. The rest of that first day was free and Panos and the boys arranged their belongings in the dormitory cupboards assigned and then joined the other soldiers for lunch in the mess hall. The food was palatable and the noise lively. High spirits and boisterousness usually amused Panos but he could not get used to the vulgarity of language of the modern Greeks. He supposed it was not a uniquely Greek trait but that did not mitigate his aversion to it. *Re malaka*, you masturbator, was amongst other equally revolting familiarities thrown about with equanimity and friendliness. It had almost acquired the meaning of, hey friend.

Three to five was a rest period and most soldiers lay in their bunks. At five, they all went back to their odd jobs and duties for a couple of hours and Panos requested permission to walk to the village. He did not see, at first sight, any potential friends. The kids had barely started shaving and most of the junior officers and sergeants were younger than he was. The officers of his age group did not give him a second look. He was happy the young trio got along together. It would assuage the initial loneliness. That was more than could be said for him.

He left the camp dressed in fatigues and an impermeable army jacket he had just been issued and was grateful for the army cap he wore because it started drizzling again. In ten minutes, he reached the village and took the main street to the port. The shops were lit but the circulation was sparse. He assumed this emptiness was typical of off-season Myrina in the drizzle and relative chill. A few coffee bars and *souvlaki* joints had soldiers inside, lounging, eating and enjoying the warmth. They provided the principal winter clientele of the fast-food trade, the restaurants and the coffee and pastry shops on the island. In summer with the influx of vacationers things changed radically but in winter it was the army that kept them in business.

The island had a love-hate relationship with the army. The army provided considerable commercial activity and influx of capital and employment of locals. The young soldiers spent their meager allowances supplementing their diets, trying to entertain themselves as best they could and yet the conservative society of the island shunned them. Although the island mores inevitably adjusted to the new ideas and customs that filtered in during the summer months, change was not readily adopted and local girls were discouraged from forming relationships with the soldiers that were there for just a year or so. They would shortly finish their military service and depart. Moreover, they were rarely well off. Usually they were boys from other Greek provinces of less than moderate means and were not acceptable marriage prospects. That did not stop the local authorities from protesting stridently whenever the army announced personnel reductions. The rich summer vacationers also roundly scorned the recruits.

As Limnos was a molecule of the whole in most things, she was also that in the skin trade. With the vanishing iron curtain and Eastern Europe's poverty, enterprising Mafia-like entrepreneurs surreptitiously introduced prostitution into Myrina. It was not obvious. They were mainly rumors that circulated but the blonde, red-cheeked Ukrainian and Russian female faces suddenly proliferated as coffeehouse servers and household helpers, as wives of old, comfortably off widowers now blessed with a new lease of life and, at their age, a little unanticipated sex. Others, unseen, holed up in apartments relieved the young Greek soldiers of their sexual frustrations.

Panos knew all that. His friend Anthony who lived in Athens and had family in Myrina had briefed him. Anthony was a surgeon like Panos's father. They met on several occasions in London while Anthony studied and prepared for a fellowship to the Royal College of Surgeons and Panos looked him up on his return to Greece. He got in touch with him again when the Army Recruitment Center informed him that he would be stationed in Myrina. The two friends had a long and friendly meeting and Anthony provided a detailed picture of life in Limnos. They would meet again in summer. Anthony was a fanatic summer vacationer of the island. So were the vast majority of native sons who lived away from Limnos. Most of them had roots, homes and farms. They were the offspring of an older generation that evaded the hardship of an arid island by seeking their fortunes in not only Athens and the larger Greek cities but also the Middle East, Africa and Australia. They left their farms to sharecroppers and were back every summer to collect their income and to upkeep the family home. Above all, they returned because of a strong attachment and love for their homeland. They appreciated the cool, dry summer climate, the casualness and relaxation that the village life afforded and relished the glorious, less than crowded beaches and crystal-clear, cool waters.

Thoughts were flashing through his mind. Thimitra. He kept chasing them away because they oppressed and choked him. Both of them had been stubborn and foolish. He reached the port. The narrow street opened on a square and a small garden with benches. To the left of it was the small port where the fishing trawlers docked. Small restaurants faced the dock all along its length with closed doors and one or two customers apiece. To the right were the keys of the main port on a large wharf where traditional Greek-island hotels were situated, also facing seaward, with the less than original names: The Wave, The Seagull and The Port. Directly above them towered the Castro. Small coffeehouses wedged in narrow side streets where, on a stormy day, one could almost see Alexis Zorbas drinking his boiled sagebrush broth; eagle-eyed surveying the crowd. On a hill, right across the port, quite isolated, was a small, white church with its belfry. Oh, Thimitra, will you not marry me up there? Bloody hell! Cut it out!

He returned to the small port, entered a tiny, empty fish restaurant and ordered a bottle of local wine. Half way through it, he felt hungry and ordered fried squid with a salad. Filling his belly, he felt his spirits rising. Oh, things will work out, he thought. He always told himself that the cause of his miseries was his lack of problems and, inevitably, something that seemed paired to that, a lack of drive. He had no financial worries. His father, a highly successful surgeon had amassed more money than they needed. His mother, independently wealthy, doted on him. No one ever pushed him to do this or that and when he announced that he decided to become a mathematician, his father just smiled and said,

“That’s all right; you have enough money to afford to waste your time. I just hope you never regret it.”

He could never have imagined how true these words would turn out to be. He traveled to England, lived there for eight years and earned a PhD. He was playing a game. That was how he felt. The more he studied, the more he delved into this arcane and peculiar science, the more useless he felt. His tousle-haired, absentminded professors made him smile when they rushed in the lecture room and announced gleefully,

“I have for you a most fascinating theorem. A true mystery and yet it does have a solution. Let’s see if you can find it.”

Panos felt he was honing his mind for nothing. The utter uselessness of it all was becoming a severe burden. He knew he was not a brilliant mind, not another Einstein likely to discover other relativities. In any case, he was not a physicist, just a silly pure mathematician. If it were not for some of his other interests in literature, art, music and theatre, he felt he would surely end in severe depression or an insane asylum. They did balance things out a bit. The women too, thank God for them. Their prattle and lovemaking was another pill of sanity.

As the days went by, his life at the camp acquired a semblance of, if not normality, at least, of routine. He was soon enough familiar with the boys but did not mix with them. He was too old, too mournful. He was considered dependable by his superiors and given a good measure of authority but was also seen as peculiar and treated warily. He was permitted to deviate slightly from the strict rules of the camp. In the evenings, while the soldiers relaxed he would go to the mess hall and on a corner table set up his books, plug in a small desk lamp he bought from the village and sit down to his problems. Useless or not, his science still fascinated him. Usually when he had lookout post duty, he worked until twelve after which he put on his overcoat and with his rifle headed for the watchtower. He dreaded these twice-weekly stints. All he could do was think. The taxi driver's Turkish invasion was not coming anytime soon and the fresh sea air caused one sigh to follow another. One thought of Thimitra after the other. He must find a woman, he thought. The question was where should he look? He was too embarrassed to ask the young soldiers for directions to the apartments of the Russian and Ukrainian prostitutes. In any case, he had never done it this way before.

Lately, he noticed a woman painter moving about the island. He had not seen her at close quarters. Just spotted her, occasionally, painting away on far away hills and distant beaches with her tripod. She was always alone. She seemed vigorous and young and it intrigued him that an artist was recording all that beauty. Artists fascinated him and he loved painting. He wondered if she was good. He had very definite opinions on talent and quality. Most of it instinctive but he found he was rarely wrong in his estimations when he consulted art books. He believed that if a painting was alive and talked to him, gripped him, it was good. It was art. The rest were either appallingly colored photographs or tasteless colored smudges.

He remembered the Picasso exhibition at the Tate. How they laughed. A smattering of talent but it was mostly colorful gargoyles, meaningless, emotionless, pretentious and empty. That was how he felt. Perhaps he was untutored and ignorant of modern art but he trusted his instinct. He trusted his love of painting. Most definitely, most of the time, Picasso was pulling our legs. She thought so too. She had asked him to go with her to the exhibition. He met her at the University of London Student Union, at the Arab Society's elections. An Arab colleague had invited him. He told him it would be fun. Politics and passions started early in colleges and his colleague's group wanted to prevent a communist takeover of the presidency of the Arab society.

She sat next to Panos at the meeting and they chatted and laughed as interminable quarrels developed between opposing students in atrocious English and even worse accents. Suddenly the meeting broke up in anger and half the students departed. The girl turned to Panos and said, "I must go." She was with the belligerents.

"Hold on a minute," he muttered, pulled out a pen and a scrap of paper and noted his phone number. "Call me," he told her.

She smiled.

"Who do I ask for?"

"Panos. Don't worry. I shall be answering the phone."

She left and he realized he had not asked her name. He realized he had met the girl of his dreams. He realized he was half in love. With what? With a thin English girl of ordinary height, with short fair hair and smiling eyes, a lovely voice, a smile that took his breath away and looked all of eighteen.

She called him ten days later. She was halfway down memory lane on the way out and when he heard her voice, he wondered who she was.

“Panos?” She questioned.

“Yes.”

“This is Ceres.”

“Who?”

“Ceres. The girl from ULU. The Arab society.”

“Oh, my goodness, yes. Hello! I did not know your name.”

“Yes. We left in a bit of a hurry. It was rather funny.”

“I am so happy to hear your voice. I thought I lost you. I sort of fell in love with you, you know.”

She laughed.

“I nearly did, too. I am prone to that sort of thing.”

“I was terribly worried you might not call.”

“Not a chance, unless that scrap of paper with your phone got lost. But I was pretty careful with it.”

“When will I see you?”

“There’s this Picasso exhibition at the Tate. Will you accompany me to it?”

That was their first date, their first kiss and their first lovemaking in his flat.

After the Picasso in the afternoon, they went to a film, they spent most of the film kissing like teenagers; they had a meal in South Kensington and went to his flat and in his bed. The first time was very special, tender and passionate but so was the second and third and fourth that night. They were in delirium. They were in love. They had plunged into an abyss, in a black hole of sensuality. They could not believe their feelings. They were sincere.

“I love you madly,” he told her. “Is it possible? Do you believe me?”

She kissed him passionately.

“Yes, my love, yes. It’s reciprocal.”

She spent the night in his flat. In between love sessions, they spoke about themselves and their families. Her father was a professor of Archaeology at the University of Kent.

“Hence my name,” she said. “Ceres.”

“I have heard it before but only rarely.”

“It is the Roman goddess of Agriculture.”

“Oh! Our Greek equivalent is Thimitra.”

“Yes, Demetra. And Panos?”

“Panos is Panayotis.”

“Good God,” she laughed. “Let’s leave it at Panos.”

“How old are you my love?”

“Twenty five. Nearly an old maid.”

“You hardly look eighteen.”

“It is my lean and hungry look.”

“Boy! Lean, mean and hungry is right. I am twenty eight.”

“Figures. A passionate Greek in his prime.”

“Only with my wild Boadicea. Apart of your indisputable lovemaking talents and dilettante visits to art exhibitions and Arab societies, what are your other occupations?”

“You just called me Boadicea. I am a fighter.”

“Meaning?”

“I studied child psychology and I work at a London Council school for retarded children. I fight passionately to bring them back. As much as I can. Which is not always feasible. And you?”

“I am wasting my life. I am working for a PhD in pure math.”

“And tasting the birds of London.”

“I love you Ceres. You are the last bird of the line.”

“Famous last words.”

“True. Time will tell, my love.”

Time, however, was hardly ever succinct. Time took its time. It had its own infinity. On his lookout post he often cried, “Will you not leave me in peace, you bitch. My Thimitra, my sweet girl.”

This woman, he wanted to get a look at her. From afar, she looked tall, well built and walked in an energetic manly gait. Perhaps she was beautiful. She strapped her tripod stand, canvasses and utensils on her back and climbed the hills like a goat. Often he saw her tiny figure across the bay at the Castro. When the weather was fine, she would stay there all day. Painting with a white fisherman’s sun-hat on her head, resting to eat her lunch and drink from a thermos flask. He wanted to send smoke signals to her like the Red Indians but was afraid to spark off the Turkish invasion. He borrowed a pair of binoculars from an officer but he could still not make her out.

He saw her two months later on a glorious, sunny day in mid-May. He had a day off and went down to the beach, on the bay between the camp and the Castro. The beach was deserted; the water icy-cold and he swam for only a few minutes. He came out shivering and stretched on the sand. He warmed up and sat gazing at the sea wondering if one ever tires of looking at that eternal movement? He saw her coming with a bathrobe and slippers. He could not mistake her walk, her movements, her short hair, her height. They were her landmarks to him. She stood some way off and removed her bathrobe and a beautiful sturdy body in a red, brief, two-piece bikini faced the sun. She had lovely long legs and full breasts; a body that had not borne children. Her face was a man’s face dominated by a prominent nose. Her eyes were small and Chinese but lively and intelligent and her mouth was large. He could not call it a pleasing face, not with all the goodwill in the world. Though not repulsive, it was unattractive and turning fifty. Was she lesbian?

She entered the sea and swam for ten minutes in immaculate style. Coming out she looked at Panos and nodded to him with a half smile. Then, she stretched on her bathrobe and seemed to doze off. Panos wanted to leave but waited. He had longed to meet her and it seemed ridiculous to leave her now despite her unattractiveness and a faint distaste she induced in him. When she awoke and sat facing the sea, he walked to her, excused himself and asked her if she was the painter he saw moving around the hills and beaches of Myrina. He knew, full well, she was. She looked at him and smiled and Panos understood that nature always seems to give even the ugliest person a redeeming feature. The truly ugly are legends recorded in books. The woman’s smile was luminous and pleasant and seemed to alter her face, to erase the ugliness. Those Chinese eyes were brimming with intelligence.

“Yes,” she said. “Where do you spy me from?”

“From the army camp.”

“Are you an officer?”

“No, just a soldier.”

“Aren't you a little old for that?”

“Yes. I have been the beneficiary of innumerable deferrals but finally could not escape the clutches of the system. I was studying abroad.”

“Why didn't you stay there?”

“There is always this inexplicable pull of one's roots. It seduces you even if one regrets it later. Plus other more mundane considerations such as employment and family.”

“Oh dear, another one,” she said.

“You too?”

“Yes. For me it was the pull of one's roots, a senile mother and a return to my long-abandoned art.”

“May I ask you something? I have not much free time from the army. The Turkish invasion is at hand.”

“Oh?”

“I am only joking. The thing is they keep us busy. The army makes for a peculiar life: a community of men without women. We have to clean, cook, upkeep the camp and equipment, wash and iron our clothes and linen, make our beds in a very specific manner and keep the dormitories tidy. And of course, defend the fatherland. Nevertheless, could I invite you for dinner at one of the better tavernas whenever I can manage it?”

“Even in one of the lesser ones would do. Yes, I would love it. It gets pretty lonely here at this time of the year.”

“Where shall I find you?”

“Call me at the Omiros hotel opposite the airline office to arrange an appointment. I am fixing up my place and I temporarily reside there.”

“Do you plan to stay here?”

“Not permanently. Just a few months every year. I have my painting junk in the house but there are also teams of artisans coming in from Athens who camp in it for the few days they need to finish specific jobs. Not very comfortable but they are happy to save on a hotel. Still, it is nearly finished. I shall be moving in it soon. It is the house on the bay of the *Romeikos Yialos* with the wooden beams curving outwards, supporting and enlarging the second floor.”

“Oh, it's beautiful,” he said. “I have admired it often.”

“Yes it is. I am in love with it. It was a ruin when I bought it a few years ago and I only started renovating it recently. I have tried, as much as possible, to restore it in its original form with some well hidden modern comforts.”

“Who shall I ask for?”

“Lea Sevdalis.”

“I am Panos Lavrendis.”

He shook her hand. It was a firm handshake from a woman with a man's face on a thirty-year old mermaid's body. Then she smiled and everything changed.

He called Lea a few days later. Ceres would not ease the Graeco-Roman fighter's grip on his soul. He had not called her for months. Every telephone call was a small doom. The wall could not be scaled. She was on one side, he on the other. It was just their voices, tears and refusals on both sides. Desperate love and stubbornness created a minor Greek tragedy at the end of a telephone line. Going to Lea, in the evening, he felt a need to talk to her. He went to the main telephone exchange of Myrina and called her flat in London. Her roommate told him she was in Kent with her

parents. He called at their home and Ceres's mother answered. She was friendly and cool as if she had seen him yesterday.

"Oh, hello Panos," she said. "How are you?"

"How are you Mrs. Ploughright? I am quite well thank you. Is Ceres at home?"

"Indeed she is. She is fussing about with Jason. He is a lovely little boy."

"My God," said Panos. "So he arrived? I am overwhelmed."

"My dear boy, did you think Ceres would stay pregnant forever? He is healthy and beautiful. Congratulations. Won't you come and see him? Here, hold on, she wants to talk to you. Good bye from me."

"Panos, my love." It was her voice. The ground started swaying and he leaned on the cabin. "Talk to Iason."

He heard his voice and his gurgling. He did not know what to say. "Iason," he said, "*pethi mou*." (my child)

Then it was her voice again.

"My darling," he said, "my darling Thimitra, are you all right?"

"Fantastic. On top of the world. This skinny body disgorged a beautiful child. I am so dreadfully happy. He looks like you sometimes but he's more English than Greek. Should I say, thank God? I have another two wonderful months still with Iason before I go to work. Mummy will keep him in the mornings and I shall give up the flat. I shall be commuting daily to work from here by railway. It's a hassle but I have to be with Iason. Still, that's some way off. Mother has been quite wonderful."

"I miss you my darling. I think of you. I love you."

"And keeping it to yourself? Why don't you call?"

"Because ever since I came to Greece, our telephone conversations ended in quarrels and threw me into depressions, which have become an almost permanent trait of my moods. Do you believe me, my darling, when I tell you that at least in our love nothing has changed? I love you desperately. I desire you, my Thimitra."

"Yes, my love, nothing has changed, unfortunately. It would have been so much easier if it had. Won't you come to see your son?"

"I cannot just now. I am in the army on an island."

"You see? Constantly tying your life in knots."

"I have to do my military service to get employed. You well know I could get nothing worthwhile in the English universities. Nothing at all in fact. One refusal after another."

"If you loved us enough you would be driving a taxicab to be near me and your son."

"And if you loved me enough you would be here, near me."

"What, in the army camp?"

"Oh come off it, Ceres."

"Panos, better let's turn it off here. But please, my love, please, call me more often. Try it every two weeks instead of every two months. I do love you, unfortunately, and I do miss you terribly. I love you my dearest. I dream of you in my bed. My passion is still alive. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Oh, my Thimitra, why are you constantly throwing the blame on me? I shall call you every other day. We might work something out though I doubt it. All that tearing apart never did much good. I love you too, my darling. Terribly. You are the light of my life. Too bad it is over the horizon and I am living in darkness. Take care of our son."

She prattled on for a while about Iason and then they said goodbye. Once again, he was depressed but it was not as bad as it usually was. He walked to the Omiros and

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