

SOLVING A MURDER ISN'T EASY
WHEN YOU WERE THE VICTIM



EXPOSURES

A NOVELLA
BY DAVID SALCIDO

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All characters in this story are fictional. Any resemblance to real individuals—either living or dead—is purely coincidental.

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There are some questions in this world that are beyond all comprehension. Like, why I'm here. That isn't as philosophical a reflection as it might appear. You see, weird as it sounds, I'm dead. I don't know how or why, but I am most definitely dead. I know this because of my present state, or non-state if you will. I am completely detached from my body, which is no where in sight. I know it because nobody in the room seems to be aware of my presence. And, I know it because of the mystery I'm watching unfold with interest.

I have just been the witness to a police interrogation of my beautiful wife Gail. She's sitting on the couch, in this, our living room, trying to hold herself together. Nearby is a box of tissues, clear indication, along with the crushed wad held tightly in her right fist, that the task hasn't been an easy one.

It seems that I have disappeared, and recently by the looks of it.

This is the first report. The officer asking the questions has been very direct and somewhat neutral as he fires off general questions concerning physical description, habits, and other personal statistics of the allegedly disappeared Daniel McBain. Me.

I can tell that he doesn't fully believe the circumstances to be what they seem. Neither does the female officer who stands behind Gail languidly flipping through one of my photo albums, stifling a yawn.

"Is this a picture of your husband with the friend you reported as the last person who may have seen him?"

Gail turns and squints at the album, held up for her to see by the officer. "Yes," she says. "It is."

Curious. The photo in question is one of me and Grady Kline. In it I'm leaning against the bed of Grady's truck, while Grady, a blond giant of a man, stands behind me, his arms draped around me in a loose hug, his bearded chin resting on my right shoulder. A very uncharacteristic pose for macho homophobe Grady. We had been drinking heavily at the time, and the gesture had surprised both myself and Gail, who had taken the picture. Grady has never been one for displays of affection toward anybody; especially towards friends of the same gender.

"Do you mind if we take the photo with us, along with the others you provided?"

Gail shakes her head and turns back to the other waiting officer. 'Damn,' I think. 'We're never going to see that photo again.' Then I remember my predicament. I shouldn't be seeing it at all. Something like fear washes over me and the scene starts to waver, like the reception is going out on a life-size television set. I shake off the feeling and everything becomes clear again.

I've missed what the officer has said to Gail. She's nodding.

"Yes," she says. "He lived with us for about four months, but that was over two years ago. My husband got him a job at the magazine where he works and he's lived on his own since then."

"Do you have Mr. Kline's address?"

Gail nods, gets up from the couch and walks woodenly to the rolodex we keep next to the telephone. She returns with a card, which she hands to the officer. He dutifully copies the information onto his notepad, then flips the page and writes something else onto a clean piece of paper.

“This is my name and badge number,” he says, ripping the page out of the notepad and handing it to her. “If you can think of anything else which may help us, please don’t hesitate to call.”

She takes the paper and stares at it numbly. From the back of the house I hear a rustling. It isn’t until the baby starts to cry that the others react. Gail and the officer stand up. He looks over at his companion, who nods.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. McBain. We’ll do everything we can to find your husband. We can show ourselves out.” Gail follows them to the door anyway, closes it behind them, locks it and goes to attend to the baby.

I sit, wondering how long it has been since my “disappearance.” I don’t remember anything at all. My last memory is of a hurried breakfast, a very sloppy kiss from ten-month-old Tori, my daughter, and Gail handing me something. A book. That’s where it starts getting fuzzy. I don’t even remember leaving the house.

Gail enters the room again with Tori, and goes about the tasks of warming up her bottle. I watch the domestic scene with sadness, but find that tears are no longer available to me. I stand, struggling with my emotions as the scene shifts in and out of focus, then freeze as Tori looks over her mother’s shoulder, her eyes coming to rest on me. Impossibly, she smiles and holds out her arms. “Da da,” she says. Gail stops what she’s doing, hugs the baby hard and starts to sob.

I hear a scream. The world seems to shatter around me. As oblivion overtakes me, the last sounds I am aware of are the frightened cry of little Tori, and another scream ripping from my throat. Then cold, dark nothing.

The sound of my name being repeated, over and over again, draws me out of the void. It's Grady. He's looking out the window of his apartment. Over his shoulder I see the two officers walking up the stairs. Grady stinks of alcohol and fear. His blond hair is uncombed. "Dan, Dan, Dan," he says for the umpteenth time. The doorbell rings. I watch as Grady lights a cigarette, paces back and forth twice as though trying to make up his mind. The bell rings again, and he turns abruptly to open the door.

"Grady Kline?" the female officer asks.

"Yeah."

"We'd like to ask you a few questions, if we may."

"What about?" Grady blows a stream of smoke out the side of his mouth, and takes another deep drag on his cigarette.

"We're investigating the disappearance of one, Daniel McBain."

Grady's brow furrows. He looks from one officer to the other, then back again. "What do you mean, disappearance?"

"He hasn't been seen for five days. We assumed you were aware of the situation."

Grady pauses, then nods, opening the screen door to invite the officers in. "Yeah, I knew that he hasn't been around, we work together. He hasn't been in the office all week. I figured that he was sick or something."

"You weren't curious?" the male officer asks offhandedly, looking around the room with seeming disinterest.

Grady closes the door. "Yeah, I was curious. But we've just been so busy that I haven't had time to ask any questions, y'know?"

“Your boss was aware of the situation.” The officer looks hard at Grady, who looks away and stabs out his cigarette.

“Yeah, so? You know how it is with bosses. They keep to themselves.” Finding a discarded pack, he fishes another out and lights it.

“Mm hm. You also signed a card of condolence to his wife, which she received from your place of employment yesterday.”

Grady looks up angrily. “I told you, I thought he was sick! Look, what’s this all about, anyway?”

The female officer gestures to a place on a nearby couch. “Mind if we sit down?”

“Yeah,” Grady says, puffing angrily. “I do, don’t you have to have a warrant or something to come in here and ask me questions like this?”

“No, Mr. Kline, we don’t. You invited us inside, and these questions are just routine. You were the last person who saw Mr. McBain...”

“Who says I was the last person to see him? A lot of people saw him last week.”

“Yes, that’s true. But according to his wife, you saw him on Saturday. The day he disappeared.”

“His wife? She’s wrong. I told her that when she called looking for him. We were supposed to get together on Saturday, but he never showed.” Grady’s pacing now, drawing heavily on his cigarette.

“I see,” the officer says. “Would you be willing to make an official statement to that effect?”

He stops pacing. "What do you mean... sign something?"

"That's right," the officer says, picking lint from her pressed uniform. "All part of the formalities."

Grady looks from one to the other officer. "Yeah, I guess so. I wouldn't have to go to court or anything would I?"

The male officer, who had been taking out a small notepad, looks up with interest. "There's no indication that it will ever get to that point, Mr. Kline. Right now we're just trying to piece together the parts of a puzzle. These things rarely get beyond the investigation stage. For all we know, Mr. McBain just got a wild hair and took off for a while. It happens all the time. The person who allegedly disappeared shows up several months down the line in another state, with another name and no intentions of ever going back to the life he or she has left behind. You know how it is."

Grady drops down to perch on the edge of a chair, chewing on the cuticle of his little finger and squinting against the smoke curling up from the cigarette just inches from his face. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Then you'll come down and make the statement?"

"All I have to say is that I didn't see him on Saturday?"

"That's it," the officer says smiling. "And answer a few routine questions concerning your relationship with the subject. All part of the formalities."

Grady hesitates, then nods.

"Good." the officer says. The other officer joins him and they move toward the door. "Oh, by the way, Mr. Kline," he says. "What exactly were you and Mr. McBain going to be doing on Saturday?"

"Nothing," Grady says. "Just hanging out together. Drink a few

brews. Watch the game on the tube. You know, guy stuff.”

“Hm,” the officer says, opening the door. “That’s very interesting. Mrs. McBain says that Mr. McBain had been talking about the mountains. She said that he had dressed for hiking and that he had taken two of his cameras with him, along with several rolls of film. She was under the impression that Mr. McBain was going to be taking pictures of you.”

Grady stiffens. “Of me,” he says a little too loudly. “Why would he be taking pictures of me?”

The officer shrugs. “I don’t know, it was... is... his profession isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Grady says. “I mean... he’s a photographer at the magazine we work for, but...”

“You work out a lot, don’t you Mr. Kline?” the officer says stepping outside the apartment, his partner close on his heels.

“Yeah, everyday. It relieves the tension.” A long pause. Grady looks confused, then angry. “So?”

“Just wondering,” the officer says looking across the balcony, then turning his attention back to Grady. “You seem to be in good shape.”

“Great shape,” the female officer adds.

“Thanks,” Grady says.

The male officer smiles. “You just come downtown and we’ll get your official statement all taken care of, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Grady says, watching the officers as they walk down the stairs and out of sight. He closes the door. “Fuck!” he says,

then lights another cigarette and stares across the room at a book sitting on a cluttered shelf. I feel the hairs prickling along my neck. It's the book that Gail had handed me on Saturday morning. The last thing I remember with any clarity. Stepping across the room, Grady picks the book up, looks around him, then shoves it under the couch, stuffing a discarded sock and a dirty plate in after it.

I'm really confused now.

Grady stands up and begins pacing the floor again, turning inward, completely shutting out the world around him. I don't know how many times I've watched him do it, roaming the room like a caged animal, a haunted look on his face, as though completely absorbed by horrors which only he can see. He's unreachable when he does this, and he does it often. It's a phenomenon I have come to refer to as a "shutout," for lack of a better word. I've learned from experience that it's best to simply let him tire himself out--let the nightmares run their course. So I watch, as I have so many times before. And I wait.

I remember the fear in Gail's voice the first time she was witness to one of Grady's shutouts. "I don't like it, Dan," she said. "He looks like he's about to get violent."

"He won't get violent," I reassured her. "I've seen him do this before. He's just buried deep in his own thoughts. He'll be alright. He has to think things out, that's all."

I could tell that she wasn't being dissuaded. "Look," I said, resting my hands on her shoulders, "Grady's been through a lot recently. He's got a lot of things to work out. His parents won't have anything to do with him. The Center has done everything they can for him. He's got to start his life over again. That's got to be scary."

Gail was struggling with something, and I thought I knew what

it was. "He'll only be here for a few weeks," I said. "Just until we can find him a job and a place of his own. I'm going to talk to Richards in shipping on Monday to see if maybe he can find a place for Grady there. Okay? Everything will be alright. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Or to me."

She had smiled then. A small, quiet smile that said she didn't quite believe me but that she trusted me.

She had trusted me before, and she was accustomed to my bringing home "lost boys" to care for. It was a weakness of mine. I had been doing it all my life and hadn't stopped even when I married Gail. It seemed we always had someone living under our roof with us, though I must admit, nobody as bad off, or as obviously disturbed, as Grady was then.

I may have mentioned it before, but if I did, it bears repeating. Grady Kline is a homophobe. We had had more than a few heated arguments on the subject, when he would misinterpret a kindness on the part of some person of the male gender as something other than what was intended. Friends, workmates, strangers; none were safe from the paranoid workings of Grady's overheated imagination. Even I had come under fire on several occasions, though never physically. I couldn't say the same for others. A female friend of mine had pinned him accurately when she had judged him to be "in a homosexual panic" after just one meeting.

Why do I feel it important that this be mentioned? To serve a point. Grady Kline didn't trust many people. Especially men. His mother had been the closest to him until the incident. A devout Catholic, she never forgave him after his attempted suicide by drug overdose, two-and-a-half years ago. After that, she never returned his letters or his calls. I discovered all this while doing volunteer work for the Drug Rehab Center on weekends, where I would man phones and talk to the patients when they needed a shoulder to cry on. It was there that I came, over time, to serve as confidant and counselor to the big, blond giant.

None of the doctors were really sure just why Grady had taken to me, out of all the people he encountered through the course of a week. They just knew that he would keep everything bottled up until Saturday afternoon when I would arrive, then speak to me in hushed tones about the wanderings his overactive mind had taken.

He was sure that all the men in the Center, doctors included, were interested in him sexually. He was sure that they were all leering at him behind his back, and soon began refusing to shower or bathe during the week, for fear that one of them might see him naked. Guarding the shower stall on Tuesday and Thursday evenings came to be one of my unofficial duties at the Center. For some strange reason, which I never quite fathomed, I was the only person he trusted with this delicate task.

Of course, I never told his doctors what he was thinking. I simply told them that he was shy, and lived by a very strict Catholic code. It seemed to satisfy them.

It didn't seem to bother them, overloaded as they were, that his progress hinged on my continued visits. He got stronger, and, at my suggestion, began working out. He gained a peculiar sense of humor, which he only shared with me. I would chide him for slacking and he would joke that I was making him into the man of my dreams. I would retort that, though it was true I was making him into the man of somebody's dreams, hairy Greek gods weren't my cup of tea. He seemed to like that analogy, and eventually had me bring in books on mythology so he could read up on these gods I often referred to.

I knew that he was better when he began to argue with me over little things, like the fact that I drank too much caffeine, and started flirting with the nurses. Being no professional, I was pretty proud at what I had accomplished. That was one of the reasons I had agreed to take him in when he was finally dismissed from the Center. I was the only person he really trusted. He often said that he thought of me as his older brother. I knew things about Grady

that even his mother never knew. There are just some things that you don't tell your mother, but he told me. That put me in a special category. I guess you could say that I was Grady's best friend.

"Dan, Dan, Dan," Grady says. It draws me back to the present, where he is still pacing in a room full of smoke. Then again, "Dan, Dan, Dan," over and over like a mantra which seems to move through me, charging me with a strange electrical pulse. I'm not sure what's happening, but I don't fight it.

I begin to hear things. Faraway whispers and a sound like little bells. The sounds fade in and out of my perception, but seem to become stronger every time they return.

Voices shout out at me, but I can't understand what they're saying.

The smoke in the room seems to be caught in a slowly forming whirlpool with me as the vortex. Grady takes no notice, lost in his thoughts as his pacing continues.

The phenomenon intensifies and soon I am surrounded by a hurricane of sound, and lightning seems to crackle through the smoke whirling around me. I want to be afraid, but I know that if I allow it I will lose all of this, and I want to understand more than I want to fear.

Pressure begins to build behind my eyes as the voices buffet me like a palpable force. How much longer can I let this madness build, I wonder, before I can stand it no more. I am no closer to understanding what is happening to me when suddenly I find myself beginning to dissipate.

Panic overtakes me and everything begins to break apart. A scream rips from my throat. A name. "Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaddddddd ddddddyyyyyyyyy!!!!!!!"

The hurricane stops. I am whole again. Across the room from me Grady stands shock still, his eyes wide, his mouth open, all color gone from his face. He is staring at me. Not through me, as he and everyone else has done since this thing happened to me. He is looking directly into my eyes. And he is afraid.

“Grady?” I say, still not sure what’s going on. “Can you see me?”

He reacts like he’s been punched, reeling backwards against the wall. “GET AWAY FROM ME!” he screams. “GET AWAY! YOU’RE NOT REAL! GET AWAY!”

I move toward him and he slides sideways, along the wall, his eyes widening in terror. “Who are you?” he asks. “What do you want?”

“Grady,” I say, reaching out to him. “It’s me, Dan.”

He begins to shake his head violently. “No!” he says. “You can’t be here! You can’t!”

I stop advancing and drop my arm. “Can’t?” The tone in his voice and the look on his face make me ask the question. “Grady... am I dead?”

He only stares at me, his eyes becoming unfocused. “No!” he says, “No, no, no...”

‘Damn,’ I think, ‘I’m losing him.’ I don’t know if it’s an answer to my question I’m getting or a complete freak out. Sweat is rolling down his face as he begins to shake his head violently. “No! No. No. No....”

“Grady!” I yell, interrupting his frightened babble. “Why am I here? What happened to me?”

“I didn’t do it!” He squeezes his eyes shut and turns away from me. His face and the front of his shirt are damp with sweat.

"Didn't do what, Grady? What happened?" I reach out to grab his shoulders and shake him. He flinches away.

"GO AWAY!" he screams, and suddenly I feel myself fading. Grady loses consciousness and the peculiar bond which links us melts away. The world begins to fade around me, and suddenly a trio of disjointed images flash across my noncorporeal brain.

...Grady sitting across from me.

"I've never had anybody take pictures of me like that," he's saying. "But I want to send them to Sammie for her birthday."

"No biggie," I hear myself replying. "We can do it on Saturday and I can have them to you by Monday."

Grady is smiling a conspiratorial smile. "I've never done anything like this before," he repeats. "We'll have to go somewhere where nobody can see us. Maybe the mountains..."

"Don't worry about it," I'm saying. "You've never looked better. She's gonna love 'em."

"You think?" he asks, still smiling.

"Sure," I say and we both start laughing."

Fade out...

Then,

...Grady is laying languidly on his bed, naked.

"Lift your head," my voice instructs him. "And look in this direction using only your eyes." He does so, and there is a flash.

"Now, lay back," I tell him.

He does so.

"I'm going to stand over you on the bed to get one from an angle looking down." I climb onto the bed and stand straddling his naked body. He's looking up expectantly. "Put your hand behind your head, under the pillow. Turn your head and close your eyes. You're asleep now. Right. Now let the other hand rest on your stomach. Relax! Don't be so stiff."

I reach down and lift his arm. "Now just let it drop." I let go the arm and it falls naturally onto his bare stomach. "Great."

I lift the top sheet and arrange it over his semi-erect penis. It falls with just the right amount of shadow. I'm pleased.

"Okay, now take a deep breath and let it out slowly." He does this and I snap off a couple of shots. "Great," I say. "You can relax now."

He opens his eyes and looks down at himself with a grin. "Down boy!" he commands, but the excited organ only becomes more insistent.

I leap off the bed, and fetch Grady's half-full beer bottle from a nearby shelf. He drinks it down in three big swallows. Turning I see five more just like it on the shelf.

"Ready to hit the trail?" I ask him.

"Yeah," he says. "Let me just take a piss and get dressed, first." I nod and begin unwinding the film in my camera.

Fade out...

Then,

...Grady is driving, laughing, drinking a beer.

"Why don't you slow down on those," I say. "You've already had two six packs."

He turns to me with a grin. "Who's counting? Besides, I need 'em. They help me relax. You don't want me too stiff, do you?"

I laugh. "No, but I don't think you want to be too limp either."

"Hell," he says. "I do my best work when I'm shit-faced." He pokes at the noticeable bulge in his lap with the bottle. "See there. Eveready. Sammie's gonna cream when she sees these pictures."

Fade out...

'What the hell is going on?' I wonder. None of it makes any sense! Why did Grady lie to Gail and the police? The presence of that book, whatever it is, suggests that he did indeed see me on Saturday. Something is definitely not right here, and I can't quite put my finger on it. Grady knows something. Something which is scaring the shit out of him.

Did he see what happened to me? And did whatever it was he saw frighten him to silence? Did someone threaten him?

I have to find out.

The fragments of my own splintered memory are offering no answers, only more questions. That leaves Grady, and maybe Gail.

The answer is here somewhere, and I won't rest until I find out what it is. That thought foremost on my mind, I allow myself to be drawn back into the blackness of the void.

2

“What do you mean you’re closing the case? Have you found my husband?”

It’s Gail, talking on the telephone with the police.

“Under what circumstances? You haven’t done anything!” A long pause. “Wait a minute! Don’t you hang up on me! Let me talk to the officer in charge of the investigation. Officer...” she fumbles with the piece of paper the officer handed her during her interrogation. “...Officer Mays. Badge number 379.” Another, shorter pause.

“Taken off the case? When? Oh for God’s sake! Look, whoever you are, my husband has disappeared under very mysterious circumstances. He’s been missing for over a week now. Don’t you think that warrants a little effort on the police department’s part to try and find out what happened to him?”

I can hear the exasperated tones of the person on the other end of the line, but can’t make out what he or she is saying. Watching Gail’s face tells me what I want to know.

“And it doesn’t bother you that Grady Kline has disappeared, either?”

Pause.

“Well that doesn’t surprise me. I’ve been trying to get hold of Grady myself, but the magazine says that he hasn’t been to work since Wednesday, and he doesn’t answer his phone at home.”

Pause.

“Sick! You can’t be serious! You just said that he failed to go in to give his report, and now you’re saying that because he didn’t answer his phone he might be sick? Don’t you think this whole thing is just a little peculiar?”

Pause.

“Mm hm. Right. Okay, then what about the book... did you find the book?”

Shotgun pause.

“The book my husband took with him the morning before he disappeared. The book intended for Grady.”

A buzz from the receiver.

“Look, if my husband saw him Saturday morning, then he has that book. It’s not something that he would just throw away!”

Another impatient buzz.

“Because I know Grady Kline. He’s got a voracious appetite for mythology. It’s an obsession with him. The book that Daniel took him was a limited edition that he picked up at an estate sale. I told the police all of this a week ago!”

The pause is longer this time, the buzz from the receiver telling me that a lecture is in progress. It’s time for the old brush off. Gail closes her eyes, her teeth grinding.

“Okay,” she says finally, cutting off the buzz. “I’ve had enough of this. The newspaper has been calling me everyday for the last week, but I’ve been putting them off, per the police department’s instructions. Maybe you don’t know who my husband is, maybe

he doesn't seem important enough for you to bother, but there are certain people who think otherwise. Daniel does freelance work for the paper. He's got friends there. I think they would be very interested in how the police have handled this case. I think they would be interested in what I've told you about that book. And I think they would be very interested in how you've let the only person who may have been with him before his disappearance, just disappear himself."

Silence from the other end of the line, then a clipped series of buzzes. Gail relaxes visibly, with a sigh.

"Yes," she says quietly. "That would be very nice."

Pause.

"No I'll be here all day. He can call at any time."

Pause.

"Yes. Thank you."

The line goes dead and Gail sits holding the receiver in her lap while tears roll slowly down her cheek. "Daniel," she whispers. "Where are you?"

Gail's beautiful face melts away as the sadness overwhelms me.

3

When I'm finally able to track him down, using the residuals from the link established several days before, Grady is with Sammie. Samantha Long. A bartender at the Limping Coyote Saloon in Queen's Creek, a tiny village some four hours north of the city. Grady met her during one of his wilderness forays six months earlier. According to him it had been love at first sight. On both sides. Certainly wouldn't know it by the scene which is unfolding before my ghostly eyes right now.

"Daniel McBain, Daniel McBain, Daniel McBain! He's all you ever talk about! What is it with you and this McBain guy anyway? You in love with him or something?"

"Fuck you!" Grady says pushing the tiny redhead out of his face. "We're just friends, I told you. Why do you want to go saying shit like that?"

"Because you're acting like a real flake, Grady," Sammie says plopping down in a rickety kitchen chair which serves as living room furniture in her little trailer. "You show up on my doorstep three days ago saying you need a place to stay, but not giving me any reason. Then all you talk about is this McBain guy. You don't eat, you don't sleep, hell, you don't even make love to me. What the fuck is eating you, Grady? Why the hell are you here?"

Grady is too miserable to stay angry. He seems to collapse into himself on the threadbare couch, which he all but overtaxes with his bulk. "I don't know, Sammie," he says quietly. "I'm scared. I don't know what to do. I didn't know where else to go..."

Sammie's round face softens. She sighs and moves to sit on Grady's lap.

"It's okay, lover," she says, hugging his head to her ample chest. "I'm here now. Momma's here. I'm sorry I yelled, but I'm scared too. It scares me when a man I feel this strongly about starts brooding and keeping secrets from me. Can't you tell me what the problem is? Maybe I can help." Pulling back she cups his face in her hands and looks deep into his troubled eyes. "C'mon my Ares, tell your Aphrodite. Would the god of war keep secrets from his goddess wife?"

Grady manages a small smile and tears begin to well in his eyes, but he shakes them off. Men don't cry, especially in front of a woman.

"What did this McBain guy do, Grady? Did he get you in trouble somehow?"

He shakes his head. "No. He didn't do anything, I don't think... I can't remember. That's the problem, Sammie, I can't remember."

"Can't remember what, lover? Slow down and tell me what happened."

Grady tilts his head back, chewing his lower lip.

"He disappeared, Sammie. And the police think I have something to do with it." His eyes suddenly focus with a brittle intensity and he grabs Sammie by the shoulders. "I saw his ghost! His ghost came after me, Sammie! His ghost!" Despite his best efforts the tears start streaming down Grady's face.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Sammie says, her own eyes wide. "Slow down! His ghost? I thought you said he disappeared..."

"That's what the police said, and his wife too. I didn't want to

believe it at first. But then his ghost came to me and I knew..."

"Grady, honey, calm down," Sammie says hugging him again. "Calm down. I won't let anything happen to you. C'mon, you're not going to get anywhere if you freak out like this."

She sits holding him, rocking back and forth for a long time. She doesn't seem to mind the desperate bear hug Grady has her in. After a while, Grady's arms begin to relax.

"Now," Sammie says. "Tell me what happened, from the beginning. Maybe we can figure this thing out together."

Grady nods, gently lifts her from his lap, lights a cigarette. He stands up without looking at her and begins to pace. As Sammie waits breathlessly on the couch, her green eyes never leaving his restless form, he begins to talk.

"I told you about my friend, Dan. He's a photographer. We were going to get together to take some pictures of me for your birthday." Sammie smiles, but Grady doesn't notice. He's becoming lost in his reverie. Now it's me who's waiting breathlessly, though I'm not too sure about that term. Do ghosts breathe?

"He came over on Saturday morning and we took some pictures around the apartment. I remember that, even though I told his wife and the police that he didn't show. I didn't know what else to tell them, 'cause of what happened next. I was drinking a lot. I was nervous because Dan was taking pictures of me naked, y'know.

"Anyway, I wanted him to take some of me in the wilderness. So we got into my truck and drove up to the mountains. We stopped to get some more beer, I remember that. And I remember driving up to the Verde River. I thought it would be the perfect place because not many people go there. You have to have four wheel drive just to get to the places I like to visit.

“We drove across the river and found a place to park, then we got out and hiked up the mountain. I guess I was pretty drunk when we got where we were going. Dan started taking pictures and... and then we heard a sound, like a motorbike. The sound stopped somewhere close. I got dressed real fast and Dan and I went to investigate.

“It was a couple of guys down the river a ways. They were skinny-dipping when we got there. Dan said something about being a natural voyeur with a camera and started taking pictures. Then...

“Then the guys started making out. I was disgusted and wanted to leave, but Dan said something about it being natural and even the gods did it. He took a few more pictures before one of the guys saw us. They were real mad... and one of them had a gun. Dan and I ran deeper into the woods to hide until we heard the motorbike leaving.

“We went back to the truck and drank a few more beers, talking about the guys we saw. I guess we argued a little, then he said we should finish taking the pictures, before it got too late and we lost the light. I got undressed while he was reloading his camera and... that’s all I remember.

“The next thing I know, it’s close to midnight and the phone is ringing. It’s Dan’s wife. She wants to know where he is. I panicked. I don’t know why. I was confused and I felt... well... I felt like something was wrong. So I lied. I told her that I hadn’t seen him. I told her that he never showed up.” Grady stops pacing, his back to Sammie.

“Then,” he says lowering his head. “I looked out the window and Dan’s car was still parked next to my truck in the parking lot. I guess I got scared. I just told his wife that I didn’t see him all day and there’s his damn car parked right next to my fuckin’ truck. I went outside and took the spare key from under the seat and... I drove it away from the complex. I didn’t know where else to park

it, so... I put it in longterm parking at the airport."

He doesn't move. Sammie doesn't move. Everything is quiet. Something is trying to come back to me. A misplaced memory is trying to resurface.

"Oh, Grady..." Sammie says, breaking the silence. "What have you done?"

Grady whirls around, his eyes wild. "I don't know what I've done!" he screams. "I told you, I can't remember!"

"Okay!" Sammie says, leaping to her feet, "Okay, honey. I believe you. But we have to figure this thing out. Obviously what you did was wrong, but there has to be a reason why you blocked everything else out of your memory.

"C'mon now, have a drink and calm down. We'll work it out. Just relax for a minute. Here," she says taking his hand and leading him the few feet to the kitchen. "Help me mix us some drinks. I think we're going to need them."

Numbly Grady complies.

My brain explodes into technicolor imagery.

...Grady and I are sitting in his truck. We're both working on finishing up the twelve pack of beer.

"Perverts like that shouldn't be allowed to run around free," Grady says disgustedly. "They're all better off dead."

"Oh, come on, lighten up," I reply. "That shit's been going on longer than Western civilization has been in flower. Hell, even the gods did it. Don't you remember the stories about Zeus and Ganymede, or Apollo and Hyacinthis? What about Achilles and Patroclus, it wasn't just a tent they were sharing on those long cold nights during the ten years they spent on

the shores outside of Troy."

"You're disgusting!" Grady slurs. "Shit like that never happened."

I shake my head, "Talk about selective reading. You know that's what they were doing. It was common practice back then. It was considered unmanly to waste all that energy on women. Women were servants. They made babies. That was their duty. They weren't allowed to do anything else. A man's best friend, or a god's for that matter, was also his fuck buddy."

Grady is looking at me with a peculiar expression on his face. I figure I've overloaded his brain with all this educated talk and decide to change the subject. "It doesn't matter anyway, those guys weren't gods, they were just happy homosexuals out for a friendly romp. I don't know how they could after a dip in that water though, it must be at least 40 degrees."

Grady finishes off his bottle with a long noisy swallow. "Wimp," he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his arm. "You're not the one walking around naked up here."

"Point taken," I concede laughing.

"It's not too bad. I doubt the water is that cold either. C'mon," he says, getting out of the truck. "Let's go check it out for ourselves."

"Hold it," I reply, "You want me to get into that water? Are you nuts?"

"What's'a matter? You afraid you'll shrivel up an' embarrass yourself?"

He's on a roll, I have to think fast to get out of this one or I may find myself chin deep in icy water, naked or no. I lift my camera and say as offhandedly as I can, "What about the pictures? Shouldn't we finish taking those first, before we lose the light?" He doesn't look convinced. "C'mon, humor an old artist. Let's finish taking the pictures... then I'll consider your insane offer."

“Deal!” he says, jerking his pants down and staggering drunkenly while trying to get them off over his shoes.

“Wait,” I say, “Let’s not get naked just yet! I’ve still got to change film, and we’ve got some hiking to do.”

“What’s the matter?” he asks striking a pose. “Is this godlike body too much for you to bear?”

I sigh, and reply sarcastically. “Hell no, it’s blinding in its perfection. I just don’t think you should waste it all on the squirrels.”

“Don’t worry,” he says, tossing his boots into the cab of the truck. “I’ll save plenty for you,” then wanders off beating on his chest and howling like a madman.

‘Well’ I think, ‘this is as good a place as any to finish up our shoot.’ Somewhere in the distance I hear a small engine cough to life.

Slow fade...

My mind is reeling. I don’t understand any of this. So much to sort out. I’m dimly aware of Grady and Sammie speaking in subdued whispers across the room, but I can’t make out what they’re saying. Or maybe I don’t want to. Too much input, already. So much to process.

What the hell is going on? The more information I get, the less sense it all makes. What happened to me? Nobody, including myself or the person I was with last, seems to know.

That’s the weirdest thing about this whole mess. I want to believe that Grady is telling the truth, but it all just seems too convenient. I’d hate to think about what it means if he honestly doesn’t remember. I don’t even want to guess what could have been so horrible that a man like Grady, who has come very close to meeting death himself, would be spooked by it.

But what if he's lying? What if he does know and he just doesn't want to say? Won't that be somehow worse?

Grady is yelling now. I try to focus enough to hear what he's saying, but my emotions have gotten the better of me and I only get bits and pieces of the conversation.

"...don't you believe me? I told you what happened."

"It's not that I don't believe you." Sammie says. "I'm just trying to understand. Friends disappearing and coming back as ghosts. Things like this don't happen to people like..."

The picture breaks apart. Grady and Sammie seem to be moving in slow motion, blurred at the edges like a badly focused movie. I fight the feeling and try to force the picture back into focus.

"...calling me a liar!"

"I am not calling you a liar! I'm just asking you to call him and..."

Grady is pacing. Drinking heavily. "He's dead, goddamn it! How can I call a ghost?"

"You just said a little while ago that he disappeared. It's your imagination doing this to you, Grady. And that damn bottle..."

The bottle flies across the room and shatters against the sink. The picture crystalizes. "Fuck you! I know what I saw, and I'm telling you that he's dead! I know it! I don't know how or why, but I know it. You're acting like I'm some sort of psycho, when you weren't even there!" Grady grabs at his head and falls to his knees. "I AM NOT CRAZY, GODDAMN YOU!"

Without thinking, I rush to Grady's aid. I try to put reassuring hands on his shoulders. No such luck. There's no real connection. My hands simply bounce back as though deflected by some

invisible force. But something else happens. In that split second of annulment, my eyes lock with Grady's and I feel a pull. Like I'm being sucked into the whirlpool of emotion behind his eyes. Fear reaches out to grab me by the throat. Grady flinches back with a yelp and Sammie is there, enfolding him in her small arms.

"Okay, lover, okay," she says, stroking his hair. "Let's not talk about this anymore tonight."

"He's here, Sammie," Grady says with a shudder. "He's here with us right now!"

I stand shock still, waiting. I'm almost as rattled as he is by what just happened.

"Who's here, honey?"

"Dan. I felt him. He's here, Sammie. He's dead. And he's here." The strain is too much for Grady. He collapses into Sammie's arms and begins sobbing.

Sammie doesn't say anything. She just closes her eyes and lays her cheek on the top of Grady's bobbing head.

"Am I crazy, Sammie? Am I going crazy?"

"No, honey, you're not crazy," she says slowly, deliberately, to calm him down. "Just tired, that's all. C'mon, let's go to bed."

"I don't think I can... What if... what if he..."

Sammie leans back and looks at him. "He won't. It's just your imagination, Grady. Dan isn't dead, he's just... misplaced. You said so yourself. You just need to rest. Maybe it will all seem clearer in the morning."

Reluctantly, Grady gives in and lets Sammie lead him to the back of

the trailer. A flicker of an idea has begun to germinate in my mind. This is the second time that Grady has been aware of my presence. Both times something peculiar happened. Both times it was almost as if something inside him was drawing me out. Or in.

The idea begins to bud. Maybe this occurrence has something to do with his agitated state of mind at the time. If that's the case I doubt that I'll be able to make any use of the phenomenon. It's hard to have an intelligent conversation with someone who's hugging wall space and drooling. But, there's also another possibility. A long shot.

Maybe this thing occurs not because of his agitation, but as a result of it. A childlike reversion to irrational fear results, causing a shutdown of the rational parts of his mind. Which in turn leaves him open to experiences normally rejected by it. And if that's what's been causing this phenomenon, I just might be able to use it to my advantage.

The idea is in full flower now. Fear isn't the only state of mind that causes the conscious to give in to the subconscious.

I wait for what seems like hours as the inevitable lovemaking noises from the back of the trailer rise to a crescendo, then fall off. Eventually the sounds of heavy slumber tell me that it's time to make my move.

I stand next to the sleeping form of Grady and listen. It doesn't take long to find what I'm seeking. The babble is far away at first, but I track it down. This time I'm ready for the storm which greets me. The voices make little more sense this time than they did the last. I ignore them in favor of my own, calling out Grady's name, over and over. There is a shudder in the electrified air. The sleeping form beside me rolls restlessly onto its side. I call out even louder and the shudder intensifies. Sleeping Grady begins to make small noises, rolling onto his other side. One more time I call out and it happens. With a strangled cry and a lurch Grady drops deep

into the realms of his subconscious.

And I am there with him.

A flash of light. A disconcerting wave of vertigo. I'm suddenly rushing, alone, through a tangled field of fractured images. The noise level is deafening. It throws me off balance with its intensity. Something like fear rises up in me, but I fight it back. Pain lances through me and I feel like I'm on fire, bruised and battered by the shards of guilt and regret in this field of glass I am being dragged through.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it ends. I've arrived. I open my eyes to find myself lying on a beach of some sort. The sand is impossibly white, the sky above a shifting plane of opalescent hues. Somewhere in the distance I hear the sounds of some angry beast bellowing out its rage. Standing up, I survey the area. I appear to be on an island of some sort. Vermilion waves crash behind me, leaving bloody foam in their wake. Ahead lies a towering, jagged tooth of a mountain, surrounded by foliage, rising out of the heart of this lonely island like a broken lance. It is from there that the sounds of fury appear to come. It is in that direction that I decide to go.

I walk for what seems an eternity, but the distance never seems to decrease. The sands appear to shift, impeding my progress. A wind has begun to blow, pushing me back. Ahead the bellowing continues. I begin to wonder if I will see Grady in this distorted mindscape, and if I do, if I will recognize him. No sooner are the question marks attached to the thoughts when I find my answer.

Off to my right, I see two people struggling. A man and a woman. Both are naked. I make better progress in the sideways trek to see what the commotion is. At first I don't recognize the couple. The male is small and bony, pulling against the woman struggling to drag him forward. She is huge and grotesquely voluptuous with a wild halo of red hair. It's the hair that clues me in. Sammie, and

the little guy must be Grady. My thoughts come out as words and the couple stops struggling to turn in my direction. Little Grady's tear-streaked face contorts even further. "No!" he screams. "No! Please! I don't want to go! Don't help her! Please!"

"I'm not here to help her," I hear myself say.

The woman, Sammie, takes my words as a challenge and flings herself at me, her body changing into that of a lion in midair. I step back, but she never connects. Something happens and she is flung back. She lands on her feet and ugly black wings sprout from her tawny back. A snarl distorts her woman's face into a mask of fury.

My eyes never leaving her, I watch as the sphinx takes to the air and tries again, with the same outcome.

This time she never hits the ground, but changes once again in midair. Her leonine body shifts and becomes that of a bird with enormous breasts. The harpy swoops and dives but never seems to get within striking distance.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" little Grady screams.

"Grady!" I call out. "You can make her stop! Change her back into a woman again!"

"I can't!" he wails, getting smaller.

I run to him, but can't seem to get close enough to touch him, anymore than the harpy can seem to connect with me. "Grady!" I yell. "You're the only one who can do it! This is your place. It's all of your making. Look at me!" He does so, his eyes round with fear. "Grady, I wouldn't lie to you. You can change this. Think! Think hard."

He stops and looks up at the enraged creature, which is turning in midair for another strike.

“Do it!”

The harpy screams. She twists and begins to fall, her shape changing as she does so. Unexpectedly, the woman disappears. I turn to look at Grady. He has grown, but is still nowhere near his true size. He falls to his knees and clasps his hands together.

“Thank you, lord.”

“Lord?” I ask, then look down to see myself surrounded in a golden radiance. I too am naked, with an enormous penis hanging pendulously from my hairless body.

“Grady, don’t do this,” I say. “I’m no god. It’s me, Dan.”

He looks confused. “But you vanquished her...”

“No, I didn’t do anything. It was you, Grady. I’m human just like you. It’s Dan.”

“I know who you are...” he says, then turns away to look toward the jagged mountain and the still bellowing monster.

“If you know who I am, then change me back, Grady.”

His answer is startling. “Back to what? That’s what you look like, here.”

A million thoughts race through my mind then. A million thoughts which I cast aside. Grady picks himself up and continues to stare in the direction of the mountain, while question marks bounce around, jabbing the inside of my head with their insistence.

Instead I ask the other, safer, question. “Why was Sammie here? What was she trying to get you to do?”

“She wanted me to go there.” His arm comes up to point straight

ahead. "She didn't believe me. She wanted me to go to the cave to prove that there is nothing there..."

"What cave?"

He turns to stare quizzically at me. "Can't you hear it?"

A loud grinding roar pierces the air.

"That? It sounds like some sort of beast."

"It's the seven headed hydra, guarding the cave."

"Against what?"

"Me."

The word seems to echo across the distorted landscape.

He answers my next question before I can ask it. "It's protecting me from what's inside."

"What's inside, Grady?" I ask quietly.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. You, I think."

"Me? Why me? I wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

"Yes, you would. That's why that part of you is there. You made me do it." He turns to me with an anguished look on his face and the sky begins to darken. "I would never do anything like that, but you made me feel... You made me do it!"

"Do what, Grady?"

He turns away from me, hugging himself against the winds which are kicking up in a sudden squall. The sound from the mountain

becomes more intense and anguished. He shakes his head and lightning flashes frighteningly close. "It wasn't all my fault. You brought it on yourself. You asked for it!" He begins to back away from me.

"Grady!" I yell over the sound of the storm. "Grady, tell me what happened!"

He clamps his hands over his ears and suddenly we are on the deck of a ship rolling against the force of a typhoon. Giant waves crash over the sides but I am not affected by them. I look up and see Grady lashed to the mast of the rocking ship, while the sounds of singing assail us from all sides.

"What happened to me, Grady?" I scream through the mythical tumult. A giant bird appears out of nowhere, swooping down with frightening swiftness, and rips Grady's stomach open. "I don't know!" he screams. "It's not my fault! It's not my fault!"

And suddenly I am being sucked backwards, through a squirming tunnel of organic tissue. In the distance I see Grady, lashed now to a rock as the bird feeds on his entrails.

The scene recedes as my velocity increases but his last words continue to echo through the living chamber.

My brain explodes with images.

...It's late afternoon, and I've just used up my last roll of film. Grady is sunning himself on a rock and I stop to look down at him as I head for the truck. "All done, buddy," I say. "That's six black and white and four color. Should make quite an impressive portfolio, if they all come out."

He opens his eyes and smiles lazily up at me.

"See," I continue. "It wasn't so bad, was it?"

“Nah,” he says. “Wanna go swimming, now?”

I groan and look toward the river.

“We had a deal,” he says pushing himself up to a standing position.

He sways and I reach out a hand to steady him. “Whoa, you sure you’re up to it?”

“Hell, yes!” he says, and unbuttons the top two buttons of my shirt.

“I think I can handle it,” I say smiling. “Let me just put this stuff away and... Shit... I’ll be right with you.”

He follows me over to the truck, watching as I pull my camera case out of the shell. “Uh uh,” he says. “Get undressed first.”

“Why?”

“It’s only fair. I’ve been naked all day, least you can do is get naked now. What’s a matter? Chicken?”

“Fuck you,” I say, but push the case back and begin getting undressed. Grady watches me until he’s satisfied that I’m not going to pull a fast one, then strolls over to the river’s edge to test the water.

“There,” I say. “Satisfied?” When he turns around I’m striking the same pose that he did earlier. He gives a wolf whistle and I turn back to the task of putting my equipment away.

I’m zipping up the last pocket when I feel Grady behind me. The heat from his body and the hair on his chest tingles along my back as he presses close to me, his erection against my buttocks.

“Stop fucking around,” I say, pushing him away with my shoulder. He presses in even closer. His breathing is quick against my right ear. I stiffen, then slowly push the case back into the truck, trying to sound

nonchalant. *“Ready for that dip?”*

“More than ready,” he replies, bumping me forward against the tailgate of the truck.

“Grady..”

“They all did it, you said. A man’s best friend was his fuck buddy,” he says stepping back a bit and turning me around to face him. I don’t like the look in his eyes when I meet them. I try to step sideways, out of his grasp, but he’s too quick for me. “Was it a lie?”

I look up into his smoldering eyes and feel my stomach tighten. “Grady, let go of my arm. You’re hurting me.”

He shakes me, cracking my head against the camper shell. “You were lying to me weren’t you. You were making fun of me!”

“No, Grady! I wasn’t lying to you! I wouldn’t lie to you!”

His eyes become distant and unfocused as alien thoughts tumble around in his head. Then he pulls me forward into a suffocating hug and his hands slowly find their way to my buttocks.

“Grady. Please, no...” I say, my throat tight with fear. “This isn’t right...”

“You’re my best friend,” his voice rumbles from somewhere above my head. “You’re the only guy I’ve ever wanted to... You’re the only one I ever thought about...”

“Grady...”

“It’s okay,” he says, molding his body against mine. “Nobody will know. We’re just friends right?”

I gather together all my strength and push hard against him. “Grady!

Stop it! I don't want to do this!"

We stand like that for what seems an eternity, me backed up against the truck, hands planted on his hairy chest, him at arms length shivering with desire. Then his face becomes a mask of drunken rage and he hits me. Hard.

I slump into his arm and he lifts me up, tossing me back into the camper shell. I'm still trying to shake the fuzz from my head when he crawls in on top of me. Instinctively I begin to struggle and he hits me again, twice, once in the face, once in the temple. My head explodes in agony and I am dimly aware of Grady mumbling something, but I can't make out what it is.

He levers my legs up into the crooks of his arms. A scream is wrenched from me as he makes his initial, forced entry. He hits me again and this time I taste blood. My vision is ringed in blackness like I'm looking through a tunnel. Fire courses through my body in waves as Grady pumps furiously into me. I briefly lose consciousness, awakening when he puts his mouth over mine in a brutal, crushing kiss. One of his hands is fumbling around with my penis and I am horrified to find it responding.

Again I lose consciousness, awakening when Grady's thrusts become quicker. I feel as well as see him reach his climax. He does so quietly, his teeth clenched and his eyes squeezed shut. Then he drops limply onto me, his lips brushing my neck as his hands return to caressing my semi-erect penis.

I gasp when he pulls out of me, unable to move, not caring what happens next. I just want to curl up into a little ball, but Grady isn't through with me yet. I feel his mouth roughly exploring my erection and wince as his teeth graze the sensitive organ. I fade into unconsciousness again. How long it takes I don't know, but if he's waiting for a response it isn't forthcoming.

When I awaken again, I'm in Grady's arms, being carried somewhere. Every step he takes shoots fire through my bruised and torn body. My

head lolls to the side and I see that we're walking along the river's edge. Panic wells up in me. "Grady," I say. "Please, don't..."

I'm surprised at the gentleness in his voice as he responds. "I'm not going to hurt you, Dan. It's all over. I'm just looking for a place to clean up."

I look up into his face and see an expression of defeat and misery. He pulls me in close against his chest and lays his cheek on my head, still looking at the river. When he's found an area suitable to our needs he steps into the water and gently lowers me into it. I wince at the renewed intensity of the pain, but it quickly recedes in the numbing coldness of the stream.

He washes himself off a few feet away as I sit and let the water rush over me.

"Dan," he says. I ignore him. "Dan, Please don't hate me. I don't know what happened..." The face I turn to him is devoid of expression. He falters, splashing water up onto his chest, then looks at me again. Tears are in his eyes. "I don't want you to..." I shake my head, looking away. "It wasn't my fault!" he yells. "It wasn't my..."

Grady sees him first. I see the shocked expression in his face and turn to look behind me. A man is standing on the river bank, smiling down at us, dressed all in black leather. I recognize him. It's one of the guys we had spied upon earlier. One of the guys on the motorcycle.

"They all say shit like that the first time," he sneers. "You guys made me horny as hell. Isn't it lucky that I decided to stay behind, instead of going home with that other fucker?"

"What the hell do you want," Grady says, standing up menacingly. He freezes as the man reaches behind his back and retrieves a gun.

"You Sampson," he says smiling. "And your little Delilah too, now that he's nice and broken in."

Without warning, the world around me shatters like a mirror and

as the shards of pain and guilt rain down on me I scream out the only name that can save me. The name that was always there to save me. The only name that ever mattered.

“Gail!”

Then the world comes to an abrupt end.

Somehow I have found my way to Gail’s side. She is comforting me, like she always has. I find it strange that she can’t seem to touch me, but just having her near is enough. As she envelops me with her maternal warmth, I talk. I tell her everything. I tell her what I’ve seen. I tell her about Grady and Sammie. I tell her about the visions. I tell her about the dream. Everything that has happened to me since this madness began I tell her.

Everything except the rape.

I try, but I can’t bring myself to do it. It’s too soon, too painful. Shame washes over me and the words won’t come. It’s all been a bad dream. I talk and, as always, she listens. And when I’m finished--when I’ve said everything that needs to be said--I fall asleep, exhausted.

The last picture in my head is of Gail crying. “It’ll be alright,” she says. “I’ll take care of everything. I love you, Dan.”

“I love you, too, Gail,” I say sleepily as the void rises up to claim me.

4

The next few days blur together. I keep my energy levels low, half aware of what's occurring around me. I've had plenty of time to think, but thinking is the last thing I want to be doing at the moment. There are more questions than answers, and what answers I have received I either don't understand, or refuse to accept. I've never been a very complicated person. I know when I'm in too deep. This time, I'm in way over my head so far I can't even see the light at the mouth of the well.

So I wait, floating in an enveloping cloud of vapors, haunting my family's home because I don't want to be too far away from Gail. Gail is the only person who can help me. Gail always has the answers.

She's spent a lot of time on the phone recently, when she's not taking care of little Tori, or politely submitting to the visits by friends who stop by to offer their condolences. She's having a rough time of it. Somehow, in a way I'm not at all sure of, she knows what happened. At least as much as I do. The problem has been convincing others of what she knows. Her threats to the authorities, about using my sources at the newspaper to blow the case open, are beginning to wear thin. Even though her insistence has resulted in a search warrant, and the recovery of the book from Grady's apartment.

Unfortunately, the information has also seemed to work against her. Though she was right about my car being tucked away at the airport, the fact that it was there at all only seems to have convinced the police that it was I who left it there, on my way, by plane, to wherever I was going. Nobody seems to care that the time on the

parking stub confirms her story that the car was put in storage after she talked to Grady on the phone that Saturday night. Nor the fact that nobody answering my description was seen in any of the terminals. Of course, there are always disguises and aliases.

As a way of pacifying her, an APB has been issued on Grady. Apparently both he and Sammie have disappeared again. I haven't had the nerve, nor the inclination, to find out where they've gone. I'm leaving all that to Gail. Gail always knows how to handle these situations. She always has, though this time, I must admit, it certainly doesn't look good.

"You're gonna have to face it sometime, Gail. Danny-boy has run out on you and Tori. Just like Jeff did to me and just like men have been doing to women throughout time. I've had it happen in several of my past lives, but you just never really get over it. Men like Dan are scum. I've been telling you that for years. Him leaving is probably the best thing that could ever happen for you."

The voice and the venom behind it, belong to Daphne Shelton, one of Gail's oldest and closest friends. I've never liked Daphne. She's always trying to fill Gail's head with metaphysical garbage about crystals and aromatherapy and other such shit. Outside of her company I've always referred to her as Daffy, much to Gail's displeasure. Needless to say, Daffy never liked me either.

"You know," she says, taking a small sip of coffee and staring at Gail over the rim of her cup. "Dan tried several times to make a play for me. Tried to kiss me on several occasions. He was always interested in anything in a skirt, or out of it if you know what I mean."

A lie! I would rather gargle with drano than put my lips anywhere on that bloated sow's person! I gather myself together and drop into an unoccupied chair at the dining room table.

"Daphne," Gail says looking toward the ceiling with a sigh, "I

know that you and Dan never got along. I doubt he would ever try anything with you."

"Well," Daffy sniffs, "what about all those naked bimbos he always had in his studio. Surely you can't believe that all they were doing was taking pictures?"

"I can and I do, can I get you some more coffee?"

"Gail, sweetie, I know you're in pain but all this self-denial is terrible for your chakras. You're squeezing them off with all this tension. It's no wonder you've been acting so strangely of late. There's no way for the kundalini energy to enter your system and revitalize you. Now, c'mon and breathe with me. We'll straighten you out together..."

"Daphne, I don't want to be 'straightened out'. I'm just fine the way I am. And I don't think that I'm acting strangely at all. Everybody else is. Nobody, not even my best friend, seems to believe me. That's why I'm tense. It doesn't have anything to do with my chakras or my cunnilingus energy..."

"Kundalini energy."

"Whatever. I'm going to get some more coffee. Do you want some?"

Daffy looks at her, then breathes a heavy sigh and nods. I'd never really seen Gail and Daffy alone together. Obviously I didn't have much to worry about. Gail knows how to keep the windbag in her place.

"It's not that I don't believe you, honey," Daffy says picking at the crystal chips glued to her red fingernails, while Gail goes about her business in the next room. "It's just that, well, I find it hard to accept your story that Dan came to you in a dream to help you solve a mystery even the police aren't even sure exists." Pause.

“Are you listening to me?” she asks craning to look through the doorway into the kitchen.

“Yes, Daphne.”

“Not to denigrate you in any way, honey, but, you’ve never exactly shown any abilities of a psychic nature before, y’know? You’ve always been the stoutest disbeliever.”

Gail returns with the cups and a bag of Oreos under her arm.

“I know that Daphne, but I never said this had anything to do with psychic powers, did I?”

“You didn’t have to, honey. That’s what it implies. Now don’t you think that if Dan were really dead, or floating around in the ether disconnected from his body, that I or one of my many spiritual guides would be aware of it?”

Angrily I float to within an inch of Daffy’s face, but she is no more aware of my existence than the chair she’s sitting in is aware of the strain she’s putting on it. Spiritual guides! I always knew she was a phony!

“I don’t know anything about that, Daphne,” Gail says, clenching her fists on the table before her. “All I know is that something happened to Dan, and nobody will believe me. Not even you and you’re supposed to be my best friend. For god’s sake, Daph, we’ve known each other since Catholic school. You know how I feel about all this.. this.. stuff you’re always spouting. Why would I suddenly make up a story like this? And if you say tension, or anything about misaligned chakras again, I swear I’ll knock you silly!” Tears stand out in Gail’s eyes but she blinks them away.

“Honey, honey,” Daffy says laying her bejeweled hands over my wife’s white-knuckled fists. “I’m sorry. You know that the last thing I want is to see you hurt. I’m just trying to look out for you,

that's all."

"Damn it!" Gail says pulling away. "I can look after myself!"

Daphne seems to deflate a little, and a genuine concern creeps into her face. Taking a deep breath she tries again. "Have the police been able to track this Kline person down?"

Gail closes her eyes and shakes her head.

"And you're sure... you're sure that he has something to do with this?"

"Yes, Daphne. I told you what happened. I told you what I saw. I've been telling people for days, but nobody will listen! Grady Kline is the one with all the answers to this puzzle and he's out there somewhere running around free, while Dan..." The words refuse to come. Choking back her tears Gail stands up and begins pacing the floor. "I hate that man, Daphne. I hate him! I always have. I hated having him living in my house. I never trusted him. I always dreaded the day that something like this would happen."

I sit back in shock at this revelation. I knew that Grady made her nervous, but I never suspected this. Apparently neither had Daphne.

"Gail, did you ever tell Dan any of this?"

"Of course not. He would've said I was just being stupid; that there was nothing to worry about. He never listened to me when it came to his friends. They always seemed to come first. Oh, I know that he loved me Daphne, but sometimes... sometimes I think he loved them more..."

Such bitterness. I pull back feeling like I've just been scalded by an unexpected blast of steam. Gail roughly wipes tears from her face.

“And I have never met a more ungrateful group of people in all my life! I could never understand it, Daphne. Dan would bring these people... these losers... home with him. He’d give them a place to live and help them find a job. He was always giving and he never got a damn thing in return. Anytime they needed something, anything at all--a ride, a meal, money--he was right there for them. But, do you see any of them here now? Have any of them even called since all of this happened? Hell, no! Because when Dan needed them they were never anywhere to be found. They would take what he offered and turn around and kick him in the face! God, I hate this! It’s so unfair!”

“Honey, calm down,” Daphne says rising from her place at the table. “It’s going to be alright...”

“What do you know?” Gail says, turning on her friend. “You always hated Dan. You never gave him a chance!”

“Gail, that was between Dan and me. It had nothing to do with us. I’m not that kind of friend to you.”

Gail stops her pacing, her back to Daphne. Her shoulders begin to shake. “I know that Daphne. It’s just so unfair. The thing I loved most about Dan was the thing that also upset me the most.” She turns back to face her. The tears are flowing freely now. “He was always forgiving people. It didn’t matter what they did to him, he always forgave them. Those friends of his used him like a doormat and he always forgave them. Where’s the justice in that?”

Daphne moves to wrap her arms around her, and the two of them stand that way while she sobs into the larger woman’s shoulder. I shrink back, fighting to keep my misery from dissolving me.

Gail never could understand. Those ‘losers’ she was referring to were my friends. Sure they had their failings, but who doesn’t? Holding a grudge, just because of human nature, was never something I could stomach.

I've always believed that as long as a person had friends he would never be forgotten. He would never be alone. He wouldn't have to live alone and he wouldn't have to grow old alone. Most importantly, he wouldn't have to die alone.

"You know," Gail says, pulling away from Daphne. "I think I could handle this a whole lot easier if it were anybody else besides Grady Kline." Gail stares at her coffee cup for a moment, then turns and wanders into the living room to sit heavily in the overstuffed couch. "I don't think that Dan had any idea what was going on in Grady's head. He was so naive, Daphne. He had no idea what Grady really thought of him, but I knew. Women know about these things. We always know when we're being threatened."

Daphne comes around the other side of the couch, her eyes wide. "Threatened?"

Gail nods. "Grady Kline was in love with my husband. I could see it in the way he responded to him. In the way he looked at him. And in the way he treated me."

Daphne slowly lowers herself onto the couch, next to Gail. "Oh, honey. I had no idea. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Because I was ashamed. I was ashamed for being so jealous, when Dan was so damned oblivious to the whole thing. And I was afraid..."

"Afraid that he would be angry if he found out that you suggested it." Daphne says, finishing her sentence.

Gail nods, and I feel my heart drop into my bowels. If I could, I would be sick. As it is, I can only stand by in mute disbelief at what I'm hearing--numbed by the sure knowledge that what she's saying is true--and cursing myself for a fool.

It was there all along. The answer to so many of my unasked questions. The knowledge that I had tried so hard to keep submerged in my subconscious. It had been there all along.

The telephone rings, making us all jump. Gail looks at her watch. "Damn," she says. "I completely lost track of the time. That's probably my sister, wondering why I haven't come to pick Tori up."

Daphne and I watch as Gail lifts the receiver and forces a friendly 'hello'. We both see her face freeze as the voice on the other end buzzes into her ear.

"I see," she says woodenly. "I'll be there within the hour."

She hangs up, squares her jaw and turns to look at Daphne. "I have to go down to the county coroners office. It seems that somebody just brought in a body from the Verde river. They want me to go in and identify it."

Being dead is a weird enough feeling all by itself. The anticipation of waiting to view your own body is beyond weird, it's bizarre. And maybe a little bit kinky, too.

I must admit, knowing where it was now made me feel a little less vulnerable. It's hard to explain, but it's something like the feeling you get when you've come out of the grocery store and you can't remember where you parked your car. You search your mind, but it's just not there. You know the damn thing is in the parking lot somewhere. You wander the aisles, overburdened plastic grocery bags biting into your hands while your milk goes sour, and the feeling you have is of complete helplessness. You feel like your mind has betrayed you somehow. But when you finally do find the vehicle, your relief is immeasurable. You want nothing more than to leave the damned parking lot in your car and never return.

As I wait for Gail to talk to the police and sign some preliminary paperwork, I wonder; will finding my body allow me to leave here? I have all the answers I want. I don't think I can face anymore. The question of what eventually happened to put me in this situation is less pressing now that I've already seen so much of what lead up to it. I just want to find what once belonged to me and go far far away.

Gail is being led to the back of the building, into a cold, sterile room with huge drawers built into the walls. Her face is a mask of control, but I can see her body stiffening with tension as the lab technician rolls one of the drawers open. Her nose wrinkles with distaste at the smell. I had overheard the coroner telling her that the body wasn't in the best condition after almost two weeks in the water. That explanation doesn't even come close to describing the condition of the body when the sheets are finally pulled back.

Time seems to stand still as Gail's eyes take in the bloated features and claylike skin of the person on the palate. I move in even closer to do the same as she turns away and shakes her head. My shock almost causes me to disincorporate. It's impossible! The body isn't me! But it is somebody I recognize.

The last time I had seen this man he was pulling a gun on Grady and me as we sat in the cold running water of the Verde River.

Something is wrong here--something terribly, terribly wrong. The questions rise up and claw at me with their insistence. What the hell is going on? Why is this man here, now, instead of me? And if he's here, where the hell am I? What the hell happened out there, by that river?

'Oh, God,' I think, 'It's never going to end! This nightmare is never going to end!'

'No,' a voice in my head replies, 'There has to be an answer, and only one person knows what that answer is.'

I've got to find him. If I'm ever going to have my peace, I've got to find Grady Kline.

5

Grady and Sammie are unloading camping equipment from the back of his truck when I find them.

"I just can't understand why the door was open," Sammie is saying as she hauls an armload of bedding up the stairs and into her trailer. "I know I checked it before we left." She looks around and shrugs. "Well, it's not like there's anything here to steal."

Grady clomps into the room. "Where should I put this stuff?"

"Try the closet in the back bedroom. Hey, wanna beer?"

"Yeah," Grady says dropping the load on the floor in front of him.

"Grady," Sammie whines, turning away from the refrigerator with a couple of icy beer bottles in her hands. "I told you to put that stuff in the bedroom. This place is too small to have shit piled up everywhere..." She stops as he pulls her against his chest with a smile.

"We just got back," he says matter-of-factly. "Didn't you say that I'm supposed to be relaxing? It's therapy, remember?"

"I said camping was therapy. Getting away from everything to clear our heads, not junking up my place when we got back."

"Yes, mother," Grady says, taking his beer and twisting the cap off with his hand.

Sammie punches him in the arm. "I'm not your mother." Then she

smiles and proffers her bottle for him to uncap. He does so with a twist, and they stand smiling at each other as they take their first swallows.

“So, how do you feel, lover?”

“Great, why shouldn’t I? I haven’t had a bad dream all week.” He turns away to survey his mess and squats to begin gathering it up again. “You were right. I was just being paranoid. Too much alcohol and not enough sleep.”

“He says as he sucks his beer bottle dry...”

Grady looks up and smiles ruefully. “This is my first and last beer for today.”

“And then?”

“Then I’m going into town to find a telephone.”

“And?”

“Then I’m going to call Dan and prove to myself that it was all in my imagination. Satisfied?”

Sammie smiles and nods. “Yeah, but afterwards, honey, you really should take it easy for a while. Too much work stress can really fuck a person up. People have nervous breakdowns all the time ‘cause they let shit build up and don’t know how to release it.”

“So, now you’re an expert on fucked-up people?”

“Well, smartass, I *am* a bartender.” Sammie turns to drop the two bottle caps into a bag under the sink. “Y’know, for a while there, you really had me going. I almost believed your wild story about ghosts and disappearing friends. You, my love, should be a writer.”

Grady stands up with his load and disappears into the back of the trailer.

“You’ll have to make room for it,” Sammie calls out over her shoulder as she bounces out the door toward the truck. She crawls into the back and pulls out a lantern and a stove, then pauses to stare at the unfamiliar case wedged into the back corner behind a toolbox and a pile of dirty rags.

“Hm,” she mutters to herself. “I don’t think that’s mine.”

Pulling it out, she looks behind her, then unzips it. Three film canisters roll out. She looks at them, hesitates, then picks them up and drops them back into the case, zipping it up again without looking inside. Uncertainty plays along her face as she pushes the bag back into the corner of the truck. She is replacing the pile of rags when I see her eyes widen and her hands begin to shake. She edges slowly out of the truck to examine one of the rags in the daylight, and something like a sob escapes her lips.

The rag is a shirt. My shirt. It’s dry and hard, soaked through with what can only be...

“Blood.”

Tears are in Sammie’s eyes as she looks up into Grady’s terrified face. “My God, Grady, what have you done?”

He’s backing away from her and the incriminating piece of clothing she’s holding out to him.

“It wasn’t just your imagination was it? You didn’t have a nervous breakdown. It was real!”

“No!” Grady screams. “No! I made it up! It’s not real!” Suddenly he rushes forward and snatches the shirt out of Sammie’s hands.

“We have to get rid of this!”

“No, Grady! We have to go to the police.”

The look he turns on her is murderous. “I can’t go to the police. I didn’t do anything. It was somebody else. It wasn’t me!”

“Where are your keys, Grady, are they still in the ignition?”
Sammie is trying hard to hold herself together. She’s a strong woman, but I know that Grady is stronger. Much stronger.

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to the police.”

“No!” He only hits her once before I spring into action. Summoning up all the experience I’ve gained in my short time in this ethereal condition, I lunge at Grady and force him to see me. He screams and jumps back. I advance, my arms outstretched, my face twisted with rage.

“No! Dan! I didn’t do it! Stay away from me! Stay away!” His foot catches on a stone in the dirt driveway and he tumbles backwards, striking his head on the steps leading up to Sammie’s trailer. I hear the truck roar to life and turn to see it spray dirt and gravel as Sammie stomps on the gas and shoots down the road in a cloud of dust. Without hesitating I plunge into Grady’s mind and follow him into the tortured recesses of his subconscious.

The island is in the throes of a storm. Lightning fills the sky and fifty-foot waves of crimson fury pound at the beaches. Voices and whispers fill the air, like the buzz of locusts. In the distance I hear the roars and screams of the hydra gnashing out its rage. Then I see him. He’s running. Away from the obscured mountain, straight toward the angry surf. I move to intercept. He screams when he sees me and changes his direction. Even so, I catch up with him easily.

I still can’t touch him, but I can surround him. Everywhere he

turns, I am there.

“Stop it, Grady!” I bellow. “Stop it, now! I want answers, and this time I’m going to get them!”

He tears off in the direction of the mountain and this time I let him go, following close behind. The ground begins to heave beneath our feet as the island is shaken by earthquakes. Ahead, the mountain unleashes a barrage of angry protests. Still we run. I don’t let Grady veer from the path, herding him like a panicked animal, and am surprised to find the distances falling away at an uncanny pace. We’re at the mouth of a cave before I even realize that we’ve started up the mountain. I look back to find a sheer drop and dizzying heights. All around us, the island is tearing itself apart. Trees fly through the air and rocks rain down around us. Wails and shouts assail us from all sides. A deafening roar blasts us from the cave and I turn to see Grady running into it’s dark depths.

I follow.

The creature that rises up before us is nothing like I expected it to be. I am struck immobile with fear. Seven heads it has, just as Grady said, but they aren’t dragon heads, or any other kind of animal for that matter. They’re all human heads, and each one bears my face!

The creature ignores me, lashing out at Grady instead. He is flung against a wall with a mighty swipe of the monster’s tail and pinned there by a taloned claw. Again I spring into action.

“Make it go away, Grady!” I yell. “Make it disappear!”

He screams and the monster screams in response. The sounds are eerily similar. I turn on the grotesque creature and find that I am armed. A sword has appeared in my right hand, a shield in the other. Grady’s doing, I surmise. He can’t control this thing alone,

so he's doing the next best thing.

Taking the cue, I lunge for the hydra and engage it in battle. By myself, I have never been able to touch anything or anyone in the dream state, but with Grady's help the sword I wield finds its mark time and time again. I slash at the creature and feel the brunt of its attacks on the shield, but never receive a scratch. It is only a matter of time before the creature fails. The odds are hopelessly stacked against it.

With a fury I drive past the monster's defenses and aim for what I hope will be its heart. The sword strikes, true to its mark, and hydra rears up, filling the cave with earsplitting noise, then falls back disintegrating until there is nothing left of it but the echoes of its death cry. The shield vanishes. I turn to find Grady slumped against the wall of the cave. He looks up at me and his face is filled with anguish.

"Please, don't make me look," he says.

"We've hidden from the truth long enough, Grady," I say. "It's time to face up to it. I have to know what happened, and you're the only one who knows."

The cave flickers around us and we are somewhere else. Trees surrounds us and the sound of rushing water fills my ears. Grady and I are standing off to the side, watching as facsimiles of ourselves stumble out of the river at the bidding of a tall man, dressed in black leather, holding a gun.

...The man steps sideways, to keep me in his sight, and runs an appreciating hand over Grady's buttocks. "Very nice," he says.

Grady twitches in anger and the man's gun is suddenly planted in the small of his back. "Don't even think it, Sampson," he commands, then laughs at his continuing joke. "Get down on your hands and knees."

Grady slowly does as he says, and the man stares at me with a smile playing across his cruel face. "How'd you like first crack at it?" he asks. "Payback's a bitch, but I can make sure he likes it."

I shake my head and look away.

"Suit yourself," he says, running his hand over Grady's buttocks again and reaching between his legs to fondle his dangling penis and testicles. "Very, very nice. I'll bet it really hurt, taking all of this at once, hey Delilah?"

This is too much for Grady. I see his face twist into a mask of rage as his right foot shoots backwards to catch his protagonist just above the hip and knock the air out of him. He swings around to find the gun coming up and bats the arm away as a shot rings out.

Pain explodes in my chest as the bullet slams into me and knocks me off my feet.

The sounds of struggle continue, then abruptly stop with a sickening crunch. I look up to see Grady holding the gunman up over his head and flinging him into the water.

Then he is beside me, pressing something to my chest. A shirt. His eyes are wild. Tears are streaming down his face and saliva flecks his lips.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no..." He says it over and over. I can tell that he's lost it. I try to speak but find I can't. My vision is ringed in darkness and I am finding it hard to keep my eyes open. They roll back and close. Grady howls like a madman.

Somewhere in the distance I hear a motor roar to life. Rolling my head sideways, I force my eyes open, just in time to see the truck disappearing into the underbrush.

"Grady," I whisper. "Don't leave me. I'm not dead. Don't leave me..." then I fade into unconsciousness.

I stand stunned, watching as Grady's truck bounces out of view. Beside me, the dream Grady is shaking his head, his eyes never leaving the body near the river's edge. It twitches awake and tries to roll over, but flops back in pain. He moves toward it, and I follow.

"You weren't dead," he says. "I thought you were, but you weren't dead..."

"Grady..." The words come hard to me. "You left me. You left me behind to die."

"I didn't know what I was doing," he says turning to me like a lost child. "I was scared. You were hurt so badly, and that other guy... I didn't know what to do. I was afraid."

"So you left me there to die..."

Grady nods, tears streaming down his face. "I didn't know what else to do. I was afraid you would... tell..." He falls onto his knees in the dying grass and stares at the image of me, trying feebly to hold on to life. "I was afraid. I shouldn't've done it, but I was so afraid. Please, Dan, don't be angry with me... I didn't do it on purpose. Please, forgive me?"

I stare at him, kneeling in the grass, and feel my chest constrict with pain. "Grady," I say, and the sound is more like a sob. "I can't... I can't let you purge yourself of your guilt this way."

His eyes are round and red rimmed as he stares at me. "What do you mean?" he asks. "I didn't do it on purpose! I was afraid! You have to believe me. I would never hurt you Dan!"

I turn and look at my abandoned body, still writhing with pain. "But you did, Grady. You did hurt me. You hurt me worse than anybody ever could. Don't you see, Grady? Don't you see what you did? It has nothing to do with the pain you inflicted on me.

It has nothing to do with that. Pain can be overcome. What you did was even worse. You left me, Grady. You let your fear keep you from helping me, and you left me behind to die." I look away from his tortured face and the anguish is more than I can handle. "Grady!" I howl into the shimmering air. "You let me die alone..."

"Please, Dan," he pleads. "Please, don't hate me!"

"I don't hate you Grady," I choke out. "I pity you. And I can never forgive you. Not for this. This is something you're going to have to carry with you for the rest of your life."

His screams do nothing to dissuade me. I stand sadly by as the land around us twists into a nightmare world of fear and horror. I watch, unable to help him, as the dying body before us opens its eyes and stands up, reaching out toward Grady while blood pumps from the ragged hole in its chest. And I find that a ghost can cry, at least here in a wounded man's psyche, as I watch my friend spin over the edge into madness; a madness which until this moment had always been just out of reach, held at bay by the paper thin world of his absolving dreams.

Epilogue

Gail is exiting the hospital when she finds herself face to face with Sammie. The two stare at one another before Sammie speaks.

"Mrs. McBain... I'm so sorry."

Gail nods and attempts a smile.

"I feel..." Sammie is having trouble with the words. "I feel responsible somehow."

"Don't," Gail says. "There was nothing you could have done. You weren't even in the picture until afterward."

"I know..." Sammie bites her lip and tears begin streaming down her face. Gail hesitates, then steps forward to comfort the small redhead with a hug.

"It's going to be alright," she says.

"You hate him, don't you," Sammie sobs quietly.

Gail's answer is as matter of fact as Sammie's is emotional. "Dan was the forgiving one, not me. I will never see my husband again. My daughter will never know him, except for photographs." She steps back and takes Sammie's shoulders in her hands, forcing her to look into her eyes. "What happened to Grady is a justice of sorts. I don't mean to sound harsh, but, short of life imprisonment or the death penalty, madness is the only form of punishment I would accept. Because of him, my husband is dead. I mourn for you. But I don't feel sorry for Grady Kline at all. I can never forgive him,

and I can never forget.”

Sammie looks away and nods. Gail’s sister approaches the two women, holding little Tori. Gail releases Sammie’s shoulders and drops her arms.

“I.. I’ve gotta go,” Sammie says, refusing to look at the baby. “I want to see him... before visiting hours are... well, you know...”

Gail nods and Sammie disappears through the glass doors.

“Da da,” Tori says.

“She’s been saying that over and over,” Gail’s sister reports. “I tried to make her stop...”

“No,” Gail says, her eyes brimming with tears. “I don’t ever want her to stop. I want her to remember her daddy as long as she lives.”

The world begins to fade around me, for what I know will be the last time. I can’t help Grady now. The opportunity has passed. I couldn’t reach him now if I wanted to. Sadly, I realize that I still don’t want to.

“Bye bye, da da,” my little girl says with a beautiful smile, frantically waving her arm.

“Bye bye, honey,” I say, waving back. “Daddy loves you.”

Then there is nothing.

fin



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