

THE SANGUINE

by Jim Grimsley

In his wrenching new tale, Jim Grimsley deftly disturbs the calm surface of “The Sanguine.” The author’s most recent book, *The Last Green Tree*, was released from Tor Books late last year. It ties together some of the threads begun in such earlier Asimov’s stories as “Into Greenwood” (September 2001), “Perfect Pilgrim” (February 2003), and “The 120 Days of Sodom” (February 2005). In other news, Jim tells us that he has a cameo in the movie version of his mainstream book, *Dream Boy*.

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On his early morning turn through the park, fretful about the day to come, Morgan shoved his hands in his pockets. A cool breeze not yet touched with sun blew off the Chattahoochee; later the early summer heat would come. Rarely did he walk alone, inside or outside, and today was no exception; he was attended by one of the guards from the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, Tang Tu-Li, a burly young woman dressed like an athlete out for a morning jog—warm-ups, headband, heart monitor, and expensive running shoes. She followed at a discreet distance but every time he glanced her way, there was her gaze on him, careful and measured. She knew her business, this one.

Like most mornings, winter or summer, he crossed Meteor Park on the walking path, over the stone bridge, along the riverfront, and back along Chersey Street to home. He liked his walk and never felt hurried. His schedule was easy, no more than one client per day, since these days he worked only with the most difficult cases. He had ample time to drift along the riverwalk and watch the passenger ferries pulling in at the dock. New-Atlan stretched along the river, bright, glittering, endlessly tall, the bustle of the morning beginning, lines of helicopters snaking toward the various helipads on the tops of skyscrapers, streams of traffic crossing the bridge. The knowledge that his work, however difficult, was part of this endless pattern of movement reassured him, never better than at an early hour, well before seven A.M., when the world was tinged with a sense of a new beginning, a morning that might be the start of anything.

Tang the bodyguard controlled an outlying flycam that surveyed the route, which varied slightly day to day but in general followed the same path, a loop leading from Chersey uptown along the park, around Meteor Lake, and back along the bike path to the river. The complexity of surface streets and the fact that New-Atlan was mostly closed to vehicle traffic near the park made it possible for Morgan to switch his route at whim, and so he was never an easy target should someone actually have tried to kidnap him or worse—a possibility in these troubled times, the year Fourteen, soon after the end of the chaos.

But he formed part of the solution to the chaos and not part of the problem, as he saw it, and therefore it was unlikely that anyone would try to harm him.

Morning after morning he was proven right, arriving home in time for a listen to the weather and a look at the digest of headlines floating above the jector.

He had a fairly modest apartment in the Federal Security Compound, provided for him as part of his compensation package; he saw his recall clients there. Most were war criminals or betrayers of good order of some other type as defined by the Southern Tier Government. They were people to be held responsible for the turbulent times out of which the world had only recently, and only partially, emerged. Today, though, would be an exception to his usual work with criminals, almost a relief, if he thought about it. Still, he felt a certain amount of apprehension.

A week ago had come the prompt from the regional office of the medical bureau overseeing human memory management that Morgan was due for his own annual recall. The news came as a shock to him; part of a memory alteration of any kind was the hardwiring to forget it for fifty-one weeks out of the year.

“So today I get to feel what my patients feel,” he said, and Tang looked confused, as if uncertain whether to answer. Morgan rarely spoke to her, familiar as she was. She was part of the comfortable present, as were all the rest; Chuck Ipsis who was currently by the front door and Lex Nemov who would replace Tang this afternoon; there were more, and he could have remembered them, each name, had he wished.

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The memory dump—delivery of the neural storage wafers in their refrigerated canister—came precisely on schedule. The process was still referred to as a dump even though these days a memory was never transmitted over the public net, or over any sort of net. Memory was stored as living protein at a central location, copied, and transferred as a protein wafer to be softened with a solution and applied to the client’s external receptor cells. It was treated as precious cargo.

Even today the data arrived from the central cache by certified courier accompanied by a small platoon of armed guards, though in this case the precautions were a courtesy to Morgan. Usually he handled the memory box with studied casualness, but today he felt the weight of the cool cube when the guard handed it over. He confirmed the code on the unit carefully and chatted with the delivery detail like always. Some days the guards came from the Corporation for Christ security forces, dull green fatigues with a hint of a camouflage pattern. Today’s guards were Southern Tier, Lieutenant Jacobs and his unit in uniforms of a dun color. Jacobs’s people set up in their usual locations throughout the apartment and Morgan realized that these preparations were exactly the same as usual, even though his client for today was not a war criminal or prisoner of the state. Today’s client was Morgan himself, restoring blocked memories from his own life.

“Why all the fuss?” he asked Marla Sinjnovc, the Regional District Something-or-Other who had come in that morning for an unannounced visit. She apparently planned to handle his recall herself.

“You might get upset, even violent, when we restore your memories. You know that.”

“Not to the point that you need the army, for Christ’s sake—”

“It’s a courtesy, Morgan. You’re a memory specialist and you need a recall yourself. You’ll be vulnerable the whole time you’re recovering. This is a sign of respect.”

“It still makes no sense—I mean, why bring you into this, for instance, you’re the regional—whatever.”

She was doing her usual trick of avoiding eye contact. He always found her irritating; some association with some memory he couldn’t bring up at the moment, perhaps.

“You ask the same thing every year.” She had set up her portable dogcase in line with the rest of the servers in his stack and was busy tending to queues of this and that in her tank-state. She had a distracted look, her eyes focused on her inner frames and screens. He liked it better in the old days when people wore glasses or goggles for that kind of work. She continued to speak without looking at him, but she was a bit breathless, agitated. “And every year, like clockwork, I say, trust me, you’ll want the fuss before the day is out.”

“But you even have Jennie here. She’s a psychometrician, for god’s sake, I don’t need mood adjustment.”

“Of course you don’t. I’ve known you a long time, Morgan. I know how to manage your recall.”

“Then why do you seem upset?”

She flushed. “I’m not upset. There are things on my mind.”

“The regional office.”

She gave him an odd look, and a moment later clearly lied to him about something, but he couldn’t tell what. “Things are fine there,” she said, but with that tightness to the upper lip that meant she was speaking falsely for some reason.

Why would he know that she clenched her upper lip when she fibbed? She hardly ever came for one of her drop-ins these days.

He spoke mostly in irritation as she fiddled with the coded latch on the memory box. “I don’t know why I need to do this anyway, I’m perfectly fine with whatever nips and tucks have been performed on my internal connections.”

“You didn’t have memory bypass, you had dysjunction. And here’s where you say-”

“What on earth are you talking about, dysjunction, why would I do that?”

She looked at him without the usual cool distance, touched her tinted hair distractedly. Her nails were each glowing in myriad colors, a fashionable new fluorescent gelatin treatment that also strengthened the aging tissue. Advertisements for it saturated the virtuum. “You’ll know why when you do your restore. What do you tell your clients when they ask you that question?”

“I tell them that removal of traumatic and psycho- or sociopathological memories is a great palliative but the original bearer of those memories is required by law and by good scientific practice to restore them at least once a year. But what am I—what did I—oh, I sound like one of my own patients.” He even sat, without thinking, in the patient’s chair, since Marla, behind his desk, had already claimed the ExecutiveComfort Vertimax that was all the new rage from Herman Miller. “I’ll know when I know. Why are you here, anyway?”

“A doctor who treats himself. You know.”

“I don’t have a fool for a patient, I can take care of this myself.”

“You say that every year, too.”

“Why don’t I remember any of this? I mean, I know why, but it’s frustrating to sit here and know that I do actually go through this scene with you or somebody every year, and I don’t have the slightest clue about it.”

She was tidily tucking away her transmitter into the dogcase. All of her attention was now focused on him. What frightened him was that her look was suddenly tender. “You go through this scene with me,” she said. “Every year. I don’t give your case to anyone else.”

“You know that none of this is reassuring, it’s actually more frightening to hear you say things like that.”

“I know. There’s no cure for it but to remember what you have to remember. Are you ready?” She was actually shaking a bit as she held his memory patch between thumb and forefinger. The square looked for all the world like the piece of communion wafer the preacher used to slip under his tongue back in the days when the Baptists went high church.

In fact it was a series of protein codes, a series of ten small squares, that he would ingest through a patch behind his ear. She was dropping a solution that would turn the square to a paste his receptor could absorb. The proteins contained certified copies of memories excised from him and stored in the secured central cache for the Fifth Circuit district. Memory excision was generally carried out under a court order. Why had he or anyone else sought a court order in his case? As she applied the first patch to him, his heart started to pound and a feeling of dread weighted him to the seat.

“I think I did something terrible,” he said.

She was looking at him with tears in her eyes. He was right, he had done something awful. What had happened? And then he began to know. The texture of the past changed inside him as he watched her.

“I’ll now inform you under Federal Law of the Territory of the Southern Tier Government that you are under surveillance by a qualified Sanguine and if you attempt to resist these memories or to react to them violently you will be duly restrained under the code....”

He was sweating and shaking. Her voice softened, though she could not vary from her legal script since their actions, their images, their voices, were now being recorded by his own staff.

“Morgan Durban Alexei Horton, I am required by law to inform you that on this date in August in the last year of the Great Collapse, you were found guilty of manslaughter of your two sons and later, under court directive, sentenced to memory excision as a preventative to suicide; so ordered by the county of FuKalb in the Territory of the Southern Tier at the request of your wife—”

Her voice had begun to shake, and she was sitting with tears in her eyes, controlled in every other way. The memory had begun to take hold and he knew at the same moment that she said—

“Your wife Marla Sinjnovc.” She had apparently doubted her ability to get through the speech and had taken the trouble to print out a script on an old fashioned card that she held in front of her, hand trembling. The card appeared to have seen a lot of use. She looked at him. “That would be me,” she said. “That’s part of the excision. We were married, Morgan, you and I. But you’ve forgotten.”

“I know,” he said, and he remembered everything and his heart tore all over again.

* * * *

The memory was from the days of the earthquake along the New Madrid fault in the midwestern United States. The disaster there had plunged the old United States of America government into a chaos that finally broke the country into pieces. For Morgan, sitting in his married student housing in Minnesota, reading for his finals in memory management science by candlelight, trudging miles to the university to study in the library, watching his hungry children as the country collapsed into civil war, the days had been filled with a grinding horror. He had been married to Marla at the time but he could feel less of her in the memory than he should, even at its beginning. At first he could find nothing of his sons, but that was not unusual; restored memories took some time to unfold.

In his current, present life as a Sanguine, the odd name that had come to be applied to a memory specialist, he remembered the Great Collapse as an abstraction,

events that he had barely witnessed. As the reality of the memories flooded into him, Marla applying wafer after wafer to the moist, greedy patch behind his ear, he felt himself shaking, trying to knit together a past he had obviously not been able to endure when it was his own.

“Why do they make me do this?”

“Don’t your patients ask you the same question?” Marla asked, sniffing, reaching for a tissue from his desk.

“Yes. But most of my patients are criminals.”

“That’s nice. Most of mine aren’t. You remember now, right? I’m not really your irritating regional supervisor who drops in unannounced, I haven’t worked for the government in a long time. These days I’m your ex-wife who visits you once a year. I’m the one who remembers our children every day.” Some of her agitation was passing now. She stood with the tissue clutched in her fist and walked to his window looking out over the city, for all the world like some movie heroine doing her big scene.

What did he tell his patients? Take long, deep breaths and let the memories settle. Remember, this is not who you are or who you will be tomorrow; this is someone you used to be. These memories don’t belong to you any more. They belong to the you of yesterday, not to the you of today.

“Now I understand why they call us Sanguines,” he said. “It’s a bloody mess in my head right now.”

“I thought it was because we’re such tangible optimists, curing the world’s problems by allowing people to forget the hard parts.”

They’d had this discussion before. He remembered and smiled. “How’s private practice?”

“Tedious. I make a lot of money.”

“Still doing criminal cases?”

“Court-ordered memory tracing. I don’t do excisions any more. I hate them too much.”

He blew his nose, found his legs shaky when he tried to stand.

Tell the patient: Don’t think about the harder memories at first. Realize that you had two sons, two children. Hold back their names for a moment, while the memories are reassembling; just realize you had two sons once, a long time ago, as if it were a pleasant thing. Slowly breathing, watching the treetops over the park below his office window, the clouds sweeping in and shading the leafy surface, another storm coming. After a while he could start to search for a face, Joshua, and a face,

Brock, but faces were complicated and wore out; those parts of the memories tended to remain fuzzy, hazy.

“Are you doing the breathing?” she asked. “Like a good client?”

“I’m trying.” He sniffed again, reached for another tissue. “Did you bring pictures? I can’t remember what the boys looked like.”

A spasm of pain, not performed or movie-like but real, crossed her expression. “Sometimes it’s like a movie script we play out every year. You ask for things in almost the same order.”

“It’s because I can’t remember their faces, it’s the first thing that occurs to you. It’s what my clients ask me for and most of them are psychopaths. Were psychopaths. They want pictures of their victims, or their moms.”

She snapped at him in a way that he remembered, her reaction to the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, from their married days. “Why do you like working with these creeps anyway?”

He shook his head. “Not now.”

She had been searching through her dogcase the whole while. “Here’s the flat I want, the pictures are here. The same ones I bring every year. Just thumb it at the bottom. I can’t watch this part, I’ll be in the other room.”

* * * *

So much rushed through him as he sat and held the frame. She had married him while they were at the University of Georgia doing preliminary neo-med training for their future careers as Sanguines. Later they had a house with white walls and peeling paint, the kitchen curtains yellow, windows over the old fashioned twentieth century sink. They lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, so that they could do pre-Sanguinal training with Vincent Pradwhi at Cederson; they lived on a street with a big, twisted oak, its branches gouged out in a perfect partial circle from the side for the power lines that still ran along the street. At times it looked as if a moon were eating the canopy of the tree. His son Joshua had sandy hair with pale green eyes the color of the newest, youngest blade of grass imaginable. Brock was heavy for a three-year-old and Marla worried about his weight because he would not ride his blue Raleigh Racer tricycle even in the house. The bedroom Marla shared with Morgan danced with a shimmery light when there was snow on the ground. After the boys were dead, Marla put on a lot of weight and sat in the kitchen where she could still hear them sometimes, she said, as if they were playing in the back room. Bits and snatches, momentary images, came to him while he sat in his present-day high-rise apartment holding the frame of the past in his hand.

That he had loved Marla, the memory of the love, came back to him before the love itself. Other images came with that, shaking him so that at moments he could hardly breathe, doubled over onto the emptiness in his gut. Her face, the curve of her

cheek, the line of her neck in a certain kind of soft light, the forming and reforming of her neat, round buttocks when she walked naked into some other room; maybe his college dorm room, when they were first dating, or her room at the sorority when he sneaked upstairs to see it, awful pink checked curtains at the windows her mother had made. So this was where his smugness, his ease with his present life came from: it was a scab over the wound of what he might have been if the earthquake had never happened, if he had not watched his sons starving, if he had not decided to drive to the local food center, if there had not been snow, if he had not been upset, if he had not been drunk....

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“What about my prison sentence?” he asked, when Marla came back into the room. He had finished with the picture frame, handed it back to her. She collapsed it to something the size of a matchstick and put it into her dogcase.

“It’s somewhere in those wafers I gave you. That memory doesn’t usually resurface for a while and you don’t have much to remember. After the trauma care you were suicidal and drugged most of the time. We put you in a psych hospital.”

“Where?”

“Dorothea Dix in Raleigh, near your parents.”

“That’s when you decided about my memory—”

“Your parents suggested it. They said they thought if we took away the memory of the bad time you would heal. So we all went to court.”

He swallowed, fingers loosely laced together in his lap. He felt bleak and drained. In a few more minutes the memories would start to fade; recalls worked best when kept short and cathartic, according to Laslow and the other gurus of memory science.

He asked, pretending to be calm, “When did you divorce me?”

She had sat back in his comfortable desk chair, hair a mess, eyes swollen. “Christ. I don’t know if I can keep doing this every year, Morgie. It makes it even worse that you forget so completely every time.”

“This is what we do to our patients every day without blinking.”

“I know.” She shook her head. “It’s a bloody business, all right, making people remember what they couldn’t live with in the first place. I wish I had a cigarette.” She had claimed the habit as her own as soon as cigarettes were made cancer-safe, before the civil wars. Reclining in a Jacuzzi in frozen Minnesota with a scotch in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Standing in the cold outside her sorority, smoking because her roommate was a priss about the smell. He shook his head, focused on the woman in the chair. “You asked me for a divorce,” she said. “Just before you drove off in the car. I had no idea the boys were with you. You

were so drunk.”

“Why didn’t you know where the boys were?”

“We didn’t know. Either of us. They’d crawled into the back seat of the car to get away from the sound of our fight. We were fighting.”

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I still don’t remember any of this.”

“You were almost killed in that car, too, Morgie. It’s a trauma memory. There’s usually a gap.”

The nimbus around her was coming to a peak, not even noon yet, and he loved her as much as he ever had. But if it was part of the memory it would fade, too, and within a few more minutes he would think of her in the old way, as his distant associate, not really very relevant to his life. The same line of her neck in that same soft light made him want to touch the skin there, one fingertip along the tiny creases.

She looked him in the eye and knew what he was feeling; that much was plain from her own posture, somehow defeated and dissolving. She loved him, too, and he felt it across the room, without a sound, as she watched. There was a crack in the world and it ran through them, it had taken their children. But that had nothing to do with the fact that he pulsed with feeling for her still, even now, seeing her aged and different.

“I don’t know why I wanted to divorce you but it had to have been a mistake,” he said. “I love you so much.”

Her face creased in the center as a face will do when it wants to clench a painful emotion, contain it, refuse to let it display. She broke in half visibly but rigidly, refusing to move. “Don’t say it,” she shook her head. “You won’t remember the rest. You won’t remember why you wanted a divorce.” She wiped her eyes on her hands, like a girl, sitting with her feet splayed inward, toes of her shoes touching. “That’s part of the gap. I always have to tell you.”

“What?”

“You wanted a divorce because I was cheating on you. I was having an affair.” For a moment she was clearly studying him, assessing him for body signs, looking over his monitors, glancing at the cameras for a moment as if to remind herself of the filming, of the silent witnesses. How many times had this staff or another filmed this scene or one like it? Did Marla keep the digitals in one of her frames?

What she’d told him refused to register.

“Did you hear me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She spread her fingers over the arms of the chair. Her nails were still glimmering. Confession had stilled her and she was beginning to show signs of calm.

His fingers and toes were tingling and his mouth felt dry. “It’s starting to wear off,” he said.

“Your toes?” she asked, handing him water.

“And fingers.”

She nodded.

“Things could be different,” he said, heart thudding. “I still love you. Do I usually say that?”

She shook her head.

“We could see each other now. In our new lives. I know they can’t put the memories back in but people learn to live with that anyway.”

She looked at him, softening as he watched. Had they not been in the eye of several cameras, he might have touched her. But his thirst was strong again and she poured him more water and something about the taste of the water blurred her, made him less certain of what he saw.

“I don’t care what you did,” he said, mopping his forehead with a tissue. “I mean it.”

“You’re sweating,” she said, arranging her own hair. “It won’t be long now.”

“Tell me you’ll try,” he said. “Tell me we can try again.”

“I’ll try. Sure.” But she was motionless, watching him. “You really are an optimist. Who knew?”

A last image of Brock, dissolving into the dark. An image of Joshua, face crushed between the back and front seats of a car. Deep inside him came a moment of tearing so awful, so thorough, he would never cross to the other side of it.

“I don’t care what you did or who he was,” he said, and she looked at him a last time just as he was closing his eyes. “We could be happy.”

In the sleep that followed he was certain he would wake and find her with him. The boys would be outside playing in the yard. There would be food to eat and no argument and Marla would not have that guilty, sneaky look she’d had for so long. The earth in Kansas and Iowa and Missouri would knit itself back together and there would be one country instead of three. The Horton family would be whole and Morgan would get his exams done and Marla would not need to talk about that

doctor she was training with or mope around the house neglecting Morgan in favor of daydreaming. In the sleep that followed, he was certain everything would be all right again, his life would knit itself back into a whole, and his brain would take the shape it used to have before the memories leaked out of it onto those communion wafers.

But after a while there was no name for that woman he was thinking of and there was no time to which he wanted to return. What was left were scraps of memory that lingered and pulsed forward, shifting into one another, too abrupt to be hallucinogenic, more like a movie stuttering before it stops.

Morgan Durban Alexei Horton came to himself on the patient's chair of his office and looked out the window, where clouds had gathered. He felt shaken and drained and, as he did every year, he wondered what it was he had remembered in the recall. The echoes of the feelings remained. Soon even his memory that this procedure had happened would fade; and he would live another year blissfully unaware that he had ever been part of any other life than this. But Marla Sinjnovc—why was he thinking about her? Why was he afraid she was sad?

Tang, the bodyguard from this morning, came to the office door as he was stirring from the chair. She gave him the sort of once-over one gives to an invalid or a person who has just lost a close relative. “Do you need anything, Dr. Horton?”

“Dr. Sinjnovc. Did she leave?”

“Yes, sir. Right after the procedure.”

“Did she seem upset?”

Tang hesitated, her chin dimpling slightly. “More so than usual, yes, sir. I think it's appropriate that I say that much.”

“Do you know what memory she shows me?”

“No, sir. Are you remembering something from the session, sir, are you having a residual, because I could call—”

He shook his head. “No, nothing wrong. The recording of this session. Does she take it with her?”

“Yes. Every year I've been here.” Tang was getting uncomfortable so he nodded and turned to let her know that she could go. Remembering this morning, he attempted no undue familiarity. He shuffled the frames and packets on his desk.

The thought made him feel warm, that Marla was watching the tape, was watching him remember and forget. Why did it please him? What was Marla to him, after all? But still, maybe if she were to call him, or maybe if he were to call her....

He gave the empty memory box to his assistant, telling her to double-wipe the

code to make sure his information was erased. The rest of the day he spent on his orchid garden. By evening he had only a hazy inkling that the procedure had happened. That night he spoke to an associate on the hard-line and actually said, in all seriousness, “I don’t even think we knew about the Great Collapse where I grew up. I hardly remember a thing.”

In bed in the wee hours he dreamed a sandy-haired boy was leading him to the top of a slight rise, the path folded over with leaves and branches, the crest of the hill all awash with glow under the green canopy. The boy leading Morgan was eager but careful and kept looking back at Morgan with complete, utter tenderness. “Come on,” said the boy, “when we get to the top of the hill you’ll see. Brock’s there.”

But he never came to the top of the hill in the dream, he kept walking as his feet got heavier and the ground slipped back and the sandy-haired boy whose name Morgan could not remember appeared more and more frightened. His hand slipped away and Morgan stepped off the path into the tangled trees and was lost and could not breathe and woke up, looking at the flat, square windows of his bedroom.

The next morning on his turn through the park, Morgan remembered to bring gloves. The sky was lightening and clear birdcalls rose over Meteor Park.

Tang had come with him again, chin tucked in, studying the dry grass, her manner reserved and distant, showing no hint of yesterday.

“This morning’s client should be interesting,” he said.

“Who is it?”

“A pervert. A sexual offender of the child molesting type. They get violent when they realize who they used to be.” Morgan smiled, though he was not even looking in Tang’s direction. “Maybe it’s a sign things are getting better. We’re back to the ordinary run of human filth and vice. Not so many war criminals any more.”

Tang looked very reserved for a moment, then stared at the ground and something changed in her manner. “Do you remember what you asked me yesterday?”

“No. Not really. By tonight I won’t remember yesterday at all, I’ll go back to my base memory completely.”

“You wanted to know whether Dr. Sinjnovc seemed upset.”

“I remember now, yes.”

“She said something when she left. She said you didn’t follow the script this year, not at the end. I’m not even sure she was really talking to me.”

“I didn’t follow the script?” A happy feeling flooded him, suddenly. Why? He could hardly bear Marla Sinjnovc’s company even for a morning, she was vapid. So

why this feeling, that he was pleased at having surprised her?

For a moment he could almost see her younger, standing somewhere in the ice and snow, like something from a fairy tale, smoke or mist drifting around her head.

“I don’t know why they make me go through a recall anyway,” he said after a while, his heartbeat settling, his breathing relaxed. “I’m fine. What could there be for me to remember?”

Tang turned away, neither embarrassed nor comfortable, simply herself.

“A little hope,” she said, in that placid way of hers, and he found himself wondering, then and after, what she had meant.

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