Canadian Jedis

A rookie enters the wild as part of Canada's elite survival program, to learn why some die in crisis, while others thrive.

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It is possible to die of embarrassment.

Since I first came across it, I haven't been able to get the story of Ken Killip out of my head. As told by Laurence Gonzales in *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why*, Killip was a capable man, a firefighter and outdoorsman, who embarked on a hiking trip with a friend in 1998 in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park. Sprawling over a quarter of a million acres, it is billed as a "living showcase of the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains."

Not far into the park, Killip became separated from his more experienced friend. "Killip was relying on his partner, whose name was York. And if you start a trip relying on a partner, you are in danger," Gonzales tells me over the phone from Chicago.

Immediately working against Killip in the bush was that he was good at his job. "He was a rule follower," Gonzales says. So Killip stuck to the plan, to what he thought was the route and tried to catch his friend.

In a crisis, emotion comes first: panic, embarrassment, fear. The mind then tries to quell those emotions by propelling the body into action, bringing on the classic fight or flight response. "If I just get unlost," Gonzales explains in this case, "I won't be embarrassed."

So Killip kept moving: It usually makes matters worse, but when lost, most people travel between 3 and 8 kilometres, often going in circles.

Shame is a powerful motivator. "There is a tremendous drive among all primates toward status," Gonzales says. "In primates, the loss of status can be fatal. Your survival depends on your position in the group and knowing your place in the group.

"The reason why men don't ask for directions is because it's important to appear to know what you're doing. If a chimpanzee didn't act like it knew what it was doing, others would hurt him and possibly kill him.

"Failure to do the right thing is always a cause of a loss of status."

Killip could've done the right thing: Stop doing anything. Then light a fire, find shelter, stay put and wait for help. He had everything he needed to do just that.

He did the opposite. Killip, believing that as a firefighter he was an example for others, did what had been ingrained: Never light a fire in a park. Shivering overnight, and then tramping through the wilderness the next day, he next tried to climb a hill to "see" a way out. Falling with the effort, he sprained both ankles and suffered severe ligament damage to his knees.

But Killip still wouldn't keep still. Irrational and injured, he tried to climb a 12,000 foot mountain, again to get a sense of his surroundings. Unable to complete the task, he grabbed onto a tree, holding on to keep from falling, passing in and out of consciousness.

Finally, two days into the wild, he stayed put. He made camp. Killip would spend five days in the bush, coming close to death, losing 30 pounds. A chance helicopter saw his blue parka hanging on a tree and that's how his life was saved.

Days after my own return from the bush, in which I spent time with members of the country's elite wilderness survival program, I mull over Killip's fate one more time. I know now that if I was in his fix, I'd need more luck to live than he ever had.

Survival instincts, survival training, are tricky things. Some people intrinsically have what it takes to survive. Some can learn. Some never get it, and some of those will pay an incredible price.

Would you survive?

That question can haunt you. Over the past few years, as a hobby, I've read more than 60 books on the subject, studied countless news stories on the wires, spent dinner parties sipping wine and debating while surrounded by warm fireplaces and friendly faces, whether we'd live or die.

One of the things I've learned is that survivalists teach what plants you should eat in the bush, but not what you shouldn't. It's so you never confuse the two in a delirious state — you only eat something if you *know* it's safe.

But ask Chris McCandless if that always works. Chronicled in Jon Krakauer's *Into The Wild*, the young adventurer died in Alaska after eating the wrong part of a plant he believed was safe.

That's the problem inherent to much survival writing: Stories are generally told by real survivors or by people you'd expect to live. We can't ask the dead what they did wrong and how they felt about it. A few stranded souls have left journals behind (McCandless included). But we'll never hear them talk.

Yet we learn from doing the wrong things as often as the right. So when offered a chance to attend a real survival outing set up by Laurentian University in Sudbury, even though I'm a neophyte in the bush, I agreed immediately — despite that I would be 10 years older than the students and had gone soft from a decade of city living. As Ken Killip can attest, it's not often a potential corpse can tell a story.

From your couch, Killip's behaviour may seem nonsensical, absurd even. But illogical actions are consistent with how most people behave — as many as 9 out of 10 — in a crisis, Gonzales notes in his book. Think of the number of people in the World Trade Center who went up the stairs.

In studying survival situations, the most consistent elements are the contradictions in every case and from case to case. In Killip's case, his injuries helped: They made him sit still. And while the trained firefighter struggled mightily in his ultimate test, this August, three Mexican fishermen were found alive, adrift in a boat, having spent nine months at sea.

"Do you agree that some things you must learn by doing?" Gino Ferri asks me over lunch in Orangeville.

Ferri is the head of Survival in the Bush Inc., which he has operated out of Hanover, Ont. since 1977. A legend among survivalists, Ferri argues that casually mulling over your possible fate in a crisis is like asking someone to become a mechanic without letting him drive a car.

Yet we all have had ample opportunity to muse. 9/11 in 2001 and the ensuing War on Terror, the Blackout of 2003, Hurricane Katrina ... these events have contributed to a collective thinking about how we would handle survival situations.

Survival movies are a constant: Recent flicks include *World Trade Center* and *Snakes on a Plane*. There are offbeat hits on TV in OLN's *Survivorman* and *Mantracker*, mainstream ones in ABC's *Lost* and, of course, CBS's *Survivor*. Documentaries featuring modern adventurers like Tim Treadwell and Joe Simpson have had success. In books, the genre has maintained its own shelf since Krakauer invigorated it nearly a decade ago with *Into Thin Air*, his take on a doomed Everest expedition.

Study them all you want. Ferri argues it's for naught. He contends that television, literature and in-class instruction — modern society's primary methods of learning — are poorly equipped to encapsulate survival factors like boredom, shame, loneliness and stress.

Yet the more you study, the more the questions multiply. *Touching the Void*'s Joe Simpson can crawl down a mountain with a broken leg. Could I handle that? *Survivorman* Les Stroud can live for a week in the wilderness. He makes it look easy, is it hard? In the wilderness

movie, *The Edge*, Anthony Hopkins' character keeps repeating, "What one man can do, another can do." Is that true?

The course, which started at Laurentian in the '80s, is deliberately demanding. The bulk of it consists of spending six days in the bush. Not seven or more. Six.

Held mid-August, the class is done in prime blueberry season, meaning there will indeed be bears about. That's one concern among many. "It's just little things that chip away at you in a lot of places," explains student Victoria "Tori" L., the only one in dreadlocks.

You sleep on the ground. There's no toilet paper. No tents for protection when the pitchblack dark closes in or the rain comes down. No sleeping bags for warmth, just spooning with strangers. No matches. No DEET to keep insects away.

"I scratched myself raw," Caroline "Coop" C. would later admit.

Students bring knives, a couple of changes of clothes, a wool blanket, a tarp or two, a tin can. Water is purified by boiling, fires started with tinder and flint. Each has a dozen or so classmates in the same boat and almost a week in the wild to get through.

As the days pass, instructors take away the meagre belongings everyone was initially allowed to bring, cranking up the tension as it would in a real survival situation. All this happens while bodies decline through a lack of nutrition and sleep, isolation, boredom and fear, plus chances are, some combination of diarrhea and vomitting.

For the final 24 hours, all food is taken away. Students make do with what they can obtain from the forest around them. Snakes, easy to catch, are a common meal. Sun-dried leeches too.

The best thrive. Strong members of the program finish the class with nothing but the clothes on their back. They're often missing even the pant-legs on the zip-off cargos they walked in with.

It's sometimes sneered at as a "camping degree" but around 150 first-year students apply for the school's elite Outdoor Adventure Leadership Program each year. Fifteen are chosen, and the mandatory Wilderness Survival class kicks off second year. Those who excel are future leaders in the bush, often becoming guides and search and rescue team members.

"Not the best in the province," corrects Roger Couture, Laurentian's director of the school of human kinetics, about the program. "The country."

This year, there are four male students and nine female in the class, continuing a trend that has seen women dominate the class's numbers.

"Women tend to be stronger when faced with crises," Ferri explains. "They're able to cope much better than men. The irony is, look at the leaders — they tend to be men."

In the mix are tall and athletic types like Gavin H. and Ashley S.. More than a few are giggly girls, like Coop and Tori. There's the odd wanderer, like Mathieu C., who spent part of his summer hitchhiking through Saskatchewan, and several quieter types like Haley K., who wants to be a writer. The oldest is 23, the youngest 19.

The class goes into the bush on a Monday, staying until Saturday. "Most people break by Wednesday," assures head instructor Jennifer Khan, a former member of Greenpeace. There are pictures of past years to prove it, distraught, ghastly-looking students blanketed in darkness, trees looming in the flash, weeping in fear as if they're auditioning for the *Blair Witch Project*. "It usually happens at night," explains the 40-year-old Khan.

Now, *The Edge* was about Hopkins and Alec Baldwin fighting Bart the Bear and each other over who got to sleep with Elle Macpherson. Packing for the Wilderness Survival class, overseen by Ferri although no longer taught by him, I accept that meeting the bear is more likely.

After a good cop/bad cop grilling in which my capabilities, mental and physical, are assessed, Ferri and Khan declare me an armchair outdoorsman, despite some protests I make of being an avid hiker. Khan tells me I will likely dehydrate.

To prepare, I get a few books, a gear list, flint and steel, and they tell me to let myself get eaten by bugs, to sleep outside on my deck, to stop using any kind of perfumed soap or deodorant, to strengthen my hands. I spend hundreds of dollars getting gear, did as I was told to prep, bought what I believed I'd need. I thought I was ready.

I lasted two days.

Gino Ferri has done 29 in a row.

"Your survival kit is always with you," he says, pointing at his head, after I've returned. "Your brain."

He was born to poor parents in Italy: "I remember they would make pasta for us as kids for supper, and theirs would be the pasta water." Raised in Canada, Ferri has a PhD. in psychology, which he says he only bothered with so people would take him seriously. He's analyzed more than 2,000 survival cases, authored the 1989 book *The Psychology of Wilderness Survival*.

He went into the wild in late July in 1972, 150 kilometres northwest of Thunder Bay. He was 27, a proven outdoorsman, at his physical peak, seeking to understand what a prolonged survival experience would be like. He didn't have much on him, a knife, a tin can. He built his shelter, scavenged food and water. He made a fire-bow, but at one point it took him 7-1/2 hours to get a blaze going.

Today, 61 but still trim and fit, his callused hands and feet, leathery skin, deep tan and steely grey hair in his beard and moustache reveal pieces of a man who has spent his life outside. "In Northern Ontario, the day can be 25 degrees, and at night go right down to 4 or 5," he says, slowly, remembering.

He divides the time he spent into three. He handled six days without much trouble. But after that crucial seventh day, he went downhill quickly — wincing visibly at the memory, he gestures with his hands, pantomimes a flatline, then a steep descent. Feeling despondent, he had to force himself to drink water, push himself to do the bare minimum to stay alive.

By Ferri's 20th day in the wild, images of death overtook all others. In his mind, the forest had turned into a tomb: *his* tomb. He hallucinated plants spoke to him. "`How's the day going?' `How are the bugs?' Crap like that. Nothing profound. I didn't discover how to eliminate poverty on a global plane."

Hallucinations are common. Ferri once interviewed a rescued man who described how a beaver, dressed in suit and tie and holding a briefcase, had tried to sell him some swamp land. "But I didn't buy the land," Ferri says the still-delirious survivor told him from his hospital bed. "Because I knew that swamp land wasn't a good investment."

By Ferri's 28th day in the wilderness, "in my log book, looking back, I was writing things that were insane," he says. "I knew from a very primitive level, that this was it."

Today, the charismatic Ferri has made his life teaching anyone who wants to learn about the outdoors. But on his 29th day in the bush, having gone from 175 to 146 pounds, only able to move for a few minutes at a time, it was one of his own mentors who taught him when to quit. A man named Bill Parker, who had been observing Ferri in the wild, hauled him out.

"Until a person experiences it, they just don't get it," Ferri says. "If left on their own, they just don't survive."

In my case, Khan was right: Without feeling thirsty and despite drinking regularly, by late afternoon on Tuesday, a tight headache and stressed stomach signal dehydration has set in. We're overlooking a lake, a couple of clicks out of the town of Espanola, 45 minutes out of Sudbury, only hiking for a few minutes off the highway. Surrounded by water, I'm uncomfortable — I can't swim a stroke. For a tent, I've got a tarp hanging from a string. The instructors are together, the students in groups they've picked themselves.

The air is crisp, the mosquitoes frequent, being busy is constant. Up at 6 a.m., instructors put everyone to work building traps, planning and giving presentations, simulating search and rescue operations, teaching orienteering.

`Not the best in the province: The country.' Laurentian professor Roger Couture, about the school's Outdoor Adventure Leadership Program

`We didn't see it, that's why it was scary. Then it started breathing rrr, rrr — and we thought, "Oh, that's a bear."" *Laurentian student Warren C.*

Feeling tired and ill, to get myself out of the fix, I light a fire, sparking flint and steel. Already, I'm a wreck. But I don't want to ask for help. I feel increasingly alienated from the much younger students, and the instructors, eminently more capable. Embarrassed and proud, I am painfully aware that I'm out of my element.

Going in, I knew enough about the outdoors to be aware I hadn't fully prepared. I had worked nearly 80 hours the week previous, taking one day off in 12. I was overconfident, bragging to others of my adventure, but inwardly unsure. And once I realized I had underestimated the shit I've got myself into, I can't let that go.

"You journalists always do that," Ferri tells me after. "You over-analyse everything. Relax!" But in the bush, I can't. It takes nearly two hours to get my fire going and for the water to boil in the too-large tin cans I've brought. By the time I'm done it's too hot to drink anyway. In depriving myself of fluid throughout, and inhaling too much smoke, I only make my symptoms worse.

Or so I think. After it's over, I'm told by paramedic Dan Kieffer of Survival in the Bush Inc. that I likely had too much Gatorade in my system. It's a survival contradiction: You need electrolytes to avoid dehydration, and sport drinks have lots. But overload and you end up with too many — and balancing them out takes a tremendous amount of water. I had none.

Nauseous, weak in the knees, feeling alone among strangers and increasingly stressed with night closing, the point slams home: This could easily happen to any other city slicker who wandered off his favourite trail.

I shove aside my macho feelings of "toughing it out" and get out. Later, unable to get my stomach to relax, I vomit in my hotel room. I can't help mulling over a talk I gave the students earlier in the day about survivor cannibalism. Had I been in *Alive*, I would've been food.

"If you had you stayed, you would have declined quickly," confirms Khan, a 20-year veteran of the wilderness.

Two days in, I wasn't the only one having problems: Khan says six of 13 students are dehydrated as well. Their lethargy and dead eyes are a giveaway to her own, which remain bright and lively.

A major lesson is that survival, especially wilderness survival, isn't about overcoming heroic and daunting obstacles. It's about grappling with a million minor ones.

Ferri says seven of these are key: pain, cold, thirst, hunger, fatigue, boredom and loneliness. Each of these works to harm a survivor in the same way that the "trap" in the NHL slows down a fast skater. Each mosquito bite, headache, sunburn, and stomach cramp is a stick that can hook you to the ground, impede progress, frustrate your attempts to act rationally.

Dehydration is the most pressing — and sneaky — concern. Your body can last a month without food, but no one lives a week without water. Lose just 10 per cent of your body water, and you're mentally and physically compromised, according to Peter Stark's *Last Breath: The Limits of Adventure*. Lose 12 per cent and you will slide into shock.

My symptoms were mild by bush standards, mere annoyances compared to what can happen. Daniel Curley is a 17-year-old high school student, but he's veteran enough to act as a field assistant to this class. He had been in the wild for several days on his own before anyone even arrived.

On his first day, he accidentally cut his thumb down to the bone. Taxed by the injury, Curley hit the second stage of dehydration the day before I left — vomitting — and also asked to be taken out.

Later, he tells me he went two days without drinking anything. Even though he knew absolutely he had to have water? "Pretty much, yeah," he shrugs. He can't explain it either.

It is repeated in the Laurentian class so frequently it's annoying: Your body can process a cup of water every 15 minutes: Drink up! But as the class also teaches, you can tell people things all you want and it still won't ever hit home.

Ferri makes the case in *The Psychology of Wilderness Survival* that cultures which thrive in the wild and those dominating modern-day society have their values absolutely opposed.

In the wilderness, the hunter is the most respected individual and the cook is low on the social scale. In urban settings, the chef is the sophisticate, while the person who grows or gathers the food, is a peasant, a boor, an anachronism.

Society values comfort and intellect, prettiness over production, cleverness over wisdom, thought over ability. The wild rewards the capable, adaptable and the instinctive.

My values and abilities, which have allowed me to make a comfortable living in an urban environment, include focus, intensity, independence and the ability to push myself past reasonable limits. A cynic and a joker, isolated on a farm growing up, I've remained a loner into adulthood. I'm often called "tough" because I motivate myself with negative reinforcement: "Work harder! Don't be lazy! Quit being such a goddamn idiot, do it right!" Creative, more talented than capable, I've over-relied on a few skills to get by in life.

"You're also extremely hard on yourself," Khan tells me, often.

These attributes can work in your favour in society. They are only destructive in the bush. Focus on building a fire and you won't notice the storm clouds rolling in overhead. Independence spirals into isolation and loneliness. Intensity wastes energy and promotes panic. Negative thoughts don't inspire action, but they will help you give up. Combined, everything brings on depression, the desire to flee, feelings of inferiority and helplessness. The civilized world lays traps for us. As society gets more complicated — who knows how an iPod actually functions? — people work to avoid real adversity. "Your world becomes increasingly complex, and you feel you can't understand it," Gonzales says. "And so you give up trying to understand it. You reach a state what psychiatrists call `a learned helplessness.'"

Helplessness is the opposite of what survival classes teach. Accordingly, the methods common to every high school aren't used. Schools teach you to think. But in crisis, thinking takes too long. Survivors react instinctively. And the way to develop instinct is by doing.

Schoolrooms insist students "keep their eyes on the front of the class," and set up the teacher as "one who must always be obeyed." In the bush, Khan and her fellow instructor Kevin Good turn that on its head.

On the first day of class at the Laurentian campus, student Carmen Scott tells Khan that she has placed absolute trust in her. But let's consider that. Do you always trust the leader? Not questioning the man in charge caused every one of John Franklin's men to die in the Arctic, searching for the Northwest Passage. However, absolute trust in the boss allowed every one of Ernest Shackleton's men to survive the South Pole.

"It took a long time for me to realize Jen (Khan) was trying to stress us out," Tori says after the class is over.

Later that first day, introduced as a "junior field assistant," I become an unknowing guinea pig in an exercise designed to teach the perils of blind faith in the boss. After "Coop" is blindfolded and pushed off a desk only to be caught by her peers, I'm told to remove my socks and shoes. I'm blindfolded and led outside. Unbeknownst to me, the class follows.

Walking barefoot over a lawn covered in fresh goose shit, I'm told to pull my shirt over my head, exposing my upper body. At the same time, without me knowing, female students are instructed to laugh. I'm ordered to get on my hands and knees and crawl in the shit. The laughter continues.

I'm led onto a desk placed there beforehand, turned around and shoved off. The laughter doesn't stop. I can't help it and flinch as I fall — although the students hold up their end and catch me.

I take the blindfold off, and I'm surprised at the looks on their faces. They're not really laughing, like my fellow football players who hazed me in high school more than a decade ago. The students are anxious; their faces show only concern, fear or sympathy.

Not that they did anything to help me. Not that I refused to be humiliated.

"The students were uncomfortable with what was happening," Khan explains later. "They knew it was wrong. But they didn't stop it.

"Think if it was a rape," she adds quietly. "They know now."

Days later, in the bush and up on a rock shelf overlooking a lake, the class sits, exposed to the elements. Good, a man with a face like a teddy bear that belies his skill in search and rescue, is at front, encouraging the students to always "look around."

Eventually, he still has to point out clouds rolling in and inconsistent wind patterns — unstable weather's ahead. He forces the students to make the decision: "Do you think we should stay in this spot?" The answer is no. The students elect to move closer to shelter.

Accountability, leadership, decision making, adaptability, awareness, sensitivity, thinking, enjoyment, balance, empathy, peace: Survivors specialize in these traits. The Laurentian students aren't just being taught "hard skills" — how to build traps, spears, recognize bear scat, edible plants and trees. They're learning "soft skills" through adversity, how to become capable of adapting and reacting.

"You can't teach it," Ferri says of the survival instinct. "But you can learn it."

If Ken Killip hangs in there to be found, willing students can learn to survive, pros like Gino Ferri can handle a month in the bush, and I'm dead man walking in the wilderness, is there any pattern to who survives?

"The short answer is not that short of an answer," Gonzales says. "It's probably genetics. But it's more than genetics. It's the type of challenges and successes you had growing up that essentially created your emotional state. Training can work. But it depends on who you are going in, and how aware you are, of who you are." One trend is clear: experience dealing with adversity plays a role. Twenty-year-old Caroline "Coop" C., all giggles and curly brown hair when you meet her, may not fit what you think a survivor looks like at first blush. But she found a release in wilderness experiences after her mother was paralysed when she was just two years old.

"Being surrounded by positive attitudes makes all the difference," Coop says with a grin.

Intuition, instinct and action are vital. The night I left, with night so black you couldn't see your hand in front of your face, the students were left to fend for themselves. First, a loud snuffling was heard across the lake. Warren C., Gavin H., Mathieu C. and field assistant Drew S. laughed it off, thinking it was the instructors playing a trick. Then they heard a splash and the unmistakable sound of a large animal swimming dead at them. "We didn't see it, that's why it was scary," explains 19-year-old Warren, who looks more like a surfer than a survivor. "Then it started breathing — rrr, rrr — and we thought, `Oh, that's a bear.'"

No one panicked. Reacting to the situation, they grabbed weapons, mostly just long sticks. "We armed ourselves," Warren says. "And once we did that, we were okay."

Happily, so was the bear, who trundled off into the bush.

On the last night — the survival situation — the students were paired with their most unlikely partners. Tori and Ashley were put together, the two who had the hardest time starting a fire. It took them almost all day. But when they did, everyone who heard the screams of success applauded. "We just rode that high for the rest of the day," Tori says.

Later that night, one student — Karmen H., who had never entered the bush before — had a mild panic attack, realizing she was being crushed by her two partners, spooning with her for warmth in their handmade tent of bush and sticks.

But this year, in contrast to others, that was as bad as it got. In what was one of the strongest classes the program has seen, no one had to be removed, even if Warren admits it was brutal. By the end of the survival outing, "I couldn't think," he says. "I couldn't speak sentences."

But he survived. Others thrived. Although Saturday was the most stressful in terms of tools to work with and the lack of food, "I had the most fun and the best sleep that day," the mild-mannered Haley says.

Curiously, at a celebration buffet held after six days in the bush, the students each order chocolate milk, turning to encourage each other, "Chocolate milk?" They nod and pass it on. Asked why, they can't explain. "Who doesn't like chocolate milk?" Warren shrugs.

It could just be a coincidence. But they've selected what may be the best possible liquid to put into their bodies. Recent studies have shown that chocolate milk has a near-ideal ratio for re-energizing muscles after long periods of physical activity. These students don't need science to tell them that though. They just like chocolate milk.

Although they had superficial differences, the 13 were more alike than unalike. "It's hard to put your finger on it," says professor Stephen Ritchie, co-ordinator of the outdoor leadership program at Laurentian. "But you know it when you see it."

While there was a lot of laughter, there was little actual joke-telling. Smart aleck behaviour was absent, with no world-weariness or woe-is-me cynicism. Although outgoing, none were overly clever, witty or quick. Instead, they were patient and attentive. They were polite, respectful, sincere, bright-eyed and healthy, relaxed and slow-moving. Each seemed older than they were. To pick one word: Professional.

"They sound like Jedi," a colleague offers. It's as fair a summation as any.

Does that mean all of them are survivors? Does that mean the rest of us are doomed? Not at all.

Remember, those five random Mexican fishermen who wound up in a boat together? Three lived nine months. If the story's true, how'd they do that?

Well, it's a good bet this wasn't each man's first bout with adversity, so they were able to remain calm. Capable, each provided food, grabbing at birds landing on the boat, pulling up fish from the sea. Resourceful, they used what they had, stretching a tarp to catch rainwater to drink. Bonding, they prayed together, fighting off loneliness. Prepared, one had survival training beforehand. And they read from a Bible one happened to have: survivors subconsciously prepare for the worst. They staved off boredom, and in occupying their minds, kept depression at bay.

In the end, it never matters how. At some point, they decided to live. So they did.

Gonzales is ultimately optimistic we all can learn more about withstanding crisis. "While it's true that not everyone will survive, knowing that some will rise to the occasion, helps."

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