

Praise for *Trove*

“For so many of us, the obsessions of our future selves are sown into the wounds of our past. This is so clearly the case with Sandra Miller, an immensely gifted memoirist for whom the search for treasure has been, among other things, a life-long search for beauty, for safety, for the revealing of secrets that may become a sanctuary for love. The prose here is spare yet lyrical, evocative and painstakingly honest, and *Trove*, itself, is a treasure.”

—ANDRE DUBUS III, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *House of Sand and Fog*

“Sandra Miller’s memoir, *Trove*, grabs readers by the heartstrings and whisks us along on her life’s journey. From New York to California to Japan, from Europe to Boston, Miller’s story is a marvelous, sometimes magical adventure that is also urgent, heartbreaking. Miller is eloquent, witty, and grippingly honest as she searches for love and treasure, within and without. *Trove* is that rare treasure of a book—a compelling story that touches your heart and soul.”

—MAUREEN STANTON, author of *Body Leaping Backward: Memoir of a Delinquent Girlhood*

“Sandra Miller’s writing is straight to the heart magick. Going beyond words, she makes you want more. Her writing moves you to explore and ponder; and best of all, it opens up the imagination to all things possible.”

—DAMIEN ECHOLS, author of *High Magick* and the
New York Times bestseller *Life After Death*

“You will not read a page of this book without thinking, *oh my God, I have so been there*. Sandra Miller’s *Trove* is an hilarious, heart-breaking page-turner about one woman’s relentless search for the treasures life has to offer: romantic love, parental approval, a decent career, and some shred of meaning in this crazy world. *Trove* is the utterly accessible memoir we’ve all been hungering for: the everywoman’s *Eat Pray Love*.”

—ERICA FERENCIK, author of *Into the Jungle*

“With dazzling prose, keen observation, and laugh-out-loud humor, *Trove* is an essential book for women braving middle age, or anyone looking back in life before they surge forward. Sandra Miller writes about marriage, parenting, aging parents, and the quest for creative fulfillment with wisdom and insight, and with an honesty that is as shocking as it is satisfying.”

—LISA CAREY, author of *The Stolen Child*

TROVE

A WOMAN'S SEARCH *for* TRUTH
and BURIED TREASURE

SANDRA A. MILLER

Brown Paper Press
Long Beach, CA

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Brown Paper Press

6475 E. Pacific Coast Highway, #329
Long Beach, CA 90803

FIRST EDITION

ISBN: 978-1-94193-212-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019938729

Cover Design by Joan Wong
Interior Design by Gary Rosenberg

14 13 12 11 10 / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Mark

*This is the moment of embarking.
All auspicious signs are in place.*

—DENG MING-DAO

Prologue

At five years old I began hunting for treasure. I looked for it on sidewalks, under trees, in the dressing room at Sears where pockets released loose coins, matchbooks, ticket stubs, and foil gum wrapper linings that held their shape like a magic trick. I found the dirty penny kicked beneath the counter at Liggett's Drug Store, and the twisted piece of telephone wire that called to me from the gutter. Walking home from church, I filled my black patent leather purse with discarded fragments from my Connecticut factory town, as if they were clues leading me to even bigger treasure that lay far from my home, a stifling white colonial that could not contain my wants.

When forced inside I looked out. Standing in front of the sliding glass door of our dining room, I imagined treasures buried beneath the front lawn where a birdfeeder hung from the lowest branch of the dogwood tree. Behind me, my tall, ruddy father, sloe-eyed handsome like an old movie star, sat bent over his newspaper, while my mother, brittle-thin and blonde, circled him in her ritual dance of rage. Around the dining room table she went, picking up a silver-plated candlestick then pounding it back down, stomping her feet dramatically, brandishing her arms with a huff.

My father yelled, "What the hell, Betty?"

She yelled back, "I'll give you 'What the hell!'"

He slammed down his fist so hard that the plate split in two, the meat landing on one half, the baked potato on the other, as if even the food was taking sides. My mother retreated to find a

cigarette, shutting her eyes on that first deep drag. “A cigarette?” my father scoffed. “That’s how you deal with things?”

“Says the guy who smashed a plate,” she bit back.

When I screamed for them to stop, please stop, he stood, this gruff giant, and walloped me across the back, while my older sister, Betsy, cowered in the corner of our dining room with its dull ivory wallpaper. A week could go by without my parents exchanging a word. They just shuffled around each other in chilling rebuff.

One February morning, staring out at our birdfeeder and dead winter lawn, I wished myself away from them forever.

What happened next was both simple and profound. A large crow, feathers as black and glossy as midnight, alit on the feeder’s platform. My mother always banged her palm on the window to shoo the crows away—“greedy birds,” she called them—but not me. This crow had intense eyes perfect for spotting sparkly bits of treasure, and a long beak that could carry it away. We were looking for the same things; I felt it in my chest—an invisible string connecting the crow’s marble-sized heart to mine. It was such a muscular tug that when she tipped her head and dove at the ground, my own mouth opened in want, like a baby rooting for her mother’s breast. In the next instant, she lifted her head and turned her jewel eyes to mine. In her beak was a shiny white stone. A gem I had missed.

I held myself still, afraid of snapping the thread that bound me to this vigilant bird. I dug my toes into the beige carpet, dry against my bare feet, and felt the cold on my face, as the winter air breached the wall of glass. When I tented my fingers against the window, the crow sensed the vibration, and, in one fluid movement, spread her wings, folded back her feet, and disappeared into the high branches of the maple tree shadowing our yard. And some shiny part of me went with her, the thread pulling wisps through the window, the way a kite catches flight on a gust of wind.

I already had learned how not to cry because crying would be

punished. Still, I wanted to weep at that goodbye. When someone says she feels her heart being ripped away, I understand. I do. I remember that moment, my cheek pressed against the glass, my mouth creating a cloud of breath as I strained to see where the crow had gone, teasing me with that small white stone, and trailing behind her pieces of my heart.

1 - PUZZLED

“We should probably search together,” my friend David suggested, “until we have a reason not to.”

“Sounds good,” I said, as quick to agree with him as I had been to argue with my husband, Mark, who wanted me to skip this excursion. I’m often nicer to men I’m not married to, something Mark just loves about me.

David and I began, wading side-by-side through an overgrown patch of spring weeds bordering the community garden in Brooklyn’s Floyd Bennett Field. Sporting raggedy jeans and long-sleeved T-shirts, we could have passed as gardeners, only we weren’t there to spread mulch or check on seedlings. We had no legitimate interest in the garden itself, but rather what we hoped lay beneath the cool May dirt: a pirate’s treasure chest.

David had spent dozens of hours at home solving clues related to this armchair treasure hunt, a pastime in which a person or organization buries a prize then sets up a series of puzzles to reveal the exact location. This hunt, called *We Lost Our Gold*, had been put in place by two enterprising puppeteers as a promotional stunt for their work; anyone with some free time and a computer could have a go at decoding the layers of complex clues concealed in eight YouTube videos about pirates struggling to recollect the whereabouts of their missing treasure. Once someone had correctly solved all of the clues, they would know precisely where in New York City to dig up the chest, which is what we were doing.

David had determined that the garden in this defunct airport-turned-park was the X that marked the spot.



“What’s actually *in* the treasure chest?” my husband of almost 15 years asked when I presented my plan to spend a day digging in Brooklyn with a guy who wasn’t him. Mark was sprawled on the couch reading *Golf Magazine* with one pair of glasses placed sexily atop the other.

“Ten thousand gold coins,” I explained.

“Like doubloons?” he asked, incredulous.

“No, the golden dollar kind with Sacajawea and the presidents.”

Mark, who with his shock of dark hair and full lips resembled both a young Warren Beatty and an ageless Mick Jagger, took off the top pair of glasses and set it on his stomach. “Ooh. I love that band,” he said, “Sacajawea and the Presidents.”

“Seriously.”

“Seriously? There’s a lot going on that day. The kids have stuff to get to. I’m working late. We have dinner plans.”

“But there’s always a lot going on.”

“So are you telling me you’re going, or asking me if it works for you to go?”

“I’m telling you that I *want* to go.” I crossed my arms over my chest, as if to suppress the ache I felt inside.

“And I’m telling you Friday is hard.”

I drew a breath and tried to keep to the script: *Of course, it doesn’t work for us. Of course, the kids come first. Of course, no sensible forty-six-year-old mother drives from Boston to Brooklyn to dig for treasure with a guy friend, while her husband handles work, house, kids, and meals.*

Here’s what I refrained from saying: *My life depends upon this treasure hunt.*

But there are some things you simply can’t explain, like the crow

that flew off with a piece of your heart, and the chronic need to look for what you lost that day. Or the feeling that a treasure hunt could be the answer to a lifetime of longing. I just blew out of the house and headed for the bike path, my eyes blurred with tears for that part of myself I could never show: an insatiable craving for fullness.



Standing in front of the community garden with David, I listened attentively as he explained his deductive process, like the physicist that he is. “If you’re going to bury a 160-pound wooden chest, there are a few key constraints,” he said.

I pulled my small reporter’s pad from my bag and started scribbling notes.

“For starters,” he continued, “you would probably want to put the chest in public land within about one hundred yards of a parking lot. That way, whoever finds it could actually carry the thing out to their car.”

“Of course!” I said, scrawling even faster, adding girly flourishes to my letters, stopping short of dotting my *i*’s with puffy hearts in exhilaration over escaping with David for the entire day.

“And,” he continued with casual confidence, “it should be in a place without much foot traffic, so someone won’t just stumble on it or get arrested digging it up. I know if I were going to make a treasure hunt, I would bury it in a community garden.”

“That,” I said, poking my pen in the air between us, “is why you’re so good at this.”

He flashed me a questioning look. “What do you mean?”

David had dark, wavy hair and blue eyes that could focus like lasers. While I admitted to Mark that I always had a crush on him in that *yeah-he’s-a-cute-dad* way, I never revealed the extent to which David stirred up unbidden longing, the kind that is systematically, if subliminally, prohibited by marriage vows: *I promise to love you forever, cherish you for all time (and lose any ability to*

notice that other desirable men still walk the earth), 'til death do us part. When David glanced over again, I turned away, always worried that he could read me like one of his clues.

"The thing is," I said, "other people might ask, *Where's the gold? How do I get to the treasure?* Not you. You think, *Hmm, if I were going to make a treasure hunt, here's what I'd do.* You crawl inside it."

David thumped his fingers on the chicken wire fence. "Maybe," he said, dismissing my compliment to focus again on that expanse of dirt.

At five feet two with fair skin and wavy, light brown hair, I felt diminutive next to David who stood a foot taller and probably weighed two of me. More pronounced than our physical differences, though, was how we operated on opposing energetic frequencies: mine, antsy, versus his, methodical and unruffled. I wanted to get started already, find the right spot and start churning up dirt until the steel edge of the shovel met with the curved wooden lid of the chest. I could imagine the sound—dense and slightly metallic, but with a trace of hollowness. *Thunk*. I'd been waiting for decades to find real treasure and could barely tamp down my urge to dig, right then, right there. But I had to respect David's geeky expertise that had led him to winning two major hunts similar to this one.

So, as he continued to survey the garden, I paced the perimeter, curling my fingers into fists and scanning the area for things left or lost, twinkly or bright, the kind of treasure I'd been finding all my life. Walking to school as a young girl, I would sweep my eyes over the pavement, searching for something to deliver me from my volatile father's unchecked rage, my mother's cool disinterest. If a cheery yellow button or renegade paperclip winked at me in the sunlight, I would pick it up and slip it into my pocket. At some point I began to imbue these found things with meaning. Spotting something green meant go ahead with whatever project

I'd been dreaming up; a heart-shaped stone promised love to come; on the rare occasion when I stumbled upon a lost jewel—a broken gold earring, a runaway bead—I'd feel a surge of connection with my stylish mother who loved high heels and fashion jewelry.

“What are you doing with that piece of junk?” my mother would ask if I dared to show her my discovery. “Cripes. Throw that away before you catch tetanus.”

I never did—catch tetanus, or throw it away. I saved everything. Still do.

A ceramic bowl in my office brims with my recent finds: dozens of coins, some shiny round washers, a nugget of fool's gold, and a sharp blue tile, perfectly square. I have an iridescent marble the color of soap bubbles; a pink plastic ring I mined from a patch of ice in the Stop&Shop parking lot one brutal March morning; and, one of my favorites, a brooch crushed by a car tire in a pedestrian crosswalk and flattened into a leaf-shaped mosaic of shattered gemstones.

How did you see that? my son or daughter might ask as I pick up a thumbnail-size piece of sea glass in the tumble of rocks by the ocean's edge, or a dirty quarter in the gutter on a dark December night. How? *I'm like a crow* I tell them, always concealing a bleaker truth: With an instinct born of yearning, I have trained myself to find things. Even as I waited for David, logical in his approach to pretty much everything, I simply hoped some sign would appear amidst the coffee cups trapped by the sieve of a chain link fence and magically point *me* to the treasure chest. It was the same way I once believed a key-shaped soda pull-tab might open the portal to a hidden world, one that would let me to walk away from my childhood into a place where no one could hurt me. But no such sign materialized in that moment. Instead, David turned to me with his trademark restraint and said, “I guess we should have a look.”

With that, I let out a deep breath and lunged toward the garden gate.

We decided not to haul the two steel shovels from the SUV until we needed them. As for the metal detector purchased from Amazon, David was hoping not to use it at all and return it for a refund. The idea of this hunt was to find money, not blow it on the search. Plus, neither of us had much to blow: he, as the divorced dad of three girls; me, as a writer and part-time college English teacher.

“What *exactly* should I be looking for?” I asked, trailing David through the gate. “Give me specifics.”

“Maybe a parrot, or anything having to do with pirates,” he reasoned. “There’s probably going to be some obvious clue on the site, possibly even a potato plant.”

I squinted at him. “What does a potato plant have to do with pirates?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet,” he said, “but there’s a reference to a potato in the first video.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll keep my eyes *peeled*.”

“Ha!”

As much as I adored David, he terrified me. Practically impervious to flirtation—a rare trait in middle-aged men with a pulse—he guarded his heart with the care of one who had suffered from that organ’s fragility. “I don’t trust easily,” he once confessed, as a way of explaining why he’d been slow to date again after his divorce. Stymied in most attempts to charm my way to closeness with him, I resorted to making asinine jokes that he typically responded to with a fast smile and a chuckle, my best confirmation that he actually liked me. For a guy obsessed with cracking codes, David, admittedly, could be oblivious when it came to deciphering the cryptic nature of women. And despite my concerns that he could read my thoughts, I don’t believe he was aware of the feelings he provoked in me, or that he sometimes felt like a possible

answer to a lengthy stretch of lonely, a problem that was supposed to be fixed by marriage: one person to vanquish years of longing, as if any puzzle could be solved that easily.

For a few minutes I followed behind David as he walked ponderously, neither of us observing anything remarkable. With so much space to explore and limited hours to search before dark, I finally suggested divide-and-conquer.

“Go for it,” David said. “Shout if you see something curious.”

“Curious? I’m going to find that treasure chest.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” he said, “the way you notice things.”

I smiled at him, quietly delighted that he had recognized my talents. I couldn’t solve complicated math clues, but I definitely noticed things. I grew up reading the signs of my parents’ anger, always tuning in to the timbre of our Catholic household that told me when to hide in my closet, or when their moods—heightened by a pitcher of Manhattans—made it safe enough to come out.

I hid things, too. I buried the pieces of myself that my father never saw before he died twenty-six year ago, the same pieces that my 82-year-old mother, who was now hobbling toward death, might also never see. But that was the problem: I didn’t know where to look for that lost part of myself. I’d taken to falling asleep at night with one hand on my chest, the other pressed to my gut, trying to touch the unreachable place of desire stirred to life by my mother’s advancing illness, and an unexpected awareness of my own mortality. *What is missing that will make me feel whole, and why, when I’m teetering on the brink of fifty, can I still not find it?*

Continuing down the dirt path alone, I scrutinized each garden plot, some of which already had been planted for the season, while almost as many remained barren or choked with weeds. I was supposed to be looking for “on-the-ground clues,” as they are called in the armchair treasure-hunting lexicon. More specifically, we needed a crow’s nest, a pirate ship, and flying birdy, or at least real-world representations of those objects. A few rows over, I

noticed that David, his face inscrutable, was staring intently into one of the plots. I stopped and watched him.

David lived in a neighboring Massachusetts town with his daughters, his girlfriend, his mother, and four mostly female pets. A mutual friend, Kathleen, had connected us five years earlier when Sting's wife, Trudie Styler, turned one of my essays into a short film starring Kerry Washington, and I appeared on *The Today Show* to promote it. Around that time David had solved another armchair treasure hunt similar to our Brooklyn one and was getting some interest from Hollywood about turning that story of discovery into an adventure movie. "How do you two celebrities not know each other?" Kathleen asked when she introduced us one morning at school drop-off.

"I love treasure hunting, too," I mentioned to David as the two of us lingered on the playground, exchanging stories of our recent newsworthy experiences. Although I wanted to impress him—a true treasure hunter who had actually found valuable things—I did not elaborate on my belief that things of value appear all around us, if only people would take notice. I certainly didn't reach down to pick up the rhinestone butterfly barrette I'd been eyeing in the damp playground woodchips, at least not until he turned away, and I could bend over and surreptitiously grab it.

I was still staring at David when he signaled me over. "What's that?" He was pointing at some feathery growth in an otherwise empty dirt plot. "Potatoes?"

As the daughter of a father who had lavished his garden with the affection he'd withheld from his daughters, I knew my vegetable plants. "That's asparagus," I said. "It bolts like crazy when the weather warms up. Kind of like kids."

There was that quick smile and chuckle. Not that I noticed or anything.

We continued wandering, this time together, aware of glances from some legitimate gardeners, including a woman battling her

sixties with a bottle of peroxide and midnight-blue eyeliner. Holding a cigarette in one hand and a milk jug repurposed as a watering can in the other, she returned our *hello* with a tight nod.

“What’s she going to do when we start digging up the pirate’s chest?” I whispered.

“I don’t know,” David said, still peering closely into every plot. “Let’s worry about that when the time comes.”

But the time wasn’t coming, at least not then. When my phone buzzed a few moments later, I forced myself to answer. “Hey,” I said.

“How’s it going?” Mark asked, his voice cloyingly upbeat. Although we hadn’t resolved the tension around this trip, we’d at least sidestepped it for a while. “Did you find anything?”

“Not yet.” I wandered out of David’s earshot. “It’s complicated.”

“But you still think you’re going to find it, right?”

I looked out at the park, more enormous than anything we could tackle that afternoon without another targeted spot to focus our attention. The word *impossible* leapt to mind, as did *morons*. “We’re pretty hopeful,” I said.

“Well, that’s great. So, I’ll see you around 7:30 still? We’re meeting Maggie and Pete at 8:00.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “You know,” I said, with my jaw clenched, “just to be safe, I think we should postpone. Traffic out of the city could be brutal.”

When Mark didn’t answer, I filled the silence. “I’m sorry,” I pleaded. “I thought this would be quick.”

“I did, too,” he said.

We hung up without our usual “I love you.”

“Everything okay?” David asked when he saw me snap my phone shut.

“For some reason,” I said, “driving five hours to look for a pirate’s treasure chest doesn’t make sense to everybody.”

David smiled. "Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Though we tried to be strategic after that, David and I ended up darting about in various directions, covering acres of land in search of something that could be our flying birdy clue. At one point, David trekked back to the car to retrieve a shovel and had his way with a patch of weeds. "I came here today to dig and, dammit, I'm going to dig," he insisted, both of us laughing as he jammed the steel edge into the dirt with exaggerated thrusts. When his efforts produced nothing but more dirt, he broke out the metal detector and poked the black sensor head into low clusters of branches. I used that time to circle a nearby asphalt lot in search of a sign, any sign, stopping when I happened upon a puddle of blue and white crockery shards, a broken plate from someone's picnic perhaps. I kneeled to examine the various pieces before choosing a triangular chunk with blue flowers. Though obviously not related to the treasure hunt, it still felt like a clue. "It's here," I told myself. I slipped the triangle into my pocket and rejoined David.

"We probably should quit for today," he said, wiping his forehead with his sleeve and gazing into the shrubs. "I'm getting nothing."

"Seriously?" I couldn't bear the idea of leaving without the chest of gold. "I have a feeling we're close." I touched the piece of pottery, sharp between my thigh and jeans.

"Feelings aren't clues."

I didn't say it, but I thought it: *For me they are. Everything can be a clue. This shard in my pocket. That cloud shaped like a hawk. Us being here on a May afternoon hunting treasure.*

"Let's stay a little longer," I begged. I believed the treasure was in that park somewhere, and I didn't want our day, full of quirky fun and promise, to end that abruptly. I couldn't remember when I had last felt so motivated by anything. "Come on," I pleaded. "We have to find it."

David half smiled. "You are persistent."

We walked in focused silence until we came to the Kings County Fair, one of those honkytonk operations with bagged cotton candy and sketchy rides yanked off of a few dirty flatbeds. At the makeshift bar in the food tent, David ordered a beer while I guzzled a glass of water then left the tent and headed across the field, a 1,400-acre conundrum that needed to be solved before dark.

It was coming on twilight, that fleeting time of day that always felt like loss to me. Already I could sense the minutes slipping away to the tinny sounds of a carnival soundtrack.

“Where?” I asked out loud over that monotonous jingle. “Where is the treasure?” Closing my eyes and opening my fists as if catching rain, I lifted my hands over my head, not really caring that I looked like a TV evangelist praising the Lord. “Where?” I asked again, as I had so many times before under wildly different circumstances. As a child, it was, *Where are the parents who are supposed to love me?* Later it warped into, *Where is my life’s path? The great adventure? The feeling of wholeness?* I sometimes wondered if *where* was my first word. I just didn’t want it to be my last. I’d been looking for that intangible *where* for my entire life, and here I was on a Friday afternoon in a defunct Brooklyn airport, ignoring my children, pissing off my husband, looking again because I didn’t know what else to do. *Where? Where? Where?*

I plopped down on the side of a runway in the dry bramble, once wetlands, and waited for an answer. Nothing came. I pinched a bit of dirt between my fingers and brought it to my nose, sniffing deeply for the earthy smell of potatoes, or metallic notes of gold dust. Still nothing. I touched the dirt to my tongue until I could taste the dry grit of my father’s garden on a long-ago summer day, before spitting it out in disgust for the taste, and myself.

When I returned to the food tent, I found David perched on a barstool inspecting a map of the park. He swished his mouth around as if gargling his thoughts.

“What?” I asked, reading an idea in his eyes.

“Before we go, let’s try the North Forty.” He pointed to a wooded area a few hundred yards past the fairgrounds.

It was getting dark as we approached the small forest popular with birders and hikers. There was a prominent *Keep Out* sign posted near the entrance, but that didn’t stop us from walking right by. “What do you think,” David asked after a few moments, before we reached the thick of the woods.

“Don’t know,” I said, echoing the doubt in his voice. “Are they really going to bury the treasure in a place we’re not supposed to go?”

“The website said no.”

We stopped and faced each other. Right behind David, I could sense the rustle of the woods: the indiscernible life and unknowable danger so terrifying to me as a girl. As we stood there, close enough that our breath overlapped in the growing darkness, a police car drove by, drenching us in a shower of headlights. I wanted to seize David’s arm and pull him close. But as the squad car began to slow down, my partner in crime spun around and began walking back.

It would be nearly seven o’clock before we drove out of the airfield with the shovel bouncing around in the rear of the truck, no treasure chest to lock it in place. I tried to call Mark, but he didn’t pick up. “On my way home,” I sang to his voicemail.



When I arrived at my house close to midnight, I went to Phinny’s room first and stroked my twelve-year-old’s shaggy brown hair, now tossed across his pillow. Phinny always felt far away when he was sleeping, like he’d entered a secret world where no one could find him. In her room across the hall, ten-year-old Addie’s closed eyes looked troubled, until I kissed her head and she stirred a bit from the heaviness of a dream. Even in sleep she was easier

to reach. Next, I stole into my own bedroom and stripped off my dusty clothes. When I tossed my jeans into the hamper, the pottery shard clunked onto the hardwood floor. I picked it up and set it on my nightstand. After a quick rinse, I slid into bed trying not to wake Mark and reveal the hour of my return. When I felt him shift with my weight on the mattress, I held myself still until his breathing dropped into his chest, and I was once again alone.

Finally, slowly, I drifted into sleep, thinking of that far-off airfield, of clues, of crow's nests, of growing old, of treasure, of that thing I lost long ago—lost, or maybe simply had not yet found.