

# FANGBOY

by  
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*Fangboy is not a children's book, but it's sort of inspired by the books I loved as a kid. So I'm dedicating it to the following authors who would probably rather not be associated with this novel, even if they're deceased:*

*Beverly Cleary*

*Judy Blume*

*Donald J. Sobal*

*John Dennis Fitzgerald*

*Helen Hill & Violet Maxwell*

*Mary Stolz*

Super-special thanks to Tod Clark, Terri Garey, Michael McBride, Rick Moschgat, Elizabeth White, and Rhonda Wilson for their feedback even the feedback that wasn't "You are AWESOME!!!"

Though the story is probably apocryphal, it is said that Fangboy twisted around in the womb and emerged from his mother mouth-first, with his glistening sharp teeth the first sight of him to greet the world. Neighbors did indeed report a horrified scream from the midwife, who ran out into the front yard shouting something barely intelligible that might have been "*The devil is here! The devil is here!*" But when speaking of this incident years later, at least two of the neighbors insisted that the midwife clawed her own eyes out in an attempt to un-see what she had witnessed, which is incorrect and easily verified, so it's entirely possible that the baby came out in the standard manner.

What is certain is that Nathan Pepper was born with a mouth full of long, pointed teeth. Apart from that, he was an ordinary baby: exactly twenty inches long, eight pounds and three ounces in weight with beautiful blue eyes and a few thin strands of black hair.

His mother, Ellen, cooed and cradled the newborn against her chest, while her husband Samuel trembled and wondered if he had fathered an abomination. What kind of child was born with teeth like that, much less these ghastly pointed ones? If Samuel weren't so certain of his wife's immediate attachment to their new son, he might have taken the boy out behind the house and quickly done away with him, but Ellen seemed to take no notice of the abnormality, and Samuel pretended to agree that he was the most adorable baby ever conceived.

Not much later, though, she did acknowledge the teeth. "It is strange," she said, peering into Nathan's mouth as he cried. "Has there been anything like this on your side of the family?"

"God, no."

"Hmmm. It's nothing that I expected, that's for sure. I don't think I'll be breastfeeding him."

"So...do you think..." Samuel trailed off, not quite certain how to phrase this. "Should we...you know...keep it?"

Ellen gaped at him. "What are you saying?"

"We don't even know if it's human."

"Of course he's human! You saw him pop right out of me, and I'm certainly human. Don't you dare refer to him as 'it' ever again. We can't possibly be the first parents this has ever happened to. Children are born with physical quirks all the time. Do you remember my second cousin, Lizzie?"

"Vaguely."

"She has six toes on her right foot."

"Really?" Samuel seemed to recall that one of Lizzie's shoes was larger than the other, but he hadn't considered that there might have been a sixth toe under there. "Why didn't they just cut the extra one off?"

"Because you don't *do* that sort of thing. And we're definitely not going to pluck our son's teeth out." She glared at Samuel and gently ran her fingers over Nathan's head. "Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll take care of you forever."

That evening, the doctor arrived. Dr. Thompson, the only physician in the village of Hammerhead Lost, was a portly and jolly man who always said "You can't rush medical care." Though many of his patients debated this concept, they did concede that nobody had ever died while waiting for Dr. Thompson to make a house call.

“Oh, he’s a handsome little fellow,” said the doctor, giving Nathan an affectionate tap on the nose. ~~“Sometimes even with attractive parents such as yourselves the baby doesn’t come out looking good as it might, so well done.”~~

“Thank you,” said Ellen.

Nathan yawned, exposing his teeth.

Dr. Thompson’s first reaction was to flinch in shock, a reaction of which he was not proud. He tried to present a completely professional front whenever he was with a patient, and it was unseemly for a physician to flinch at a deformity.

His second thought was that it was a joke; that Samuel and Ellen had outfitted their newborn with a set of false teeth to startle him and amuse themselves. Dr. Thompson did not approve of this at all. Not because he objected to being the butt of a gag—he could laugh as well as the next man—but because it presented a choking hazard for the infant.

But the new parents did not so much as crack a smile. In fact, Samuel looked more serious and grim than Dr. Thompson had ever seen him. Which led to his third thought: cross-breeding. Somehow the genetic material of a piranha had been combined with a human, resulting in the disconcerting sight before him.

He quickly rejected the third thought and moved on to the fourth, which was that he’d merely imagined it. But, no, the baby’s mouth was still open, and it was still full of sharp teeth. Dr. Thompson had no fifth thought on the matter, and thus resorted to speaking.

“HmMMM,” he said.

“Have you ever seen such a thing?” Samuel asked. “I mean, is that a known medical condition?”

Dr. Thompson shook his head. He touched one of the teeth with his index finger—gently but quickly, as if the baby might try to bite it off. The teeth were larger than those of an adult and V-shaped. They were like something out of a terrifying nightmare from which you would awake screaming and drenched in cold sweat, though Dr. Thompson felt it best not to phrase his opinion in quite that manner.

“I’m not going to lie to you,” he said. “It is the least typical infant mouth I’ve ever seen.”

“Is it dangerous?” asked Ellen.

“It certainly could be. Have you ever accidentally bitten your tongue? It hurts, doesn’t it? Well, imagine biting your tongue with teeth like those. Unpleasant.”

Ellen cringed.

“As far as danger to others,” Dr. Thompson continued, “do I think he’ll try to take a bite out of your neck? No. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t exercise caution when you’re burping him, but I see no reason to live in fear of your son.”

“Can they be fixed?” Samuel asked.

“I’m no dentist,” Dr. Thompson admitted, although that hadn’t stopped him from practicing dentistry on six different occasions in the past. “I will say from experience that it’s much easier to sharpen teeth than to un-sharpen them. They could all be capped, I suppose, but it would be an expensive procedure.”

“What about simply removing them?”

“Samuel!” Ellen held the baby closer, as if her husband might try to snatch their child out of her hands. “We’re not going to pull out his teeth! He was born this way for a reason.”

“To instill terror?”

“I don’t love him any less, and you’re not going to, either. We’re going to raise him just as we planned. Maybe with a small adjustment or two, obviously, but he’s going to live a normal life.”

Samuel turned to Dr. Thompson. “You’d mentioned his tongue. What if he *does* bite it off? We could have a child with scary teeth and no tongue. He won’t be able to speak; he’ll just make moaning sounds, which will do nothing to dispel the idea that he’s a monster! I’m not suggesting that we pick up a rock and start knocking them out, but there must be some kind of delicate surgery that can be performed.”

Dr. Thompson furrowed his brow. Logically, he agreed with Samuel. The boy couldn’t possibly have a normal childhood with teeth like that. On the other hand, Dr. Thompson had learned that it was always best to side with brand-new mothers in all issues involving anything of any type.

“Oh, little Nathan will be fine,” Dr. Thompson said, packing away his stethoscope. “It’s the way of the world for new parents to worry, but I very much doubt that he’ll be a danger to himself or those around him. If you have any problems, just give me a call.”

He did not leave quickly, but neither did he dawdle.

As Dr. Thompson drove home, he wondered if this might be an opportunity to get himself into one of the reputable medical journals. He could monitor the progress of the Boy With Creature Teeth, write up his observations, and finally earn the jealousy of his peers.

But would that be exploitive?

Yes, probably.

Dr. Thompson liked to drink, smoke, gamble, and indulge in the pleasures of women without emotional involvement and without sharing news of these encounters with his wife. He also took naps at inappropriate times, engaged in the occasional bit of minor fraud, and once, back in his youth, there’d been a regrettable instance of cold-blooded murder. But to exploit an innocent baby, even for “science,” just felt wrong to him. Not to mention that—at least by the usual standards for the medical profession—he was an extremely lazy man. A full study of a medical marvel seemed like a lot of work.

So instead he drove to his second-favorite bar, had a few beers, played a game of darts, and then went to treat Mrs. Preston’s infected leg.

Meanwhile, Samuel was conflicted. It was, after all, his own flesh and blood. You weren’t supposed to be repulsed by your own son. And the way the child now slept, with his mouth mercifully closed, Samuel almost felt the stirrings of parental adoration that he should have been feeling since the moment of birth.

“You’re right,” he told Ellen. “He is a beautiful child. And for as long as we live, nobody will ever hurt him.”

Samuel decided that he wasn’t going to take any action. Maybe the teeth would fall out on their own overnight.

\* \* \*

The teeth did not fall out on their own, but nor had they grown larger during the night. This was a great relief to Samuel, since he had dreamt of peering into the crib to see Nathan’s head elongated six times its previous size to accommodate his rapidly growing teeth. Compared to that, the reality of the situation wasn’t so bad.

By the end of the day, though he couldn’t honestly say that he was *used* to the teeth, the sight of them no longer horrified him. Nathan seemed to be healthy and happy. While Samuel had no plans to impregnate his wife a second time, for fear of what might come out next (antennae?), he made peace

with the appearance of his current child.

~~“What should we tell everybody?” he asked, as Ellen nursed the baby with a reinforced bottle.~~

“What do you mean?”

“Should we prepare them? Send out pictures? Give people a chance to react in the privacy of their own homes before they see Nathan in person?”

Ellen frowned. “Maybe we should just send a mouth-closed picture and warn people that he’s ‘different.’”

“‘Different’ could mean a redhead. We should be unsubtle.”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, if we…” Samuel started to say *“Look, if we aren’t going to get rid of him and we aren’t going to hide him in the basement for his entire life, then we should just send the pictures out there and get it over with,”* but decided not to. “I think that if people are going to scream, it would help if they did it someplace else.”

“Nobody will scream.”

“I can think of at least four people who are likely to scream.”

“I just feel that when they see him in person, see his sweetness and innocence, see his adorable dimples, then the other thing won’t carry quite as much of a shock.”

“We’ve got to cushion the blow *somehow*,” Samuel insisted. “I understand that we both love him, but he’s a disturbing sight! We’re lucky there isn’t a whole line of reporters outside of our house.” Samuel glanced at the front window to confirm that there actually wasn’t, then continued. “What we should do is make him sound *worse* than he really is. Maybe imply that he has a forked tongue or a mouth on his stomach. Do something that makes people sigh with relief when it’s only sharp teeth.”

“There is absolutely no way I’m going to spread rumors that our son has a mouth on his stomach.”

“Okay, yes, you’re right, that was a poor suggestion, but what if we—?”

“My parents will be here in three days,” said Ellen. “We’ll test their reaction.”

Samuel sighed, then nodded. “That sounds fair.”

\* \* \*

Ellen’s comment that nobody would scream turned out to be incorrect.

“He’s a monster!” screamed Helena, Ellen’s mother, clutching at her heart. “A horrible beast!”

Helena had been polite at first. A smile, a coo, a barely audible whisper of congratulations, and then, after a moment of rather distinct lip-twitching, she proceeded to engage in the aforementioned screaming.

She was not a woman to scream easily (and had not, in fact, been one of Samuel’s former predictions). She was a strict woman, yet a fair one. Stern yet nurturing. Rude yet usually correct. Samuel would have expected a response of “My goodness, what *is* that grotesque creature you have wrapped in the light blue blanket?” The shrieking was a surprise.

Ellen burst into tears and ran into the bedroom, taking Nathan with her. She slammed the door shut.

Martin, Samuel’s father-in-law, scratched nervously at his elbow. “I didn’t actually get to see anything,” he said. “What was the issue?”

Helena started to answer, but then collapsed upon the sofa. “I need a glass of water before I faint,” she said, gasping three times while speaking the sentence.

Samuel was more inclined to just let her faint, but he went into the kitchen and got her a glass of lukewarm water from the faucet. He handed it to her without a word. She took a small sip and set the glass on the coffee table.

“Samuel, what have you and my daughter done?”

“We had a child.”

“That’s no child. That is *not* my grandson. What happened? Did he die in the womb?”

“He’s not a zombie baby!” Samuel insisted. “The teeth surprised everybody, but I swear to you, apart from that abnormality he’s perfectly normal. Everything he’s done for these past three days has been what we’d expect a baby to do. I had problems with the situation myself, but Nathan is not a monster.”

Helena took another sip of water. “Destroy it.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Smother it.”

“No!”

“Samuel, that child will cause you nothing but misery. Look at the way my hand is shaking. Have you ever known my hand to shake?”

“No, but—”

“That boy is evil.”

“He’s not evil.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

“He’s done nothing evil. Believe me, I understand how you’re feeling. I’d thought about taking a shovel to him myself. But regardless of his appearance, he is our child, and we love him, and you’re going to have to respect that.”

Martin stepped toward the bedroom. “Perhaps I should take a look.”

“Don’t you dare!” said Helena. “I won’t have you haunted as I am!” She gulped down the rest



the water then looked at Samuel with pleading eyes. “Get rid of it. If you won’t kill it, put it up for adoption. Don’t taint the family name with that monstrosity. You’re young. There will be other babies. If you got started now you could have one before next summer. Please. You must understand that the baby in my daughter’s arms was not meant to exist.”

Samuel cleared his throat as he worked up his courage. “Helena, you are no longer welcome in our home.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You don’t have to love your grandson, or even not be afraid of him, but you *do* have to understand that he is our son. When you decide to respect that, we’d love to have you as a houseguest, but until that time, I would like to request that you get the hell out.”

Helena gave him a look of such intense rage that Samuel felt his resolve drain away like wax from a candle dangling over a volcano. “How dare you use the h-word when speaking to me? I’m trying to keep you and Ellen from ruining your lives!”

“Our lives will be fine,” Samuel said. “I need you to leave.”

“I’ll send people. I’ll send people to take him away.”

“If you do, I’ll kill you.”

Helena gaped at him. “Do you see what has happened? Just living with the child for these few days has made you insane! This is absolute madness!”

“Okay, I really need to see this kid for myself,” said Martin. He marched over to the door, knocked twice, and walked into the bedroom. Fifteen seconds later he emerged and returned to the living room. “Helena, I would like to leave now.”

Helena stood up. “Samuel, I beg of you—”

“I mean it,” said Samuel. “If you send anybody to take Nathan away, I will kill you. Not violently or painfully, but trust me when I say that you will at least be poisoned.”

“Very well. If you choose to throw your lives away on this creature, then the decision is yours. Do not expect support of any kind from me.”

She left the house without a word.

Martin had to make three trips to carry out the suitcases they’d brought in, so his exit was less dramatic, but soon he was gone as well. Ellen emerged from the bedroom as they drove off, holding sleeping Nathan in her arms, her face stained with tears.

“I’m sorry,” said Samuel. “I was not polite to your mother.”

Ellen sniffled, then gave her husband a sad smile. “It’s all right. We can do this on our own.”

\* \* \*

Helena did not send anybody to take Nathan away. Upon further thought, Samuel had decided that he probably wouldn’t actually murder her if she did, but it was nice to not have to make a final decision on the matter.

Samuel and Ellen vowed to give their son a normal life, although they settled on giving him a normal life except for the almost complete lack of social interaction. Apart from Dr. Thompson’s regular visits, nobody ever saw the boy. When he got old enough to crawl, Samuel built a fence around their yard, where Nathan could happily scoot through the grass without the neighbors catching a glimpse of his teeth. Though it wasn’t ideal, it was better than locking him in a basement, and much better than having torch-wielding villagers surround their home.

It was with a great deal of relief that Samuel came to accept that Nathan's teeth were the only odd thing about him. Otherwise, the boy was healthy, alert, and happy. He did bite his tongue on a couple of occasions, which caused the child to scream in agony, but nothing was ever severed. And though it took him longer to start forming words than the average toddler, that was only to be expected.

"It took me longer than average to start speaking, and that's only because one of my eyes was crossed until I was six," Samuel noted. "We can't hold that against the boy."

On his fourth birthday, Ellen and Samuel thought long and hard about how Nathan should receive his education. They knew that he had to be integrated into society at some point, but Ellen was reluctant.

"What if the other kids make fun of him?" she asked.

"They will," said Samuel. "That's a given. But I suspect that if he bites one of them, he won't be made fun of multiple times."

"He shouldn't have to bite people to keep his dignity."

"All kids get made fun of. He might as well have something genuinely weird about him; otherwise they'll just make things up to ridicule."

"What if he bites another student and the parents sue? Most children can barely break the skin, much less come away with a mouthful of flesh."

"You're right. We'll make sure he's aware that it's wrong to bite."

"I don't know," said Ellen. "I think it may be too much for him. Why can't we wait until his baby teeth fall out? For all we know, his real teeth will grow in normally, and we'd have created all of that mental scarring for nothing."

"What's going to damage him more? Kids making fun of him for having sharp teeth, or spending his entire childhood alone with his parents?"

"Kids making fun of him."

"I don't think that's correct."

"I can't do it," Ellen said. "Kids are cruel. I can't subject him to that. Maybe when he's five."

\* \* \*

Nathan traced his finger along the words on the page. "...to the story."

"To the *store*," Ellen corrected.

Nathan frowned. "Why?"

"Because the 'e' is silent."

Nathan gave her a *that's really stupid* look. "Why can't I ever go to the store?"

"We've already talked about this."

"But why can't I?"

"Because, sweetheart. People are mean."

"You're not mean."

"I'm sorry, not everybody is mean, but some people are. You don't want people to be mean to you, do you?"

"Why would they be mean to me?"

"You know."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

“My teeth?”

Ellen nodded.

“I’m not scared of that.”

“Well, Mommy is. Mommy doesn’t want you to get hurt. I’m here to protect you. Okay?”

Nathan lowered his eyes. “Okay.”

\* \* \*

“I’m taking him out.”

“Samuel, no!”

“He can do whatever he wants today.” Samuel looked at Nathan across the dinner table. “Nathan, what did you say you wanted to do for your sixth birthday?”

“Go someplace.”

“It’s unconscionable to keep him locked away like this. I’m not going to let it happen anymore. Nathan, show Mommy how you smile when you’re not at home.”

Nathan looked at Ellen and gave her a smile, keeping his lips together.

“Show her how you talk.”

“Hi, Mommy,” said Nathan, speaking so that his lips barely moved. “You look nice today.”

“Nobody will ever know,” Samuel insisted.

“He’s only six,” said Ellen. “He can’t completely control his smiles.”

“You can’t tell him what to do on his birthday. We’re just going to go down to the store and buy a huge bag of candy. I promise that nothing will happen to him.”

Ellen continued to protest, but Samuel didn’t listen. The way they raised their son was appalling. Nathan had to be able to leave the house once in a while. Ellen would see; they’d go to the store, come back without incident, and she’d realize that there was no reason to worry so much.

“If you give me a night to sleep on it, I’m sure I’ll be fine with the idea. I know you’re right. I just need a little more time.”

Samuel sighed. His concern was that in the morning Ellen would decide that this was the worst idea imaginable, and she’d beg to wait until Nathan’s seventh birthday before letting him interact with other people. Samuel wasn’t going to wait another year. He was going to do this even if he had to sneak Nathan out of the house under the cover of night.

However, one more day couldn’t hurt. “Okay,” he said.

“Do I still get candy?” Nathan asked.

“Yes indeed,” said Samuel. “First thing tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

It is important to note that what happened next was not suicide. Ellen Pepper was not a depressed woman. She was actually a very cheerful, upbeat woman, who was simply insanely overprotective and concerned about her son being subjected to harm. She would never use the word “freak,” but other people would, and the idea of other kids (or even adults) staring at Nathan, or pointing at him and laughing at him—or—God forbid—trying to hurt him because of his frightening appearance was more than she could bear.

But Samuel was right. They couldn't hide him away forever.

~~Tomorrow she'd come with them and keep a watchful eye on anybody who approached. Maybe everything would be fine.~~

Ellen did not go to bed unhappy. She was merely distracted.

She turned on the gas stove with the intention of boiling some water for a cup of tea to help her sleep. The flame didn't ignite, and she decided that she didn't feel like having the tea. She remembered—distinctly but incorrectly—shutting off the gas. She'd turned it off most of the way, but the knob hadn't quite clicked.

She even thought about it right before she fell asleep. *Did I shut off the stove?* She was about to get up and check, but Samuel was a light sleeper and it would wake him up, and if she concentrated really hard she did remember turning the knob back to "off." No need to worry. She went to sleep in her husband's arms.

The gas seeped throughout the night.

\* \* \*

When Nathan woke up, in his room on the other side of the house from his parents, he felt different. He really hadn't felt any different yesterday when he woke up and was six years old, but six years and one day, he almost felt like a completely new person.

Today was candy day!

He yawned, stretched, and then got out of bed and hurried over to wake up his parents.

# THREE

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“Mom? Dad?”

Nathan understood death as a vague concept. He knew, for example, that when he crushed a beetle its guts came out and it stopped moving. This had made him sad, and he’d made it a point not to crush any more beetles.

Dad had read him a book about a little boy with two dogs, great dogs, hunting dogs, and at the end of the book both of the dogs had died. Dad was crying while he read it—not sobbing, but several tears trickled down his cheek—and Nathan had found the book overwhelmingly depressing, even if he didn’t quite get it.

He knew immediately that his parents were dead.

Still there, but gone.

Nathan poked Mom on the arm, trying to get her to come back to life. “Mom...?”

He didn’t know what to do.

He cried for a while.

Then he got scared. He knew he shouldn’t be frightened of his own mom and dad, even though they were dead, but he couldn’t help it. He went outside and sat in his front yard and cried some more.

He didn’t want the candy anymore. In fact, Nathan Pepper would never again eat candy of any sort. Licorice sticks, lemon drops, chocolate bars—the idea of all of them would be forever repulsive to him.

Nathan sat outside for five hours. He only cried for about two of those hours, off and on, but unfortunately he was weeping when the postman arrived with the day’s mail. Though Kirk Keller heard plenty of bawling kids on his route, this sounded different. He knocked on the door to the wooden fence, got no answer, briefly considered continuing with his route as if nothing happened, and then decided to go inside.

Kirk would become something of a hero at the Hammer’s Lost post office for the next couple weeks. After all, none of the other carriers had ever discovered a pair of corpses while en route. He would retell the story countless times throughout his life, gradually exaggerating the level of decomposition until it became a tale of his discovery of two human-shaped piles of goo.

The police came to investigate. They asked Nathan many questions, but he kept his mouth tight and closed and never said a word.

\* \* \*

“Perhaps we should adopt the boy,” said Dr. Thompson, lying in bed with his wife.

“Is it because you want to do experiments on him?” asked Mrs. Thompson.

Dr. Thompson was silent for a long moment.

“Perhaps,” he finally admitted.

“Then no,” Mrs. Thompson said.

The Bernard Steamspell Home For Unfortunate Orphans was run by Bernard Steamspell, a man who was very impressed by his own accomplishments, despite their scarcity. Over the past thirty years, he had engaged in thirty-two different business ventures, all of which had failed. He'd won the Our Lady of The Weeping Statue Orphanage in a bar bet over who could inhale the most black pepper. He'd renamed it after himself, as he had all of his other businesses, and immediately sought to figure out how he could make this non-profit establishment more profitable.

There were plenty of expenses that could be cut. The Our Lady of the Weeping Statue Orphanage had never exactly served gourmet meals, but under Steamspell's leadership, its dining experience only rose above the level of "vile slop" on Thursdays, which he reluctantly allowed to become Taco Night. He sold the current twenty-eight mattresses and used the proceeds to purchase fifty-four much worse ones. Hot water was limited to his private bathroom.

These were easy changes to make, because Steamspell loathed children. Whether they were well behaved or rambunctious, intelligent or rock-stupid, fat or thin (though they would all eventually become thin in his care), Steamspell hated them all. Rotten brats. If they weren't awful little things, they'd still have parents.

Though Steamspell did not beat the orphans without justification, he found this justification remarkably easy to find. He had a large wooden paddle that he used to administer the beatings, but he liked to turn it sideways, to better focus the pain. Every orphan under his roof had been beaten at least thrice, and a couple of the worst troublemakers were well into the triple digits. Despite his best efforts to control the impulse, Steamspell often burst into maniacal laughter as he struck them with the paddle.

Nathan had tried to be brave as he rode in the front of the police car that drove him to the orphanage. The officer he'd been with the most, a gentle-eyed man named William, had told him that it was time to be a big boy, and assured him that while he'd be sad for a while, he'd make plenty of friends at his new home.

The police had seen his teeth, of course. The reactions were evenly divided between horror and fascination, though those who fell into the "horror" category did not express this in front of Nathan out of courtesy for the fact that he'd just lost his parents.

"His name is Nathan," said William, giving him a gentle shove forward to his new caregiver.

"Nathan, eh?" Steamspell asked. "Do people call you Nate? That would be easier."

Nathan shook his head.

"Well, we can make do with Nathan for now." Steamspell hated learning the children's names, and preferred to go with identifiers like Kid With Cowlick, Boy With Two Moles on Chin, and Blond Gawkly Whiner.

"He's quiet but very polite," said William. "But before you take him into your care, you should be aware of his oddity."

Steamspell frowned. "Oddity. He'd better not be a bed wetter. I won't tolerate that." He glared at Nathan. "I've put many lads before you in diapers, and if you think they only have to wear them overnight, you're sorely mistaken."

"I don't wet the bed," said Nathan, softly.

"Did I just see what I think I saw?" asked Steamspell. "Open your mouth again, boy."

Nathan did as he was told.

Steamspell let out a long, harsh laugh. “Well, I’ll be damned! I’ve never seen such a thing. The children I get are rarely top quality, but *this*...”

“He’s a very nice boy,” said William.

“Oh, I’m sure he is!” Steamspell held his sides as he laughed. “What a tragic young man you are. My God, the other children will eat you alive when they see those things. I don’t mean that literally, of course. In a literal sense, it’s much more likely that you’ll eat them.” He laughed some more, and committed that joke to memory with the intention of using it at least five or six more times.

“Are you going to be okay?” William asked Nathan.

Nathan was relatively certain that he was *not* going to be okay, but he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” The police officer shook his hand, and then left.

Steamspell briefly glanced at a piece of paper inside a folder. “Parents killed themselves, did they?”

“No, sir.”

“Boy, when you address me, you will say ‘sir.’ Do you understand?”

“I did say ‘sir.’”

“Then say it in such a way that I don’t immediately forget that you said it! I will be treated with respect. If you wish to eat and be sheltered from the rain and sleep without being bitten by snakes, you will need to learn that I am the most important person in your life.”

“Yes, sir.”

Steamspell struck him on the side of the head, an open-palmed blow that made Nathan’s ears ring.

“I said ‘sir’!” Nathan insisted.

“I know you did. I’m not deaf. That was for all of the bad things you did before you came to live with me. I think we can both agree that a slap to the ear is an extremely mild punishment for all of the sins you’ve accumulated, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So now we’re starting clean. From now on, when I beat you, it will be for transgressions after this moment. Does that sound fair?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you bite the heads off chickens?” Steamspell laughed. “Wouldn’t that be something to see? I wonder when real geeks get started in the geeking business. I’d guess it was pretty early, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t, not having grown up in a carnival atmosphere. Maybe it’s something I’ll exploit. Do you like the taste of live chicken? Oh, no matter, we’ll deal with it later. Come on, Nate, let’s get you to your mattress.”

\* \* \*

On his second day at the orphanage, Nathan was given the nickname “Fangboy.” His first day was mostly spent scrubbing down the kitchen with another boy who never spoke, and his first night was spent lying on his mattress, weeping softly under a thin blanket that had a mild scent of mold.

The other boys did not bother him that first night, possibly because they all remembered how they'd cried their first night at the orphanage. Nathan didn't want to cry, he wanted to be brave, but he couldn't help himself. He missed his mom and dad, and his own bed, and edible meals. (Dinner had consisted of gray and white lumps that, by popular vote, were determined by the boys to be chicken and dumplings, though in fact they were meatloaf.)

The second day, first thing in the morning, a boy who was about ten grabbed Nathan's toothbrush out of his hand. "It's mine now!" he declared.

"Give it back!" Nathan shouted.

The boy, Arnold, shook his head and held the toothbrush up out of Nathan's reach. "I'm trading it for you," he said. "I'm older, so I get the better toothbrush."

Toothbrushes were among the many items that Steamspell felt were unnecessary to replace on a regular basis, though he did not force the boys to recycle dental floss.

"No!" Nathan shouted. The toothbrush, though not custom-made, was the largest size Nathan's father had been able to find. He knew he could make do with a smaller brush, but despite his lack of social interaction, he realized that this was a pivotal moment. If he let the boy steal his toothbrush, he'd always be the Kid Whose Toothbrush You Could Steal. He wasn't going to be pushed around. "You can't have it!"

Arnold dropped the toothbrush onto the floor. The floor was actually rather clean because of all the available child labor, but still, one never appreciated having one's toothbrush dropped onto the floor. "What's wrong with your mouth?"

Nathan closed his mouth and said nothing.

"Hey, everybody, come over here!" said Arnold, beckoning to the other orphans. "The new kid has fangs!"

"I do not!" said Nathan.

"Look at them! Those can't be real, can they?"

The other boys all crowded around him, and Nathan felt his face burn red with embarrassment. He covered his mouth with his left hand.

"Go on, show them your fangs!"

"They aren't fangs."

"They sure are! They're like Dracula fangs, except it's *all* your teeth! What happened? Were you born like that? Show the others!"

Nathan shook his head.

"I said, show the others!"

The other boys began a chant. "Show us! Show us! Show us!"

Nathan covered his mouth with both hands now, and desperately tried to keep himself from crying. His face burned so hot that he thought it might disintegrate into ashes.

"Show us! Show us! Show us!"

"What the blazes is going on in here?" asked Steamspell, peeking his head into the large (but not really large enough for fifty-four boys) bedroom.

"He has weird teeth and he won't show us!"

Steamspell chuckled. "What are you trying to hide, boy? Think you can keep those choppers covered forever? You might as well get it over with."

Nathan didn't want to get it over with. He was pretty sure he *could* keep his teeth covered forever if necessary. But instead, he pulled back his lips and tried to give the other kids a pleasant smile.

They gasped. All of them.



One of them said a word that Nathan didn't remember having heard before but which he thought might be one of the bad words that his parents had told him never to say. "He does have fangs! He's a fangboy!"

"Fangboy!" several of the others shouted. "Fangboy! Fangboy! Fangboy!"

Nathan turned and ran. One of the kids on the edge of the crowd tripped him, and he fell to the floor, landing hard on his elbow.

"Freak show!" one of them yelled.

"Creepy mouth!" yelled another.

For a moment, Nathan thought they might hoist him above their shoulders and take him to be tarred and feathered (which had actually sounded kind of fun when his mother read to him about it, but sounded much less fun now). They did not. Instead, they just kept laughing at him and shouting names until finally Steamspell angrily told them all to get back to their chores. Nathan very much doubted that this was done to salvage his dignity.

He lay there on the floor for a while, until Steamspell harshly suggested that he quit doing that.

## FOUR

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If you excluded the beatings, the bad food, the ridicule, the stolen personal items, the lack of privacy, the noise, the toilet that never quite flushed properly, the drinking water with colorful specks in it, the scary shadows that danced across the ceiling at night, the drab décor, and the overall mood of desperation and misery, the orphanage was still a rotten place to live.

At least the other kids—most of them, anyway—weren't truly mean. Once the novelty of Nathan's appearance wore off they—again, most of them—treated him as one of their own. Which is to say that they included him in their daily discussions of how awful it was to be stuck in such a place.

Nathan's first beating happened on his second day, when Nathan failed to pull the weeds in the backyard garden to Steamspell's satisfaction. Nathan protested the punishment on the grounds that Steamspell had not actually bothered to *look* at the garden before picking up his paddle, and also because if Nathan were to pluck all of the weeds, the garden would have no actual contents.

Steamspell did not appreciate either of these explanations.

Nathan's mother and father had believed in the value of a good spanking, so he was not a stranger to receiving this sort of discipline. He was not, however, used to the level of cruelty and sheer exuberance on display. The spanking from Steamspell *hurt*, and went on for a good five minutes beyond what seemed necessary to send any message beyond "Bernard Steamspell is a sadist."

Nathan's second, third, and fourth beatings happened on his third, fourth, and fifth days at the orphanage. Then Steamspell's attention was captured by a new boy named Thomas who was on crutches, and Nathan's beating schedule switched to an every-other-day basis.

"I hate him," said Reggie, an eight-year-old whose mattress was on the floor next to Nathan's. They lay in the dark. "I wish he would plop right onto the ground, dead."

"Shhhhh!" said another boy, Jeremy. "He'll hear you!"

"I think he'll beat us even if he's dead!" said a boy named Malcolm. "He'd find a way!"

Nathan was certainly in favor of the idea of Steamspell dropping dead, but he said nothing.

"He wouldn't be able to beat us if we buried his body," said Reggie.

"He'd dig his way out," said Malcolm. "Even if we filled the hole with rocks he'd dig his way out."

"If we cut him up he wouldn't," said Reggie. "If each boy was responsible for burying his own piece, we could be sure he would stay in the ground. Maybe an arm or two would find its way out, but he couldn't beat us if he were nothing but an arm."

Nathan cringed. This wasn't the sort of conversation he ever had at home with his mother and father.

"How could we do it?" asked Malcolm.

"We'd cut off his head first. Once his head was gone, I can't imagine the rest of him would cause us that much trouble."

"What would we use?"

"A knife from the kitchen."

"We don't have any that are big enough."

Reggie considered that. "You're right. But we have tape. And two knives taped together would be more than long enough. We'd draw straws for who got to do it, and that person would sneak in whi-

he was sleeping—”

“Somebody would have to hold him down,” Malcolm said.

“We’d draw straws for that, too. And so the lucky boys would sneak in there, and they’d saw, saw saw away until the job was done.”

“That’s horrible,” said Nathan. He slapped a hand over his mouth. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

“Horrible?” Reggie asked. “*Horrible?* I’ve heard the way you yelp when he goes at you with the paddle. What would you have us do, throw parties in his honor? Make statues? Bake Steamspell shaped biscuits? I’ll tell you what, if you’re so in love with him, why don’t you take the beatings for all of us?”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Nathan, pulling his blanket more tightly around him. “I just...do it have to be so messy?”

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s not messy enough!” Reggie narrowed his eyes (or, at least, spoke in such a tone that Nathan thought he narrowed his eyes in the dark). “Maybe there’s a way that you could be useful, Fangboy.”

“There isn’t,” said Nathan. “I’m not useful to anybody.”

“Don’t worry,” said Jeremy, the boy who’d shushed them. “They talk about killing Steamspell at the time. They won’t really do it.”

“The hell we won’t! Maybe we won’t really tape two knives together, but we have a boy here with the sharpest teeth I’ve ever seen. He wouldn’t even have to press them together very hard to rip off Steamspell’s throat.”

“Like a vampire!” said Malcolm with great excitement.

Reggie shook his head. “No, vampires don’t rip anything away after they bite. They just use the teeth to poke. I don’t want Steamspell to have an inconvenient neck wound, I want a large piece of his throat in Fangboy’s mouth!”

“That’s disgusting,” said Jeremy.

“Is it? Is it?” Reggie nodded. “Yes, I suppose it is. But disgusting in a fine way. That tyrant must die, and I believe that Fangboy here is the one who can make it happen.”

“But not tonight, right?” asked Nathan in a pleading voice.

“No, not tonight. There’s a lot of planning left to do. But soon.”

\* \* \*

Thursday was Adoption Day at the orphanage. The orphans would line up outside, using their best posture, and potential parents would file through, hoping to find a child to call their very own. The Bernard Steamspell Home For Unfortunate Orphans was not a quality orphanage and thus did not attract the highest caliber of parents, but each and every one of the children desperately hoped to be chosen.

“No, no, no,” said an elderly man, shaking his head as he walked down the line. “These are slight pickings indeed. If I drove an hour north, I could adopt a grandson nearly twice as good.” He let out a snort of contempt and left.

“Haven’t we seen all of these already?” asked a man walking hand-in-hand with his wife. “It seems like every week it’s the same group of kids, only a little thinner and dirtier. Where’s the turnover?”

“I agree that it’s a sorry lot,” said Steamspell. “You have to understand that I take only the ones

that are given to me. If I wished to go out kidnapping, I could offer a selection of the tallest, most charming boys you'd ever seen. But a man must follow his moral compass."

"Oh, of course," said the man's wife. "If we adopted a child, we'd want one whose parents were dead, not out searching for him."

"But though our turnover is indeed low, I'm pleased to say that I've made a new acquisition since your last visit."

Nathan stood up as straight as he could, and kept his mouth tightly closed.

"Look at this one," said Steamspell, slapping the newest boy on the shoulders. "Ones with freckles don't come through very often. And he's clever. Boy, say something clever."

"I'd watch eighteen hours of television a day if I could," said the boy. Suddenly he frowned, as if realizing that what he'd said was not as clever as what he'd hoped he'd say.

"He's on crutches," said the man.

"Yes," said Steamspell. "A tragic thing."

"Will he always need them?"

"Well, I don't know. I suppose not. And rest assured that the adoption fee would include both crutches. I wouldn't just send him home with you, unable to walk."

"May we have a moment?" asked the man.

"By all means."

The man and his wife stepped off to the side. They whispered amongst themselves for a minute, then returned to where Steamspell stood.

"No, we don't want the crippled one. What else have you got?"

"No others, sorry. Next week, perhaps."

Nathan waved his hand. "Mr. Steamspell!"

Steamspell gave him a look that could melt skulls.

"I don't think we've seen that boy before," said the man.

"Oh, you don't want to see that one," said Steamspell. "He's quite diseased. It's actually very irresponsible of me to have him so close to the others. Next week, then?"

After the man and wife left, Steamspell smacked Nathan on the back of the head. "What did you think you were doing?"

"But I'm new!"

"I'm not saying there aren't parents for you out there, but even a drunken hobo knows that boys on crutches outrank boys with demon teeth. If they passed on him, in what possible universe do you think they'd be interested in the ghoulish likes of you?"

Nathan hung his head. "No universe, sir."

"That's right. So I can't have you scaring off potential clients who were never going to adopt you anyway. What if you'd given them such a jolt that they never returned? Is your conscience flexible enough to accept the idea of frightening away the new mother and father of one of your fellow orphans? A mother and father who would give them food, shelter, and a parent's love? One of these boys might have the chance to sit in a large warm house, sipping hot chocolate next to a roaring fire with a cat on their lap, but because of your selfish attempt to bring attention to yourself they might die in this place, nothing but skin and bones and two deep crevices in their face where the tears erode their flesh. Is that what you want?"

Nathan was sick to his stomach. "No, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to the other boys, whose chance at happiness you crushed. Come on, walk down the line and say you're sorry to each one of them."

Feeling the most intense shame of his life, Nathan walked down the row of boys, head lowered. ~~he told each of them that he was very, very sorry for what he'd done. Some of them thanked him, some snickered, and some glared at him as if he truly had destroyed their chances of not dying in the hellhole.~~

The boys continued to stand at attention for a while longer, while Steamspell grumbled about how few aspiring parents had shown up that day. Another husband and wife arrived but didn't even make it halfway down the line before the woman sighed and tugged on her husband's sleeve. "Let's just go. There's nothing here."

None of the boys were adopted that day.

"This is very disappointing," said Steamspell. "How is it possible that I could not unload even one of you? There was not even an attempt to haggle! What are you boys doing wrong that makes you so unlovable by even those who are actively seeking children?"

Reggie raised his hand.

Steamspell glared at him. "What?"

"If you could provide more soap, more parents would want to adopt us. The sliver of soap I'm given each day barely lasts beyond my chin."

"Why, you filthy little rat! How dare you question my soap allotment? I had planned to spend the evening beating him—" Steamspell pointed at one of the boys near the end of the line. "—and him—" He pointed at another. "—but instead I'll be beating you. And I'm in a foul mood, so I intend to beat you until my spirits have brightened!"

The boys marched back into the orphanage. After a meal of soup that was more like water with a mild carrot flavor, they spent the rest of the day doing chores. Nathan's job was to shake a rug until every last tick had been dislodged.

Reggie's screams echoed throughout the orphanage.

"I'm glad I didn't say anything about the soap," Malcolm admitted, while he shook out his own assigned rug. "I was thinking it, and I thought he wanted a real answer."

Reggie didn't return from Steamspell's office until shortly before dinner, limping and bruised. "He won't feed us properly, but he spared no expense on that paddle," he muttered. "I thought it would break in half, but it didn't even chip. Did you see that it has diamonds on the handle?"

"Are you okay?" Nathan asked.

"I won't be okay until his throat is sliding down your throat."

"I'm not going to kill him."

"You stingy little miser. What makes you so special? Don't you think that if the good lord above gave you teeth of that sort he'd want them to be put to use? By ignoring your gift, you are spitting in the face of God. Spitting right into his all-seeing eye. Blasphemy!"

"I won't do it."

"Very well, then. It's your soul. Do what you want with it."

Life in the orphanage did not take an upswing in quality during the following week. Nathan missed his parents and he didn't like anything about this place and he *hated* being called Fangboy. He didn't cry as much anymore, and thought it might be because his body had run out of water to transport to his eyes.

Every night, Nathan thought about running away. All of the boys did. Unfortunately, talk abounded of all of the measures Steamspell had taken to prevent their escape. Hungry wolves lurked in the woods. The area around the orphanage was filled with so many land mines and bear traps that no boy wouldn't be able to take more than three steps before either blowing up or having iron jaws snap

shut upon his ankle. (It also stood to reason that many of the wolves ended up getting caught in the traps as well, and if there was anything more fearsome than a wolf, it was a wolf who was angry about having been forced to gnaw off its own foot.) Goblins, or at least people dressed as goblins, roamed outdoors with giant clubs. Sharks dropped from the sky. Pits were plentiful. Men with rifles had a standing offer to earn eighty coins per orphan head.

None of these were true, and in fact any boy who made it half a mile northeast of the orphanage would have found himself in the care of kindly nuns, but none of the boys dared risk it.

The only thing Nathan had to look forward to was Adoption Day. He'd much rather have his real mother and father back, but since that wasn't a possibility (at least not in a non-supernatural, non-terrifying manner) he hoped to find replacement parents soon.

Nathan marched out with the other boys, trying to think merry thoughts in hopes that parents would want a happy child.

The first visitor was a portly woman who explained to Steamspell that her husband had gotten caught up at work, but that he trusted her to make the right decision. Green eyes were a preference, though not a requirement. Upon hearing this, Malcolm opened his green eyes as wide as he could, so wide that Nathan worried they might roll right out of their sockets and Malcolm would have to go chasing after them, which would be awkward since he wouldn't be able to see what he was chasing after. Nathan decided that should this happen, he would help Malcolm find his missing eyes, even if it meant receiving an extra beating from Steamspell.

"I do like this one," the woman said, looking at Malcolm. "But how do I know he is not evil? That's what my friends warned me about. 'Don't get an evil child or you'll regret it.' My friend Catherine, she adopted an evil one, and oh, the stains!"

"I understand your concern. I'm given evil children every once in a while, and rest assured that they are all..." Steamspell hesitated, trying to decide which answer would most please the woman. He decided that "executed" was not the way to go. "...hugged into a state of goodness."

"Delightful! Oh, my husband will be so pleased!" She ruffled Malcolm's hair. "I can't wait to start giving him aptitude tests. Oh, young Percy, you'll be so happy at your new home!"

"My name is—"

"Yes, Percy, it will be a wonderful new life for you. Let's go."

Percy left with his new mother, beaming. The other boys grumbled.

When the next man and woman got out of their car, Nathan knew he had found his new parents. The woman wore a pretty dress and jewelry that sparkled, and she had long curly blonde hair that hung over her shoulders. The man wore a blue suit with a yellow tie. They both smiled.

"Look at all of the little darlings!" said the woman. "I wish we could take all of them home!"

"As do I," said her husband. "But we agreed that we wouldn't do that."

As they walked down the line, Nathan stood up as straight as he possibly could, imagining that giant hands were stretching his body. The woman's smile brightened as she saw Nathan. "Well, hello there," she said.

"Hello," Nathan replied, saying it without showing his teeth.

"What's your name?"

"Nathan."

"Why, that's what we would have named our own child if my womb weren't barren. Tell me, Nathan, do you like baseball?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you like potatoes?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you like dogs? We have three dogs. You’d have to take them for walks every day, and promise to feed them, and play fetch with them.”

“I would! Every single day!”

The woman excitedly clapped her hands. “I adore him! What do you think, Charles?”

“I like him. He’s short but not too short. How old are you, Nathan?”

“Six.”

“Ah, I remember when I was six. The world had endless possibility. Oh, how my days were filled with harmless mischief. Do you like to fish?”

Nathan nodded, though he’d never been fishing. It sounded like a gleeful activity.

“Wonderful! I think our search is over. Give us a great big smile, Nathan!”

Nathan froze. Would they still want him if they knew? What if they were repulsed? What if they *threw up*, right there in front of all of the other orphans?

He gave them a small, closed-mouth smile.

“Are you only that happy?” asked the man. “We’d hoped to bring overwhelming joy to a young orphan. How disappointing.”

Nathan didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want to scare them off, yet he couldn’t very well refuse to smile if he hoped to be adopted. The perfect parents would love him no matter how he looked, right? Maybe they *wanted* a child with sharp teeth. Maybe they’d driven sixteen hours just because they heard that in this particular orphanage there was a little boy who’d been born with exactly the kind of teeth they’d dreamed their future son would have. If he didn’t smile, they might move on down the line and choose a boy whose teeth were merely slightly crooked!

He smiled, exposing his teeth completely.

The man and woman looked at him, their faces expressionless.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Oh,” said the woman. “Oh, dear.”

The man turned to Steamspell. “Are all of the children like this?”

“No, no, not at all. He’s our one aberration.”

“Well, he looks like a fine boy, but obviously we can’t bring such a severely mutated child into our lives. Perhaps we were too hasty about the whole parenting thing.” He put his arm around his wife.

“We should go home and read some more books on the subject, don’t you think?”

“Yes, that would be best.”

They left.

Nathan no longer smiled.

“You poor miserable beast,” said Steamspell. “How disappointing it must be to have actually believed that they were going to give you a home.” He laughed. “You’re a gullible lad, Boy With Teeth. A most gullible lad indeed. Heh heh. I’d have given my right arm to be able to peek into your mind at that moment when he asked if you liked fishing. You must have been so excited.” He laughed and laughed, belly shaking, until he was forced to wipe a tear from his cheek. “Ah, there’s nothing more amusing than the self-delusion of a six-year-old. Now, all of you, get back to work.”

As Nathan stood there, drowning in humiliation, he wondered if Reggie was right.

Nathan had teeth that could easily bite through somebody’s neck.

Steamspell had a neck that deserved to be bitten through.

It was worth considering.

“Here’s the plan,” said Reggie. “Steamspell sleeps with his door locked at night, but Milton he survived two years on the street by breaking into garages and sleeping under trucks, so he can handle that part. He’s a light sleeper, but he’s used to background noise, so Angus and Cyrus will pretend to have night terrors and scream in their sleep, which will cover the sound of the lock picking. Nathan you will sneak in there—make sure to have your mouth open already, to save time—and bite his jugular vein. Do you know which one that is?”

“No,” Nathan admitted.

Reggie tapped him on the neck. “Right there.”

“Will there be a lot of blood?”

“Of course. That’s the whole point.”

“What if it gets in my mouth?”

“You can’t do this without getting some blood in your mouth. That’s part of the sacrifice. Perhaps the reward. Timothy’s mother was a psychologist before she abandoned him, so he’ll help take you through any guilt or trauma afterward.”

“What will you do?” Nathan asked.

“Supervise.”

“That doesn’t seem like much.”

“It’s the hardest part of all! If this plan goes wrong, it’s all my fault. That kind of responsibility changes a boy. I’m putting myself at the highest risk of being forced to brood afterward, so you need to appreciate it and follow my instructions.”

“But do I really have to bite him? Why can’t we just smother him with a pillow?”

“There is too much dignity in being smothered. Steamspell doesn’t deserve it. I swear to you, those were removable teeth I’d pluck them out of your mouth and do the deed myself, but they are not and we must work with the gifts we’ve been given. So, Fangboy, are you with us or against us?”

“Can’t I be with you and not have to chew through somebody’s neck?”

“No.”

Nathan sighed. “All right. I suppose I’m with you.”

“Perfect! Tonight at midnight, our tyrant will lay dead before us!”

\* \* \*

Ninety-six minutes after midnight, Milton was still jiggling a paper clip in the door of Steamspell’s bedroom, the unlocking of which was proving more of a challenge than anticipated. Angus and Cyrus’ throats were getting sore from all of the feigned night terrors screaming. And Nathan’s reservations about this whole murderous scheme were growing stronger and stronger with each passing moment.

“I can’t do this,” he said.

“Yes, you can.”



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