

## JUST BETWEEN US

*Kamaria Romeo*

I am not delirious, nor have I come undone, but there has been spirit-infested smoke in my hair almost all of my life. Heat and smoke were the cause and they will be my cure. I set the fire in my trash can and stand above it, watching quietly as flames grow, hot and eager. As the fire grows, I turn, walk across the room, step into my closet and sit on the floor. Save for the crackling flames, the room is still. In a fire, smoke and poisonous gases will likely kill you before the flames do. Fire uses up the oxygen, producing smoke and poisonous gases. If you breathe them in, they can leave you groggy, confused, short of breath as they tempt you, lull and soothe you into a deep sleep. So I hug myself and wait for this darkness from the light to wrap itself around me, to touch my face, my lips, to curl into the dark empty spaces in my mouth and head and chest. I wait to slip into a sweet sleep, to become another gift for the flames.

## §

I was four years old when my sister Diana died from smoke inhalation. My parents said that a candle she'd left burning in her room had caused her bedroom to catch fire. She was found in her bedroom, overcome by the smoke and the heat of a fire in our old house. I'd seen a flame catch fabric and travel swiftly over it, overwhelming the material and opening a black hole until there wasn't much of anything left. I knew Diana had died in the fire and that there would be a wake at a mortuary the night before the funeral, but thinking I was too young, no one had really explained her death to me. So I imagined the flames racing over her, eating her entire body until it collapsed inward and there was nothing left but charred flesh and bones. I could not fathom why the grownups would place these remnants in an opened casket.

So when my parents and I went over to her casket during the wake, and my mother held my hand as we looked at Diana to say goodbye one last time, I'd braced myself. I was shocked to see her intact, her features unmarred, her hair neat and smooth, her arms crossed on her chest as if she were guarding herself. There wasn't even so much as a small cut on her. She bore no visible manifestation of death.

In a sense, I saw this as anticlimactic, but more than anything else, it gave me hope. Maybe there was a reason, other than her not coming back, for her lying in the nicely lined box. Adults maintained privacy about so many things. Perhaps there was an explanation for all of this, one they hadn't told me about, but if they did, then everything would make sense again. Maybe she would get up. I felt relief when thinking these things and might have gasped as my hand shot out and began shaking hers.

"Dihanah?" I said in my four-year-old rendition of Diana. Bare skin never felt so cold to me before or since.

"She can't hear you, son," my mother said softly.

I could feel a tremor running through my mother, but Diana did not move, remaining entirely indifferent to my touch, my call. My eyes raked her form. Her face and mouth were slack, yet rigid; she looked like herself, yet not. Her eyes were closed and she stayed perfectly still. She showed no sign of vulnerability, but her lying supine and unmoving seemed like a surrender.

Taking all of her in, her profound absence of motion and engagement, the vacancy, in that moment, I knew, without any words or explanations, just what death was.

And right then, I knew that a body could break and still appear unbroken.

The cold from her fingers moved up my hand and gathered in my chest, flooding me. Something broke and cracked and traveled through me, only to emerge in my eyes and mouth. Diana's indifference to my touch felt like a rejection, though it was a rejection she had every right to. It was everything, all of it, everything I couldn't say. It was a grayness, a quiet darkness that had wound around and around itself until it was a round mass with shape and dimension and was now coming loose and spreading up and outward. I covered my mouth with both hands, clamped my jaw and forced it down so I couldn't vomit any of it up. When I did, the gray pulled down into me—down, down and deep, nestling in my chest with the force of a magnet drawing in metal. Once in my chest it crowded my heart and lungs so they edged towards my ribs.

There I was with my newfound knowledge and the loss and the gray pulled in. But still, Diana looked so singular, her body separate and absent even from herself. I knew her empty vessel would be buried and put into deep darkness, isolated from me in some faraway terrain, so I placed the teddy bear I'd been clutching, gifted to me by my grandmother just a few days earlier, onto her crossed arms. When I did this, my mother, whose crying had abated, began to cry anew.

I wanted very badly to ask her about my sister's untouched body. And Diana's closed eyes made me wonder if they were even still under her lids, if they'd been lost as well. I wanted to ask about them too. But I did not want to add to my mother's sadness, so when we left the casket and sat together in the chairs in the viewing, I folded myself into my seat, sitting under the weight of it all, but feeling as loose as a broken bone.

I puzzled over my discovery, marveled that unbroken naked skin could feel like a fresh wound opening. And yet I remained very quiet for the rest of the viewing and for the ride back home. After all, I had done enough.

### §

I'm sixteen now, a year younger than Diana was when she died, and even now, I keep things to myself. I'm very good at it. My mom says I'm withdrawn; my dad calls it being introspective. Actually, it's that I'm avoiding them, frightened of what might come out. It is a dull silver powder coating everything in a slipperiness that makes it hard to hold onto myself, forcing a separation from my parents. It is thinking about what her body held—blood flowing back and forth, pulsing energy—being burned out of her, leaving her hollowed out. It is the memory of all that life, emptied out and stilled, only for her husk to be locked in on all sides by wood and dirt.

Once, when I was in my sixth-grade physical education class, I got too close to a classmate's swinging badminton racquet and took a wallop of a backhand to the side of my face. My cheek and eye and mouth felt hot, like they were cracking and would cave in. I was too stunned to even cry. My classmate apologized and asked if I was okay. Perhaps I nodded. My teacher let me sit out the rest of the period. My mouth was so sore I couldn't eat anything for a day or so after, but I never said anything to my parents.

One night, a year or so after we'd moved from the house Diana had died in, I was in our new house in pajamas and bare feet. I sat balancing myself on the ledge of my new bedroom window, facing away from the backyard. But then I went too far back, tumbled and fell right out of the window. Luckily, I landed on the retractable awning directly beneath my window and above our living room's sliding glass doors. I landed face up, and as I did, my throat narrowed to a thin line of fear as the wind was knocked out of me. My back hurt, but not too badly, and otherwise I was fine. But for a while, I just lay where I'd landed, staring straight up at the moon as it looked down at me, a bright and distant seeing eye. I saw stars too, and felt small and scared and cold.

At last, I stood slowly on the awning and scrambled back up into my window.

No sooner did my feet hit the floor than I began to cry. I cried myself tired. I'm told that I used to crawl into bed with Diana and snuggle with her. I don't remember this, although I do have a memory of her crying quietly while she and I were tucked into a bed together, my head resting on her chest. I don't remember why she was crying, but she said, "This is just between us. No telling Mamá and Papá, okay?" She would say that it was just between us when she snuck me treats or let me stay up later than I would have if Mom or Dad were home.

She was a luminary directing my way. I would follow her around and walk like her and talk like her and ask her why this and why that. So I never told on her. Never. That night as we lay in bed, I wrapped a chubby arm around her waist and squeezed.

"Don't cry, okay?" I said, and she squeezed me back, and I could feel her chest rising and falling and could hear her heart beating. We fell asleep like that, our breath and bodies tangled.

The night I fell out the window, I did not crawl into bed with my parents and I never did tell them about falling. Instead, I donned socks, displaced shoes to clear out a space on my closet floor, dragged pillows along with the large soft red blanket from my bed and the large purple teddy bear that my parents

had given me to replace Cuddles and put them all in the cleared-out space. Needing to feel held, I lined up the pillows in front of me, wrapped myself in the blanket and pressed my back against the wall.

Over the years, I would see Diana in waking dreams and in sleeping dreams. Now, drifting off, an image fills my mind: Diana curled up in a dim place in the earth, under the world. There are low dirt walls around her, holding her in. Her eyes are open, and there's a light burning inside her. She is lit from within, letting off a pure light that fills her and flickers on the walls. Her eyes are bright, and the light grows brighter and begins to thrum rhythmically. The rhythm quickens. But as it does, something shifts, slows, and I watch as a star goes nova. The glow dims, the light begins to die, and her brown eyes grow gray and clouded as her mouth issues thin gray threads which stream into my own mouth. Or maybe they're traveling out of me into her. I can't be sure.

I don't know if I am dreaming, and if I am, where the dream ends and I begin. I breathe deeply and press my back further into the closet wall so I can feel it pushing back. Soon, snug, and on the edge of sleep, I hear an echo in the night, whispering maybe, that crackles away when I listen for it. I shiver, a chill running up my arms and legs. Goosebumps come out on my skin, and I burrow deeper into my red blanket cocoon. Outside there is darkness and



moonlight, and I hear the wind blowing, picking up and pushing against the walls. I squeeze my teddy bear harder, stroke my pain into its fur. I push my back so hard against the wall that I can feel the knobs on my spine bruising. I press further.

“Don’t cry,” I say to teddy. “Be a big boy. Don’t cry.”

My sister had been asleep next to me, safe. It should have been me suffocated with flame. There had been dreams, now skinned and covered in soot and cold naked hands, once a glowing brown, now dusted in gray and pillows stuffed to bursting with it. I am so deserving of everything bad that ever happened to me and so much more.

### §

The human body is composed of elements, one of which is chlorine. It belongs in the body. It is necessary for life. Not much of it—less than one percent—but when it is outside the body, one of the chemicals found in smoke, it will injure the airways. Outside of the body, traveling into it, chlorine can make it so that you never feel anything ever again. It will put an end to the life that once needed it. And once dead, the body will break down into elements that nature might use.

Now, when I think of her death, I imagine gray serpentine tendrils slipping in and out of her nose and mouth. Beneath the walls of her skin and flesh, they sidle and wind their way around her organs to gather into a dark netting that turns her heart and lungs into gray rotting fruit. Something porous, soft even, did a hard and cruel thing, turned her insides into one long ash.

I try to keep my sister alive by holding onto fragments of her. In my room, I have pictures and some of Diana's books that survived the fire. I framed most of the pictures. In one, she's waving to the camera, almost as if she knew and was saying, *Here I am! Don't forget me!* She babysat me quite a bit, and among the pictures of her are several of us. My favorite is of her sitting cross-legged with me on her lap, a pacifier in my mouth. I'm turning my face up to look into hers as she smiles at the camera. With one-year-old me pressed into her, we could be mother and son. She was formed in the heat and darkness inside our mother's body; all of us similarly are. We grow, emerge, grow some more, and then one day leave the light and heat and sink into the darkness of the earth. I look at the picture and think about how, when it was taken, her organs were pink and red, working in concert to keep her alive. How I was the closest thing to a child she would ever have and how I look like her more now than ever. I have her bronzed complexion, her heart-shaped face, her height.

A stack of books, mostly works by Sylvia Plath, remained intact, and I keep them in a drawer next to some of her clothes—a t-shirt, a blouse, a pair of socks and jeans that had been in the laundry room. I've read all the books and wear the socks sometimes, but never did wear the clothes. I didn't want them to lose her scent. But after a while, the clothes began to smell musty and I was forced to wash them.

I'd found a ring of hers in the jeans pocket. It's a silver infinity heart ring with a diamond set in it, a sweet sixteen present. The inscription reads, "Siempre con amor, Mamá y Papá." "With love always, Mom and Dad." It feels more like a gift for me though, a sacred token, a blessing left just for me to find. I wear it on a chain around my neck and reach for it often.

There are pictures, books and clothes in a drawer, a treasured ring—objects and thin memories. She is tucked into frames in paper-thin spaces, and every day I am losing her face, the sound of her voice, her smell. I try to bring her back to me. Although I washed her clothes, I sit on the carpet before the drawer that holds her things, open it, bring the blouse up to my face and close my eyes, breathing in. But she does not come back to me; I do not see her face in my mind so well. I was so young when she died that the things I do remember are threadbare afterimages, and the face I see is the one gazing back at me

from a picture frame. I'm recalling gone things and a gone person, and even the drawer itself looks like a small coffin.

But I look at her pictures and look in the mirror so she won't be long ago and far away. The past is gone, and her things are just artifacts where our history should be, a distorted extension of a future that will never be. There's so much time missing. At times I try to fill it in and mourn the death of how old she would have been now, the death of her laugh. I cry for the spouse she might have had, for the picture of her wearing a cap and gown, the one of her wearing a wedding dress, the one of her holding the hand of a child that really was hers. I cry for the friends she will never have, the foods she will never taste. Through the years, I've collected books of all kinds on fires and fire deaths. My parents believe that my sister's death appeals to me. They don't know the half of it.

## §

When I was a teenager, a dislocation took place. The gray I'd choked down at Diana's funeral had been still for most of my life, but after Thanksgiving of the year I turned fourteen, the cluster began to spread to other parts of my body. It did not fall apart, but flecks of it began to drift loose like spores, spreading under my skin, into my head, my eyes, behind my eyes, my nose,

my throat, my tongue. Not overwhelming them—but as they drifted, they dragged. The spores scraped away bits of me, lifting them up and carrying them away. They left black and gray streaks in their wake. I was being hollowed out, brought to the edge of something.

I did not feel good in my body. I dreamed of Diana then, of long filaments traveling into my insides to make them look like hers when she died: charred trails and shadows seared into throat and lungs and blood vessels. I felt incorporeal, little more than a bundle of wrung-out clothes that existed mostly in bed as mostly chemicals and regret. I spent almost all of the time I wasn't in school—and I was there rarely—asleep. Yet, for all my sleeping, I was constantly exhausted. I would lose days as night would slip into day into another night. And for someone who barely existed, I starting eating more, too much even.

I could not muster up the proper feelings for much of anything—not boredom, not anxiety, not awe, not frustration, not anything. Nothing was marked by a sense of occasion, certainly not homework or exams or class readings. My grades began to slip; all I wanted was to be left alone in this cold blank space, to be no one and to feel nothing.

My parents, seeing something come loose, gave it a name. They said Diana had had something called seasonal affective disorder, fittingly, SAD for short, and as it turns out, I have it too. It's a type of depression that usually comes on in the fall when the days grow shorter and sunlight becomes scarcer. It retreats in spring. And yes, my depression did tend to follow a seasonal pattern, but I knew that it was a gray dust with no name floating blindly through me.

My parents gave what they saw a name to better contain and manage it because they believed that they could. If I could not hold onto myself, my parents would hold onto me for me. They would not let the disorder, nor winter nor anything else, close in on me. They would not lose another child to the gray. There was fighting that needed to be done and since I couldn't do it, they would fight and win for me.

So they fight and this is what the fight looks like: I'm taken to a doctor who says, yes, you do have this disorder and you should come see me twice a week for talk therapy and undergo light therapy. So I do. I talk to this doctor twice a week, and I get as much sunlight as I can on the days that I can. On the days when sunlight is in short supply, I sit next to full-spectrum lights, like a dormant lizard sunning itself on a rock. And sometimes, I sit by the light of a fire in our fireplace at home. I've always liked fireplaces. They confine the

flames, restrain their violent magic while imbuing the air around them with warmth. Sitting by our fireplace was like having a large warm wing open over me, like having light poured onto me. You can look at fires in fireplaces, at this wild thing made less free, and think that fires are safe.

My depression did not disappear. The therapies and the light, along with the heat from the fire, did not melt the gray away, but I did feel a layer of gray roll back as my spirits lifted. Come spring, I was back to attending all my classes and getting to them on time. I was back to going to my after-school basketball program and being with friends.

Yet the following November, I looked at the white ash of the silent fireplace and wanted only to sit in this bed of ashes. It looked like smoke solidified, frozen in time, and I wanted to unfold both hands, to sink them deep into it, lift it up and spread it over my face, my hair, my arms and my chest. I wanted the ashes to make cuts, open me up as I dragged them roughly across my skin and let the blood rise. Then I would close myself up again by jamming bloody ashes into my mouth, into that broken place in my face. I would choke the gray back down and bar the creeping disorder from ever seeing light.

But instead, I dropped to my knees in front of the fireplace as though praying, collected a fistful of ashes, lifted it to my face and examined it, then pressed

my tongue up against it. It tasted like something opening and releasing, a fresh cut or a dark, rainy sky. It was a gritty density in my mouth, and I could feel the cluster shifting and stirring and tightening.

Maybe my parents were right, maybe I do have what Diana had. Maybe it was Diana's curse flung to me from her grave. I stuck my tongue out and tasted some more.

### §

One day, just a few weeks after the accident, at my mother's mother's house, I walked past the room my parents were staying in. I found it odd that there was no sound coming from the room, although I knew that they were both in there. The door was cracked open, so I peeked through to see my parents sitting up in the bed together, not speaking, but holding hands and staring straight in front of them. They looked tired and were very still, and their stares seemed to stretch to infinity, their gazes bottomless. Their eyes seemed fixed on the same spot. Unaware that I was watching, they were not attempting to hide their pain and loss. They were not Mamá and Papá, but Samuel and Isabella. Their faces were the faces of my parents, but something about them was unknown to me. They sat there together, but I felt a distance between them.



I felt them remembering, felt the grief pressing down, and after what seemed like a very long time, it came out of my father's mouth when he let out a long, slow sigh. As he did, my mother rested her head on his shoulder, and they seemed to fold and wilt into each other under the weight of it all. The sigh was the sound of something lost. An open wound with unbroken skin growing wider, stretching the distance between my parents and me. Hearing the sigh made me aware that I'd been holding my breath and that they were exposed to my peeping. I looked away then, and exhaling, I hurried down the hall.

§

Something else I've never told my parents: one day I walked into Diana's room. The lights were dimmed, and I found her on the floor of her closet, one door open. There was soft, sad music playing. She was lying in a nest of pillows, facing the room. She didn't seem to see me at first, and while she smiled when she did see me, she was focusing somewhere, not on me. I didn't recognize her or the smile. That frightened me. She mumbled something as she motioned for me to come closer. Her eyes looked at me, and they were different too, blank and red and liquid.

"Dihanah?" I said.

She only sighed in response, and her lips trembled. When I moved closer, she moved fitfully, as if there were something under her and she was too tired to remove it. She turned and rolled over onto her other side to face the back of the closet, her back to me. I shook her shoulder.

“Dihanah?” She was leaden yet pliable and didn’t respond or move.

I turned and ran, fleeing to my room. I grabbed Cuddles off my bed before diving under it. As I clutched him, I told him it would be okay, everything would be okay.

## §

My inaugural fire setting took place when I was four years old. That one was an accident. I went into Diana’s bedroom, Cuddles in tow. That day, I went into what I thought was her empty bedroom and, to my delight, found contraband—a cigarette lighter, something I’d been told not to touch—sitting right there on her nightstand. I picked up the lighter and sat on Diana’s bed, Cuddles watching as small quiet hands tried flicking the lighter. I fumbled with it until I made a flame catch and rise and dance the way I’d seen Diana do. Pleased with myself, I walked over to the candles she kept on her windowsill. Once there, I sparked the lighter again to light the peach scented one she kept there. Without warning, and before I could even register shock, the

soft glowing tongue of light escaped and climbed onto the pink and blue butterfly pattern on the white gossamer curtain, curling it.

“Stop! Stop it!” I pleaded with the flames.

But, of course, once set free, there was no containing this creature which stubbornly followed its own path, moving aggressively up the curtain. I watched in wonder as one part of the curtain came apart, first blackening, then collapsing into nothing. I backed away until I hit the bed and then scrambled onto it, yelling for help. I made a frantic dash for the door and ran down the hallway as if chased by hounds.

The liquid light had escaped its box and, energized, had attained a size I could have scarcely imagined. But what petrified me more than that—more than the fierce heat and the pervasive smoke that assailed my nostrils, more than how something that had begun as a thread of light had bloomed in no time into a hot, feverish muscle, more than the *whoomp!* the fire made as it grew—was how the curtain had opened, as if being torn by an unseen hand, before crumbling and disintegrating.

My mother heard me yelling and came running.

“Fire! Mom, FIRE!” I managed while pointing to Diana’s bedroom door.

I watched as she grabbed the fire extinguisher from her own room, and I was behind her when she ran down the hallway to Diana's room. But it was like watching her from a distance: I was there, yet wasn't; and when I looked into the room, it was a different room. Both curtains were gone, the bookshelf was awash in flames, and the creature had spread upward. The ceiling had vanished completely, lost beneath the thick smoke that had risen. Above us, a dark floating sea of solid gray had spread out. I could hear my mom telling me to get back as she sprayed the flames back and forth until they were finally extinguished. Less than five minutes had passed from the time the curtain caught fire until then; it felt more like five days.

No one knew Diana was even at home until the firefighters found her crumpled on the floor of her closet. She'd skipped basketball practice and had come home early and gone into a cool, quiet place to drink and get high. She'd passed out before being overcome by the smoke and gases. Yet, the smoke and gases had known where she was and found their way through closed closet doors and into her airways.

She was rushed to the hospital, but she never woke from her pot-induced sleep. Sometimes when a person is high and they pass out, they will not be bothered by heat or noise. Nothing will reach them, nothing will touch them.

Nothing but smoke eager to consume them, to steal their breath as they lie defenseless and unable to put up a fight. They're overcome, but it's a sweet overcoming, and I hope, I hope she was in a soft twilight, that it was as simple as slipping gently from heat and darkness into the cold oblivion of death. I believe this. I need to.

The fire was ruled an accident. A teenager, trying to mask the scent of weed, had left a candle burning too close to a curtain and the curtain caught fire. I never said otherwise.

### §

Diana's whole life—and mine and Mamá's and Papá's—held, shook and crumbled away between two small hands, a lighter slicing through time.

I have lost the fight, but the end can lead to a place of warmth and darkness. And so dying is no more drastic a shift than stepping into the dark at last, than falling asleep on a closet floor.

Not every darkness is unfamiliar. Like everyone else, I'd begun my life cloaked in darkness, yet I had spent so much of my life in it. My body is made up of chemicals and water and will break down into elements. There are gray shadows in mine though, needing to rise up. I need to help them escape. I need to stop holding my breath and holding them in. And the truth is locked in my

chest, in my throat, making it harder to breathe, so I press my throat up against a cold gray blade to help release that too.

Home alone, I poured vodka into the trash can across the room from my bed and then took a long swig from the bottle. I put the bottle down and pulled a book of matches from my pants pocket, tore off a match, lit it and studied it, watched it burn steadily as it traveled down the shaft. Right before it reached my fingers, I flung it into the can in one fluid motion. It landed, and a flame hatched on the paper within.

I could feel heat as warm as breath but not as close. I realized I was making a fist when my heart began beating in my palm. I uncurled it and studied it—a fire-setting, life-ending hand. I used it to pick up the vodka bottle and with it, walked over to my closet and into it to sit on the floor. I pulled my legs up under me, taking in the nascent flames, watching them grow and crawl and creep higher. I remembered the shocking heat from the waves of hot air in Diana's room, how the room transformed into the sun.

I sent the same email to both my parents:

*Dear Mami and Papi,*

*I know what I am doing. It should have been me who died that day.*

*The fire in Diana's room was no accident. I was playing with a lighter and the light caught the curtain in her room.*

*I am so sorry I kept you from the truth for all these years. You will be better off without a son like me, someone who kills his own sister and then goes on to lie about it for so, so long. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about her.*

*I never did leave that room. You tried to help me find my way out, but now I'm leaving it once and for all the only way I can.*

*Allan*

I guzzle from the bottle again, finish it and then lie down in the closet, leaving the door open. The alcohol makes me feel good in my body as I close my eyes and open my mouth, breathing deeply, waiting for what will happen next. Maybe the poisoned air will get to me before the flames do, or maybe the flames will open me up in a way Diana never knew. The flames crackle and the room grows warmer, but I do not open my eyes. I feel sleepy, though that could be from the alcohol.

She would have been thirty now. I think about that day, the ending of both her and me, the greedy fire. I feel my chest being pressed down on, and

I'm outside lying on the awning again, on a ledge, swallowing night air that bruises me inside. The gray mass now has bits of cloth and picture paper stuck to it. Night air travels to my core to join with the gray cluster, to that place where it lives beneath my skin, where no one can see. When I open my eyes, lying on my back, I see a moon, and I feel dizzy from being up that high. I no longer feel warm, or maybe the heat is so much that I only feel warm. The smoke travels to the cluster too.

And now the cluster breaks, falls apart, and as it does, I can feel myself disintegrating, flaking away and scattering. As my body falls apart, I breathe deeply to gulp more air, but the smoke has stopped traveling into me. I see it moving out of me as I cough clouds of gray. Particles spill out of me in ever-widening circles around the moon. Ashes to ashes, flesh shedding into particles. At last, the pressure in my chest lessens and the relief is so profound and intense it pitches me right off the edge. Tumbling, I'm met with an awareness that the partition between life and death is quite slim, as thin and as vaporous as a chemical traveling the wrong way through a specialized air tunnel. It is no wider than the trachea or even the esophagus, a soft, narrow vulnerable road that fills with so many tiny red cuts if you swallow a spent fire and send



it traveling down your throat. It is as thin as a curtain or the gray tendrils moving from one liquor-laced mouth to another.

My eyes close. Two lives travel the same path from beginning to end, chambered in the same womb, then in closets, then in coffins. After years of dying here now is death, and here I don't need chlorine or oxygen or breath.

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