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He has published several children's books which have been translated in the USA, England, Poland and many other countries. His short-stories and novels include: »A Moment in Advance« (1957), »Crucified Between« (1958), »Walled-in« (1960), »The Tower« (1970), »Great Day« (1971).

IVAN KUSAN

My Friend Pet

... l'enfant pauvre montrait à l'enfant riche son propre joujou, qui celui-ci examinait avidement comme un objet rare et inconnu. Or, ce joujou, que le petit souillon agaçait, agitait et secouait dans une boîte grillée, c'était un rat vivant!

(Ch. Bandelaire: LE JOUJOU DU PAUVRE)

... bravo, after all the bed-bugs, the rats, the lice, the scabs and the filth, they give us pancakes...

(M. Križić: ON THE BRINK OF REASON)

Qui ne sait que la vue des chats, des rats, emportent la raison hors des gonds?

(B. Pascal: PENSEES)

Et derrière eux
courent des rats des villes et des rats des champs.
Ils s'en vont tous vers la Bastille

(J. Prévert: RUE DE...)

How now! A rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead!

(W. Shakespeare: ...)

Two rats crept up the curtains, and ran smelling backwards and on the bed. One of them came up almost to my face, whereupon I fright, and drew out my hanger to defend myself. These horrible and the boldness to attack me...

(J. Swift: GULLIVER'S T...)

»I had a rotten bad dream last night — dreamt about rats.«
»No! Sure sign of trouble.«

(M. Twain: TOM ...)

It roots in the ground — it isn't the pig, it's dark in colour — it isn't and to everyone — it's a pest.

(Stavonic riddle: ...)

»And how do you like the Water-rat?« asked the Duck. »I am rat that I have annoyed him«, said the Linnet. »The fact is, that I to story with a moral.«

»Ah! That is always a very dangerous thing to do«, said the Duck.

(O. Wilde: THE DEVOTED ...)

IT MUST SEEM STRANGE to you that I am going to tell about an ordinary mouse. Personally I should never have preferred to talk about myself, for I do not suppose that there could be anything to interest you in my life. In fact I do not even know what I am addressing myself to: cats, humans or some third kind of mortal beings. Up to a few mouse years ago I did not even know that mice all existed. If it had not been for Pet. That is it, if it had not been for Pet. Actually this is going to be Pet's story. Pet was the first to draw my attention to humans as beings who know more about us than we do about ourselves. Pet used to explain to me that there were books where all of us mice were arranged according to size, tail, colour, temperament and other characteristics, and as soon as a human saw one of us he would immediately know what kind of mouse we were. They, humans, even classify rats as well. Yes, that is how Pet begins. It was a gloomy autumn evening, a month after that night when he first drew my attention to the difference between rats and mice.

At that time I was living at the back of a wood-shed, in a small, spacious pea tin; to be honest I had called it a house and mouse until then, but Pet taught me to call things by their human names, for they are the most precise and clearest, Pet says. Our printing press had just got going then and we used to print part of our newspaper, »The Rat Herald«, on it. It is true that we only printed gossip and sports' columns in that cellar — while the rest of it

was printed somewhere else — but for all that — thanks again to Pet — who had a very good technical mind and considerable engineering ability — we had very advanced machines, so that we did the work quickly and easily. I had a fair amount of spare time that I used to like to spend reading; I got a reasonable salary, occasionally in milk and cheese; and I was just about perfectly contented with my lot. Until Pet »put mice in my head«.

As I was saying, that gloomy autumn evening, Pet ran into my tin, his eyes shining. He was shivering all over from the damp that had already settled in the air, and from some hidden excitement.

»Hello, Sik,« he said, in his brisk voice and closed his eyes. »The time has come. The time has come. I think the time has come.«

I looked at him, almost frightened. Pet was a very good-looking mouse: his longish muzzle ended in a strikingly black nose decorated with wonderfully straight dark whiskers; his coat was silvery-grey and irreproachably clean and brushed; and his soft grey eyes were the most beautiful mouse's eyes I had ever seen, and any beauty would have envied him for them, even Gri; his legs were fragile, but still fitting, and he always held his tail, his long thin tail, raised a little at the end, which gave his whole appearance an air of dignity. So striking and stylish was he that any mouse who happened to look at him would have forgotten how thin and small Pet was. And he was no bigger than a pygmy mouse, or the so-called *micromys minutus*. There, I learned that from him as well: what kind of mice there were, according to human books, and what they were called. I learned that I myself am an ordinary common mouse, *mus musculus*, which I had in fact suspected, for I have always regarded myself as a perfectly ordinary mouse. He, of course, was a »thoroughbred« mouse, or *mus spicilegus Petenyi* and it was because of this last, strange name that he had adopted the nickname Pet which was how he always signed himself and the only name we all knew him by.

Pet's misfortune, or perhaps his good fortune, was the fact that he came into the world exactly underneath the human so-called »City Library« and that his parents were very educated mice. In the basement of the City Library there was a store of books that people scarcely ever borrowed, and it turned out — something I could never understand since I knew that humans were the most perfect and wisest beings — that the books which were read the least were both the most valuable and the cleverest that the human race had ever created. And there, instead of their being in humans' rooms, they were within reach of the little paws of the young Pet, who had devoured the whole of rat and mouse literature at a very tender age and begun to search for other reading-matter. Having mastered catarabic, doggerel and some other languages he has recently launched with immense enthusiasm into the great human languages like Arabic and Greek, and various others. Do not ask me how a mouse, however »thorough-bred« can learn these languages, because it is not all that clear to me either. In his present flat under the City Library. I would always smile when

I caught sight of the apparatus, a kind of lift, that his father had made to help him turn over the pages of books that were far bigger and heavier than him; incidentally he continued to use the apparatus regularly afterwards as well.

In a word, Pet was a terribly educated mouse: he knew music, history, literature and philosophy like the tip of his own tail. He inspired not only respect, but also fear, at least in us mice. I had heard about him long before I met him and I trembled at the thought of meeting him, because rumour had it that he was conceited and had no time for the ignorant. I am naturally not a particularly educated mouse. I have studied our literature, particularly the works of the well-known Epimus Alexandrinus, our only classic, I liked the memoirs of our military commanders in the wars against the cats, I could stutter along in catese, and I could even read the famous lexicon about mice and their extermination. I had scarcely heard of Arabic or Greek ... And then one day along came Pet with the new printing machines and a carefully worked-out plan and instructions for obtaining the paper on which we were going to print »The Rat Herald«; we got it from two human so-called »Chemists«, but humans used it for quite other purposes.

I understood at once that Pet was not the least conceited; he was exceptionally amiable to us and I watched amazed as, his tail held high, he explained the same things over and over again to our typesetters. I ventured to make an occasional remark from time to time; Pet liked my comments, we began to talk — and became friends. Since then we met almost every day, he always brought some new book with him and read it aloud, translating it immediately into mouse. A new world that I had not even known existed until then opened up before me. I quickly got to hear people saying that I was conceited because I was friendly with that »stuck up« Pet. Then I understood those old stories about him and his pretensions. It must be that you can always tell when a mouse has brains and that's what irritates his fellows.

And so our friendship grew, so the days passed until that strange question one summer evening when I had just finished running off the last paper and despatched it.

»Would you like to be a rat?« Pet suddenly asked me, stiffening his tail, his big eyes flashing unusually brightly.

A rat? I was dumbfounded. »Why should I want to be a rat? I'm all right as I am, for cat's sake. In fact, what's the difference? It's true that rats are bigger and physically stronger. That's all. Why, we're the same race aren't we? You told me all about how humans put us all in the same category, yourself: we're all rodents, aren't we? Even dormice and voles...«

»Yes, we're all rodents,« Pet said thoughtfully, »but try saying that to rats; try telling them they're mice ... But in fact perhaps you would expressly *not* like to be a rat. For don't forget that many of our brothers would.«

»Rats are bigger and stronger,« I muttered hesitantly. »But they... they don't seem exactly bright. It would take a lot to make me want to be a rat after that... after all I've learned, all you've taught me.«

Pet smiled nervously, and his tail twitched gaily to right and left. »So,« he said, »you've got mice in the head as well now.«

»For the love of Cats, what have I got in my head? Mice?« I was astonished.

Pet began to explain what I did not realize with his customary relish. In an uninterrupted oration that lasted several hours he reviewed everything humans had ever written and said about mice and — rats. Until then I had only known that they distinguished us, disposed us, christened us with different names, but I had secretly thought that it was all only so that they could fight us more easily, exterminate us in the simplest and swiftest fashion. It appeared, however, that they were far more concerned with us than a mouse would have thought, they even referred to us in the course of their daily conversation.

»You'll hear Germans,« Pet expounded, »and the Germans are one of the great human nations — you'll hear them say »when a mouse is full, he does not care for food«, meaning by that a satisfied guest, someone hard to please; the English — that's another nation — say you are »quiet as a mouse« when they want to emphasize that you are going quietly; and the French — yet another nation — say of a frightened man that he would like to hide in a »mousehole«, while of something impossible and unrealizable they say »it never happened that a mouse built a nest in a cat's ear«, and so on and so on; not to mention everyday expressions such as »like a drowned rat«, »poor as a church mouse«, and so on. But my favorite saying is still »to have mice in the head« used by the Italians, the Germans and maybe some others as well. The Slavs say »to have bugs in the head«, the English »to have a bee in one's bonnet«, but naturally I prefer the one about mice. Because it is more accurate as well. That's what we're like.«

And then Pet explained in detail exactly what it meant to have mice in the head. The idea of the difference between mice and rats was, therefore, the 'mouse' that he had 'put in my head' and which would give me no peace now. A mouse in a mouse's head! I had to laugh.

But he went on explaining. My flesh began to creep a little at his words. He mentioned the fact that, whereas humans still seemed to like mice in a way (one of the most popular figures they had invented and who appeared in newspapers throughout the whole human world was the brave, clever and noble Mickey Mouse; in their natural histories they even wrote about us: »When we look calmly at a mouse we see that it is a very beautiful and engaging little creature...«), they did, however, have a very poor opinion of rats. In many languages rats were spies and turncoats and traitors; and the English for example say they »smell a rat« when they suspect something bad.

»But let's leave people for now. They are clever, of course; but still they are not capable of understanding our actual circumstances and relations. That's why I prefer to ask you, Sik, to tell me what you think of rats and why you wouldn't like to be one despite the fact that they're bigger and stronger?«

»Mice« in a mouse's head really are an awkward and uncomfortable thing. Little by little I began to understand Pet and I reflected on our way of life, while his gentle, intelligent eyes watched me as though I were reading in them the thoughts that teamed in my own brain. I knew roughly what Pet was thinking at that moment and that was this: »Rats are bigger and physically stronger than mice. In wars against the cats they are brave and daring and often even emerge the victors. In a way they are our benefactors because, while we mice only run away, they know how to defend themselves and they hold their own. Our physical strength cannot even be compared to theirs. Humans consider them among the most corrupt and underhand creatures in the animal kingdom. But so what? So what? Surely humans can be mistaken... It doesn't worry me that rats have more living space, more food — they're bigger, they need it. But, when it comes to knowledge... I am of course glad I am a mouse, but that doesn't prove anything. I daresay rats wouldn't want to be little, insignificant mice for anything, either...«

»You said that rats are stupider,« Pet smiled cunningly. »Didn't you?« »I said they aren't exactly bright... or educated,« I was confused, »but they don't need to be, for cat's sake. They're strong... Maybe only the small have to be clever, because they've no alternative...«

»But perhaps the stupid have no alternative but to be strong,« Pet smiled, twisting his tail round in all directions; and then he suddenly became terribly serious. »But listen to this; who decides how much cheese you will get for your work: rats. Who decides the payment for those sleepless nights I spent inventing this new printing press; who decides how many crumbs of cheese I'll get for the article I'm writing, who evaluates the whole of my work, effort, sacrifice, all my knowledge and ability: rats. Creatures who don't know how this machine works have to judge what reward I deserve for my invention, creatures who are incapable even of reading a newspaper have to judge what my article in that same newspaper is worth. Those who know nothing judge and evaluate the work of those who do know. That's the whole story of rats and mice. That half-wit human John Steinbeck wrote a story about mice and men to show the tragedy of a little individual human existence, not a mouse's but a human life. And — if I did not have to work from dawn to dusk to earn a bit of cheese rind — I would write a great tragedy about mice and rats. Because, listen carefully, Sik, rats are unhappy too. They are the victims of their physical strength, they know that strength is all they have and if they once lose it, they lose everything, even their name. And their real tragedy begins when they get involved in things that require not strength but intelligence. To quote...«

to me that Pet was perhaps a little mad; his calm eyes were now shining and flashing wildly. I did not sleep a wink the whole night long. I felt frightened and restless as in the days of the fiercest cats' attacks when no-one could sleep for terror. For a long time I could not understand what exactly was troubling me, until I suddenly realised that for the first time in my life I was proud of being a mouse. An ordinary, small, poor, insignificant mouse, but nonetheless — a mouse.

The days passed, the autumn nights became increasingly icy; I pulled out the tin lid and closed the opening of my dwelling at night. Pet and I met regularly, chattering about this and that. And I began myself to write in the »gossip« column of our »Rat Herald« and I felt more and more that it was wrong for us mice to write predominantly about rats since they were not capable of writing about themselves. Pet, who had changed somewhat of late, said that we, both rats and mice, were altogether too immature for journalism, that the main thing was to have enough bacon and cheese, and then we could hold forth about spiritual values. But in fact good old Pet did not really think that. He probably tried to think that way because he had fallen desperately in love. Her name was Gri. She was staggeringly beautiful. She was the main star, the main singer at our main rat variety theatre.

Gri was, naturally, a mouse. It is strange that even then I realised that it was natural. I had never noticed that a rat could be as charming, as attractive — if you insist — as our mice were. You would be quite right to say that as an ordinary *mus musculus* I am not even capable of judging the beauty of large rats, who, if the truth were known, would not have deigned to so much as glance at me. But it is a fact that even rats — my best illustration of this was our chief editor Epi — showed far more inclination towards delicate little female mice than towards their own kind. The afore-mentioned Epi, my editor, was a singularly striking rat — at least I thought so. He belonged to the family of rural rats (*epimys norvegicus*), as Pet informed me. Epi was not much cleverer than the rest of his kind, but he behaved arrogantly, haughtily, he talked loudly, shouted at his employees, launched self-confidently into conversations on topics he knew nothing whatever about — and with all this inspired everyone, including me, with an awesome respect. And there, that Epi was just crazy about the little mice who, no matter how chaste and honourable, used nevertheless to give in eventually: for after all Epi was a man of some standing, a friend of all the rat potentates, owner of several luxury flats filled with food and linked by secret passages where no cat nor any other enemy could penetrate. Epi could not make any headway in his wooing of the beautiful Gri; the manager of the variety theatre used to pursue her as well but with no success. The

his conviction that Gri was not only a beauty but also a mouse of refined taste and a true mouse's soul.

In the winter there was a big pan-rat competition for the best song of the year; the first prize was — a whole cheese. Although the songs — Pet called them »jingles« — were generally about rats, they were written, set to music and performed by mice, for only they knew anything about verse and song. The winner of the competition, however, was decided by a special committee composed of seven rats and one mouse; the mouse provided the expert assessment but the rats made the decision. And so, two days before the big contest — in which the lovely Gri was to appear as the main star — Pet came charging into my tin, his eyes ablaze.

»The time has come,« he kept saying monotonously. »I've sent a song in to the contest myself. And it's not an ordinary jingle, but a serious 'chanson'. Allegorical, in fact.«

»Allegor...?« I asked.

Pet explained patiently, but I could not grasp exactly what it was all about. I just waited impatiently for the day of the contest, particularly when I learned that Gri was going to sing Pet's song.

»I shall try just this once to offer our mouse and... rat world something: I shan't say worthwhile, for I'm not so conceited,« expounded Pet enthusiastically, »but new, different from what they're used to. I think mice are sufficiently mature by now for songs with real content and that they will know how to take something that isn't merely a meaningless, monosyllabic jingle. For me personally it will be a last attempt... perhaps I have underestimated the world I live in. I believe that the rats' days are numbered...«

I waited for the great day with feverish impatience, and with the same sentiments I entered the large hall of our theatre. I stood on one side for all the better places were taken. The rats had installed themselves in the front rows as usual, so that mice, although smaller, had to hoist themselves up onto their toes in order to see the stage. In the front row I caught sight of the great dark heads of my editor Epi and the theatre manager Ratt. The curtain went up, applause burst out and the great spectacle began. New song followed new song, and amazingly enough each one was immediately familiar to me as though I had heard it a hundred times already. Maybe there was an occasional one among them that would have appealed to me a year or two before; but now, when I had »mice in my head,« I was irritated by their pathetic content and titles: »Oh my darling Rat«, »I am heart and soul a rat«, »In my beloved rat country«, »One rat — six cats«... And then, suddenly, Gri appeared, greeted by the tumultuous approval of all present, looking more beautiful than ever, and announced in her wonderfully gruff voice the title of Pet's song: »Two great, tiny eagles.«

asked Mr. Ratt if it were at all possible to

receive them straight away, this very evening, since they had come on extremely important business.

Mrv and Kis were our most highly regarded critics. Mrv was a music critic (he had started as a singer, but had had to abandon his career because once when he was singing the rat anthem at a concert he had belched at the word »rats«), and Kis was an art expert (a failed sculptor who had given up when he made the tail on the monument to a distinguished rat personality a whole milimetre too short). It was significant that Mrv and Kis were mice — it would be hard to find rats capable of writing any kind of reviews — but of the so-called Balkan mouse family (*mus epimelas*); they are the biggest of all the mice and it is hard for the layman to distinguish them from small rats. It was obvious that their physical build had influenced their character. Being mice they were fairly intelligent and educated but, since they half belonged to the rat clan and had suffered their whole lives because they were not born rats, they were sufficiently brazen to have secured themselves positions immediately below the rats. In all honesty one must admit that the rats themselves despised them even more than they did mice because of their obsequiousness and obtrusiveness, but they were indispensable to them as informed advisers. Nevertheless I still did not subscribe to the view — I think Pet was inclined to believe it — that the reason Mrv and Kis were in such favour with potentates like Epi and Ratt was solely because of their physical defects: in recent years Mrv, the music critic, had begun to go deaf, and the art specialist Kis — was half-blind.

»Let them in,« said Ratt, »perhaps they know some new mouse jokes.«

The critics did not tell a single new joke, but what Mrv and Kis laid before the editor and the manager was more than those idle rats could possibly have expected. Mrv and Kis had studied the text of Pet's winning song carefully, very carefully as »they always did, in fact« and had discovered that the afore-mentioned Pet, while ostensibly talking about eagles, had been quite clearly and blatantly getting at the two of them. Mr. Epi and Mr. Ratt. »There's no doubt,« squaked Mrv at the top of his voice for, like all half-deaf mice, he thought no-one could hear him either, »there's no doubt that when he says 'his wounded right wing' he means, if you will permit me to mention it, your right ear, Mr. Ratt.« »And of the two of you he says, if you will forgive me: »these apparently proud, but from above just two tiny, tiny, specks of dust«. Should that be allowed? Should you let yourselves be insulted by an insignificant mouse that you feed, pay, help, pamper as if he were your own baby rat?«

And the editor's and the manager's fury erupted. Mrv and Kis used to say afterwards that at that moment Epi and Ratt really were like majestic eagles. They threw the critics out and called the servants.

In the early hours of the morning Pet was summoned before the rat court. The more cunning Epi had dissuaded Ratt from having Pet tried for insulting his superiors. »It would be too obvious, it would

provoke unnecessary trouble and it could even make us a laughing stock. We must think up some completely different reason for trying that impertinent wretch. It's high time we rid ourselves once and for all of that conceited insolent mouse,« he said.

There were evidently twenty five points in the accusation but I never succeeded in finding out exactly what such a comprehensive list comprised. People say that Pet was accused in the first place of high treason, that is of conspiring with cats, betraying our secret passage-ways to the enemy, and so on. I only know that the song about the eagles was not mentioned once. The president of the court was Epi's brother, and the president of the jury Ratt himself in person. The rat jury declared Pet guilty of all twenty five points of the accusation and he was condemned to exile from our community which was — together with the death sentence — the worst possible penalty for a mouse, for it meant swift and certain death: no other community would take him in, and in the meantime, quite alone, with no shelter, he would fall into the paws of the cats, or, made careless by hunger and exhaustion, he might fall victim to poison or cheese in a trap. Of course, not one of the point could be proven, but neither could they be refuted by counterevidence. In any case Pet had refused a lawyer and did not utter a single word throughout the entire trial.

»In actual fact,« Pet said in a fairly calm voice, »I was not particularly conscious of what was going on. I was depressed, naturally because I knew that all my illusions had been shattered... but I did not care about my own fate. I didn't even think about the fact that I had lost my dear Gri forever. I was simply sorry for our people: the clever, powerless mice and the strong, stupid rats. And as far as I myself was concerned, I tell you, I suddenly discovered after all how indestructible I was... Dangerously strong... I had never known how strong a mouse could be — as in that Aesop's fable about the mouse and the bull, you know. I suddenly realized that I was not alone. There was only Ratt's terrible muzzle in front of me and those black words: »treason«, »secret passages«, »cats« and I looked him in the eyes and felt that there was nothing else apart from that tyrannous power of his. Suddenly so many, so many leapt to assist me: Dante, Pascal, Plutarch, Spinoza, Plato — who could count them all? I looked him straight in the eye and the great Athenian thinker whispered in my ear:... »Because of his tyrannical power he must be more than ever dependent insecure, unjust, merciless, cruel, and he is necessarily himself unhappiest because of this, and so he makes those closest to him unhappy too.« I felt sorry for the wretched, lonely Ratt, who had not heard of Plato; I would have liked best to tear myself away from my guards and kiss him on his ugly nose. They read out the sentence and I knew that it was in fact he who was condemned: for when he expires, when that great brown rat dies, there will be nothing left after him. Plato and my other friends will still remain after me; and they will remain forever. And the only thing I could do was to forgive

him in my heart — I, a tiny *mus spicilegus* forgave the great *epimys rattus*»

Pet stopped talking and we looked at each other. His limbs were no longer trembling, his eyes were shining more brightly than ever. He was his old self again, with his tail held high and his noble bearing, clever, good old Pet. I asked him one more thing: had he really described the editor Epi and the manager Ratt in those eagles? Pet laughed from his heart: »It didn't even occur to me. I was only thinking of that kind of rat, cat — and even mouse, if you like (if mice could rule over some other creatures smaller than themselves). The fact that Epi and Ratt felt they had been attacked only means that that's how they see themselves... and that's really not my fault.« We parted and, of course, never saw each other again.

If you ever found a little mouse with a wonderful silvery coat and big gentle eyes one morning in a trap or poisoned in some corner, his tail a little bent, you would have done wrong if you laughed at his mouselike lack of caution and congratulated yourself on your own skill. I know for sure that Pet had learned about suicide from your books.

Many mouse years and wars with cats passed. Pet was virtually forgotten. Gri became Epi's mistress for a while, and then she too vanished without trace. A big trial was held against the editor Epi and the manager Ratt, and the accusation consisted of twenty five points: they were accused of fraud, blackmail bribery, theft of rat property; one clause even accused them of unjustly condemning Pet. They were both sentenced to death. Their places were taken by — other rats. Because of my friendship with Pet I was out of a job for a long time, but now I am working as a type-setter on the »Rat Herald« again.

In the evenings I leaf through the books he left me — and I think of how he continues to exist in them, and how there really is nothing left of Epi and Ratt — but unfortunately I cannot read them as I do not know all those languages. That is why I often peep into Pet's yellowing papers, in which, with his own little paw, he had made numerous notes from many human books. Luckily, he had translated most of them into mousedonian so I can read them. They are all, without exception, notes about — rats and mice. I do not know myself what he needed them for, still less what good they are to me, but still I enjoy reading them. A page every evening. Here is one that has come up this evening and that I particularly like. I think they are the words of some Russian writer:

»But once the thought occurred to me: why did the eagle after all »forgive« the mouse? This mouse was running across the road on some business of his own, the eagle set eyes on him, flew down, crushed him and... forgave him. Why did he »forgive« the mouse, and not the mouse him?«

And so, when I read through these notes of Pet's I seem to get mice in my head again. I remember Pet and his strength in the last

moments of his life, his ability to forgive the rats who had condemned him. I even feel stronger myself, more able. In a few days there will be the big pan-rat song contest. Our new star Kri, a wonderful little mouse, will be singing. I keep thinking I might have the nerve to write something and send it to the contest. In the last few days a little song has been running through my mind: almost as though I had no made it up, but I know it from somewhere. It is a song about two elephants crushing everything underfoot and thinking... never mind what they were thinking. I'll write it down and enter it.

Translated by Celia Williams

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