

~4700 words

Hockley Grove

In the days leading up to the Apocalypse, all was well on humble Hockley Grove – every lawn a sheet of varnished emerald; every house a temple, a salute to Family, to the silliest solidarity, to joyless one-ness; every man, woman, child, cocker-spaniel a classically hopeless mess. From street sign to cul-de-sac business shambled on as usual, even while Death loomed high, punched low. By no means was this composure the standard. With only three turns of twenty-four left in Mother Earth’s miserable music box, things had started to look very grim for sobbing primate babies of every age and stripe. Whole nations knelt and oozed. Corporations curled up in blankets of useless capital, saw oceans of liquidated assets turn to fume. Fear – the sculptor of conflict, the supremely pornographic muse – drew great gashes across every metropolitan face, maiming, marring, until the urban lymph of hatred seeped free.

Only Hockley Grove was immune to despair. By no small miracle, the primates in this glittering hamlet of a neighborhood had agreed, without deviation, to snub their noses at what was coming – *better to marry than to burn*, or something like that. While all the world’s eyes

turned upwards, glowered through the barrel of this terrible magnum called Deep Space, every Grove-eye was instead fixed stolidly downwards, on the marginalia of proud Americana, on Grove-problems – Grove-life, Grove-death, Grove-love, Grove-sex. They were determined, it seemed, to hold out with this till the very end of ends.

O the final Grove-mornings – how grand they were. All the rituals of suburbia satisfied. Every badge of Cro Magnon pride on display. The pageantry fell, with fantastic reception, under the eye of one woman especially, one queen among worker bees, one Lady Macbeth – Mrs. Grisham, wife of Mister and grand matriarch of Hockley Grove, her first name of no great consequence anymore. On these last days she would rise early to whip up a mixture of soy milk and powdered coffee grains, have an apple turnover, then plop herself onto the front porch, bottle of SPF 70 in one hand and latest (last) issue of Scribbler's Digest in the other. Only a handful of mornings left, and every one a premier for the greatest remaining show on earth. She had the best seat in the house. Tickled her crimson, this stuff – the players, the pieces, the props, ringing in the End with neither bang nor whimper, instead several musical numbers.

At precisely seven forty: The Odyssey of Joy Bender. Opening with Joy, beast in tow, leashed but still dangerous, patrolling the sidewalk in front of her fortress. Then a great wandering, fifty feet down and fifty feet back again – both creatures exhausted, completely done with (Joy at her best and worst, panting an uproarious staccato interlude). To end, a heroic shuffle, over to late-waking Mrs. Whitley's tulips to let the dog have a good long piss.

At eight thirty: The Exodus, very circadian. March of the breadwinners. Steaming sedans, hunchbacked grey hatchbacks, minivans rumbling epic sonnets of majesty, of excess power, pulling out of every driveway, honking salutation to every ally, creeping to the top of the street and then out into the residuum.

At nine twenty-three: The Metamorphoses – children on break, escaping from stifling space-ship, race-car, assorted-sport-themed cocoons and stretching wet wings in the great outdoors. O how they fluttered and flocked about one another, kicking at shins and cackling.

All the while, this celestial battering ram – Apophis, Apoptose, Apostate, whatever vile brand the eggheads had slapped to it – stormed the long blocks and side streets and subway caverns of the Kuiper Belt. Death was on the way. Death was dogged: a New York cabbie. Death was coming at 254 kilometers per second, had been coming for quite some time now. You could peep Her for yourself if you wanted. An amateur telescope would do the trick. That little brown-white speck...growing larger at a rate almost discernable to the human eye...an innocent pinhole, dilating, dilating. What was it dilating into? Into a tunnel of gaping light, with pearly gates at the frills? Into Jesus on a bed of virgin unicorns? Into a very big rock. O God, the terror. CEOs and heads-of-state and rock stars rolling in royal pussy hung themselves by the dozen. And here was good old Mrs. Grisham, age 47, blowing kisses at butterflies.

End times on Hockley Grove were strange. Strange on two levels. Strangely normal, that was true, but also flat out strange. Unadulterated strangeness. Everyone tasted it, acted it, played it, even Mrs. Grisham. On the third to last day ever she did something tremendously out of the ordinary, something couth; something she hadn't done in what must have been twenty-odd years. Herewith a phenomenon as rare as parthenogenesis – a suspension of the natural order. She gave Mr. Grisham a kiss. Planted one right dead and center, smack-dab on the grizzly lips, on his way out of the house. She gave it her all too, applied judiciously what little affection still flickered, injected the deed with as much honesty, as much gravitas, as could be mustered in such a silly little thing. Incredible, what impending doom will do to a gal. Three days and counting. Christ,

the infernal calmness of it all. From the swells of our solar system to her wave-worn rocks, Death had drifted...

With the husband out the door and the morning spectacle going stale Mrs. Grisham returned to the kitchen. She sat down at the counter, sweeping away with a liver-spotted arm the aftermath of Mr. Grisham's gruesome breakfast. Then she filled her mug and tore into her magazine. No time wasted. Not a second. Not for the indomitable Mrs. Grisham. Always the literary expedition – always onto the next piece of pointless prose, the satisfaction of eclectic futility. *Wouldn't want the head to swirl empty now, would we?*

Several soy-milk-and-gunpowder cocktails later, her reading material was beginning to run dry. Three hours had passed in the blink of a solar flare. She tossed the Digest aside, like a lioness would an impeccably-stripped carcass. The sun was infringing on the sanctity of the blinded kitchen with glassy spires of warmth. Unbearable, this stuff. Mrs. Grisham hated the sun. Odd of her, but not egregiously odd – a sentiment shared, surely, by many a spent girl like her. Awful Apollo. Bringer of stink and sweat; reminder of the squandered night; herald of the soon-to-be-squandered day. She perched her chin on chalice hands, elbow-mounted, and stared straight into the light, daring it to lick the floors. On cue, cuckold storm clouds rolled in. Even the weather bowed to her with esteem, perked out its ass to be spanked. But for what? Wherefore? *Quo warranto* – what apotheosis, deep in her past, shallow in her blank resume, merited the dominion? None knew, could ever know.

Satisfied and gloom-steeped, Mrs. Grisham dissected the room. Damn this mess on the counter. Not her mess, nary her problem. She circumambulated, pointlessly. It was in these dreadful lulls that she noticed the little things. Like how the very base of the secondary faucet was starting to assimilate mold. Like how the second hand on the Kit-Cat clock was drifting

counterclockwise again – with every tick a gelatinous shake, a trembling, an indecision in the spirit of a fat-bellied boxing has-been; always looking, wandering backwards, a fifth of a second, a fourth of a second, a whole second, days and months then years and epochs. Like how Mr. Grisham had left the drawer immediately next to the fridge slightly open again.

This drawer. His cigarette drawer. She scuffled over to it and yanked it all the way open. He'd taken three entire packs with him – three packs of *Proletariats*, leaving two *Blue Grooms* and one bedraggled *Canto*. Mr. Grisham didn't have a *problem* with smokes per se; rather, he himself was the problem, to which cheap-rolled tobacco twigs, dull and weary-tasting, were the solution. This was all fine with Mrs. Grisham, creature of vice as she was, empathetic to the vices of others. In fact, this particular vice was doing its best to quietly seduce her. She extricated a modest stick, a *Blue Groom*, and rolled it wistfully between thumb and index. A Death stick, this, but now more sad than dangerous. Death had other salesmen working for Her. Other agents. Death had a supply chain that cut out the Death stick middleman. Death had Apophis. What use was there for shit-laced smoke, with *that* looming on the horizon? Doubtlessly no use at all. So smoking became an agent, a broker, for Life instead. Life sticks, the new copyright. A patron of amplified experience.

Mrs. Grisham had tried smoking once or twice, maybe three times before – just to get a taste, just to see what all the tweaks tweaked for (the greatest tweak being her sour-stenched spouse): just to occupy, if only for an instant, the space they all kept slithering back to, on hands and knees, eyes and jowls dripping jive. *It's not crack, dear, Jesus. It's just a cig. Just one*, Mr. Grisham would whinny. He gave a brave defense, enough to color her apathetic, enough to prod her to try for herself. And so she did, through pursed lips, a hair-trigger diaphragm. All said, she didn't like it much. Too – what's the word – too...naughty. Hers was a muted life, and that was

fine enough. It would remain muted till the very end. All these mad little junkies, with their puffing and their pleading and their twitching – you’d think that nicotine was like food to them, like a real juicy pork shoulder. All the same, this little stick called to her. Mrs. Grisham rummaged around for some matches and came up empty handed, so she lit up using the gas-stove and blasted through the damned thing with a few heroic gasps. Wholly pleasureless, this experience. She pressed the fuming butt into the vestiges of Mr. Grisham’s half-consumed omelet, still oxidizing on the counter, and threw open some windows.

The rest of the day was occupied with foot-tapping and thumb-twiddling, some furniture-reapportioning, a bit of bonsai-tree-trimming (Christ, that went like shit, what a waste of money, of chlorophyll), and finally an arduous marathon of Diane-Steel-reading. This last undertaking had the effect of softening her up very slightly. The defenses lowered *pro tempore*, just in time for the return of the other half. At around six-thirty, Mr. Grisham brought home a pizza – from who-knows-where, fizzing with grease and poisonous-colored at the crust. What more could one expect these days? She gave him another kiss – more desperate, less honest – as he laid it to rest on the dinner table. They ate in mostly silence, with some monosyllabic pleasantries exchanged, afterwards dispersing to the living room (her) and the second-floor study (him), for a period of independent entertainment. All the while gathering strength, scavenging courage, mustering lust...

But this night was not the night. Not *the* night, at least, for the redemptive intertwining. It just wasn’t there – the call, the obligation. At half past nine both strangers resigned uneventfully. Neither could fall asleep. The chirp of clueless crickets and the hum of a fully-depleted air conditioning unit played them out. Almost all the way out, almost into dreamless slumber, but not quite, not yet.

As they lay there in total wordlessness, Apophis shook off the grapple-grift of Martian gravity.

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The Grishams awoke separately on Apocalypse Eve. Eves begin with mornings, people forget – only after the ennui, the loose-drawn anticipation, do they become joyous nights. And my, how loose-drawn this morning was. Mr. Grisham, perhaps in an attempt to evade the terrifying spousal glare, or the unease of feigned intimacy, crackled to life early and scuttled off noiselessly to the office (where attendance was still solid, to no one's great surprise). Mrs. Grisham rose an hour later than usual. With some effort she hauled herself from tentacled sheets and into the kitchen. She forewent the customary nutritional intake, but managed to claw her way outside just in time to catch the tail end of the morning show – the last bumbling commuters, hoisting their ten-ton spirits into various vehicles, zig-zagging up the road; the Danbury boys and the Tennyson girls, tackling each other to the pavement, then taking turns heaving tremendous rocks at Joy Bender's chained-up Staffordshire. The sky was overcast today, she noted. Earth showing the first signs of weakness, of alarm. Tomorrow would be sunny though. Then the next day, who knew?

Before retreating once more into the kitchen lair, with its bountiful cupboards and Himalayan-hewn black granite countertops, Mrs. Grisham turned her back on Hockley Grove for a brief instant to survey the house. Could be the last time, it came to her. Sentiments, entrapped memories and whatnot. She wasn't really the *type*, but in light of it all she couldn't help but take a moment...a moment for recapitulation...

It was one of those rigidly Victorian ordeals: pleasantly-frilled eaves and window perches; columns rising up to meet at all manner of triangular pinnacles – equilateral, scalene, isosceles

shapes (every geometric demographic represented); then the fleshy pinkness of the thing. Back then, Mr. Grisham had hounded the realtor day and night to get him a bid for a place like this. *No I don't fucking want that one. I want **that** one. Yes, fucking **that** one. Number fifty-four. The one with those pretty bay windows. And those, uh, what do you call them – the slate roofing... Yes I know it's fucking pink.* Indeed, he'd hounded Mrs. Grisham too, to get her out of the last cozy cottage and into something a might grander. In those days the devotion still felt organic – not so damned legislated, or so goddamned obligatory, like lately. At last she surrendered, somewhat begrudgingly. She allowed herself to be swallowed up by this veritable funeral home, swallowed up by its panther-thick mortgage, its geriatric rhapsodies. Good lord, that all seemed like it was several world powers ago...

At present, with the whole thing laid out in front of her, Mrs. Grisham realized very suddenly that she still hated number fifty-four quite a bit. I mean, how *could* you love it? It was horrid. All of it, not just the house. God, the very land itself stank of platitude. She saw the place now, with subatomic clarity, for what it really was: A terrible, kitsch-strapped plot – spatially perverted, as if an endearing little coffee shop had been twisted and stretched across three hundred or so square meters – all the cute confiscated, all the cheer cheated, and the only sentiment preserved a warm, thrumming loneliness. Hatred swam, as Mrs. Grisham reflected and reviewed. Hatred – that was the key. She could drink all the hate she wanted, all the bubbling poison, till her hate-appetite was sated, so long as she didn't submit herself to that trap of *regret*. Regret did no one good. Regret was the gristle lining her steak – to be excised. Regret was like Canada; innocent enough, muted enough, despised nonetheless.

She shook herself free of this trance and shoved her way inside, into the kitchen again.

The rest of the morning and afternoon, up until Mr. Grisham's trumpeting reappearance, went much like the day before. No more great realizations of dormant hatred. No more *regretting*. At three-o'clock, Joy Bender came round with a batch of fresh muffins. By four-o'clock Mrs. Grisham had internalized a batch of fresh muffins. Then she tried her hand at cigarettes again, to no major boon, as this time (she went for a good old *Canto*, a real classic) turned out to be even less palatable than the last. By five every activity had been exhausted: the foot-tapping and the thumb twiddling, the furniture-reapportioning and the tree-trimming, the Diane-Steel-grind too.

This was all in good time though, as Mrs. Grisham had a certain stretch of preparations ahead of her. Tonight was the night (*The Night*) – it had to be this one, for there would be none like it after. With the fire of a woman wanting, she bent herself to the cutting board and stove. The refrigerator was still lush: various sword-hewn chops and hocks and filets, humongous dino-steaks, assorted greenery, from lemon Basil to bok-choy; then on the bottom level lethal bricks of butter, paving a corridor into deeper recesses, where bread loaves of every hue, texture, ethnicity, sat springily. By the time Mr. Grisham lurched through the front door at six thirty-five, a kingly feast had been laid out on the dining room table (though Mrs. Grisham left some provisions untouched, saved them for tomorrow, for the last supper, which could expect ill-mannered Apophis as its guest of honor).

“So work. How was work?” she crooned after ten or so minutes of wordless mastication. This was her best impression of a loving consort.

“Well,” he granted – chewing, chewing, belching musically, “You know how it is.”

Mrs. Grisham nodded (she did not, in fact, know how it was).

“And the drive, dear? How was the drive?”

Again this wretched smacking of lips, this leaking of meaty juices. “Ordinary, I suppose...A bit less traffic...just a bit...”

The two went mute again.

After dinner came the customary departure, the divergence, each into one’s own private space. Apocalypse Eve was in full swing, but for this lot the reverie was pained and solitary. Here *she* sat, clicking her tongue and thumbing through well-worn page upon page of squandered cosmopolitan ink. There *he* sat, upstairs and upwind, doing God knows what with his ever-so-precious time. It was Mrs. Grisham who finally took the initiative. With a full head of steam she stampeded into the second floor study, where Mr. Grisham was listening to *Seven Habits* on tape and penciling over an old sketch of the Walden Pond cabin (a *Proletariat* dangled, quivering, from his aperture). *Oh hello dear, fancy seeing you here.* Fancy indeed. At first she poked and prodded with some cooing, some coaxing (herewith an outright Arthurian verbal defecation, bubbling with great tributary flourishes, exculpations of past grievance, ten-fingered kneadings of the ego). Then she applied her most tender – sack-shriveling? – touch. The Grove-touch, for the Grove-sufferer. A last-ditch effort: she planted herself gratuitously onto his lap, gave the landing a little wiggle for good measure, until the front of his corduroys and the back of her porous sweats nipped and popped with free electrons. Through every spatial intrusion, every suggestion of yearning, strength was being gathered, courage was being scavenged, lust was being mustered, aggregated, until finally...

Off to the bedroom, the chamber of many topical failures. This was it – the main event, the feature presentation: a last shot at the hugs and the tears and the accolades. One last dive into the teeth of combat. Formidable, the boudoir battlefield – it was a largely boring, intermittently terrifying place. Like a junior-high school locker room: the nudity never mandatory, never

insisted upon, but whenever it did come about by some cruel intersection of fates, you could be guaranteed an experience steeped in humiliation, in temporal inadequacy. But these were the last days. With Apocalypse in the rear view mirror, and with Death as a trump card, as a crackling new trope in the armature, Mrs. Grisham had convinced herself that anything was possible. *Anything*. Anything? Could they finally get it right? Could they get it right just one time, the first and the last?

The answer to this question turned out to be *No*. Despite what must have been at least some subliminal urgency, this time was no better than any other. It always went the same with him. Always. Always terrible. Mediocre consistency is no great asset in the sport of married love-making, she'd tell you if she had the chance. It wasn't that Mr. Grisham didn't care – he cared a great deal, as all men do, about their potency (their *effectiveness*). So sad, this fellow, so remarkable, for his ineptitude was wholly sympathetic.

“Good, baby?” he'd pant unattractively after a minute or two, and she could feel on the small of her back a terrible volley, loose sweat and spittle. “Baby?”

The eyes rolling sideways, never back, into the head, where they pleaded to be taken, “Yes dear... good.”

Silence again, except for the tender – nauseating, Christ what does it take to get a real man in this town – pitter-patter of flesh on flesh. Twenty-six years of aggrieved union, and still this timidity on his part; not respect (no, if that were the case he wouldn't bother with this ghastly tip-tapping every night), more a genuine cluelessness. He'd had women, had them quite well, before her, but for some reason the technique and the practicum failed to translate, when it came this married stuff. All this *hm baby* and *oh dear* shit. Like they had an audience at the foot of their bed, suited and bloused, ticking away at little boxes for the requisite pleasantries, the ceremony,

the goddamned custom of coitus. The only consolation she could sift out of the aftermath – the mildly-damp, barely-strained sluggishness of a thing done wrong – was the certitude that this precise injustice was being repeated, twenty or thirty times over, down the length of Hockley Grove. Yes, Mr. Grisham was bad, but probably not quite as bad as Mr. Tennyson, or Dr. Danbury; definitely not worse than Gerry Spreckels, that old hedge-trimming jester, spouse of luckless Linda, who made a sport out of reciting her man’s defects over Thursday afternoon cribbage. Still, sometimes Mrs. Grisham would wonder... the Mister’s performance tonight had been the worst yet, by a long margin, and now she couldn’t help but to glance behind her every so often, at the slumbering satyr, just to make sure it wasn’t old Gerry, bringer of no great sensation at all, who’d crept in and done the deed.

Suspicious dispelled, she plummeted to sleep through the sound of Mr. Grisham’s roaring nasal upheavals. This had been the final defeat – the battle and the war lost all the way, from frontline to Capitol. But it wasn’t all that bad, was it? Elsewhere in the world, outside of sacred Hockley Grove, people were tearing each other apart with filed teeth. Elsewhere, people were weaning their dogs and beating their babies. This provisional failure, in the frame of much larger, must nastier, much more sanguinary ones, merited little lamentation. To be just amongst the unjust, filthy among the filthier: such was the nature of survival, of being good enough in times like these – at least, so went the song Mrs. Grisham sang to herself as damp eyelids magnetized.

Far above, Death was still hurtling home. Apophis now occupied the space between claps: the distance between planets. Farther from Mars than from Mother Earth. Closer and closer now, km by km...

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The Last Sun broke bashfully on humble Hockley Grove. Finally the big day. Palpable anticipation – absolutely palpable. The couple rose asynchronously again, first her then him.

Bleary-eyed, long-faced Mr. Grisham found his way into the kitchen just as Mrs. Grisham was on her way out. Their gazes collided terribly through a steam of hot breakfast.

“Morning,” said Mister, guiltily.

“Morning,” said Missus.

“Waffles today?” he asked, noticing the soggy box next to the coffee machine.

A glare over the shoulder. “I left some for you. There on the counter.”

“Thanks. I’m in a hurry. Could you toss ‘em in a Ziploc or something? And napkins?”

“...You’re serious. Christ, do it yourself.”

He did and then left.

The day (the last one, the final breath of primate consciousness, the planet’s whimpering death rattled) turned out to be replete with precious little ironies, triumphs, downfalls. As if inbound Apophis exerted some special judicial force on the Grove-people from above, even as they snubbed their Grove-noses, turned Grove-eyes to Grove-shit. The Danbury boys and the Tennyson girls, tempting fate in the form of a sexually exasperated and poorly chained Staffordshire, finally got what was coming to them. A light grazing did the trick – Joy Bender’s Beast was off, splintering away a chunk of porch-railing as he went, snapping, with crimson mug and demonic snarl, at their heels and even taking one rosy-cheeked princeling to the curb, before Joy, who had been spectating from her living room window, decided to intervene. Then luckless Linda Spreckels came round, just sobbing, sobbing, splashing tears all over the Himalayan-hewn black granite countertop as Mrs. Grisham tossed her tissues and patted her on the back ferociously. Old Gerry had slammed her with divorce papers this morning, left them with a

classique ballpoint on the bedside table. As if this wasn't enough, Mrs. Grisham went on to find – for goodness sake, you wouldn't believe – a big fat *joint* of all things, hidden artfully in the other box of *Blue Grooms*, a single periwinkle shrub amongst pines. Linda Spreckels had just cast off, asking for a cigarette on the way out, and sobbing harder than when she'd made ground here on number fifty-four. In the process of returning the graciously produced carton to its unholy drawer, Mrs. Grisham felt a swell somewhere deep, and decided to try just one more, to take just one more shot at this thing, this agent of – what was it? – amplified experience. As she fished into the box, pining for one that 'just *felt* tasty', she found her fingers curled instead around something thin, wilted, homeless-textured. The outrage and confusion. The alien thing extracted, then sniffed. Unmistakable, this fragrance. She dumped the entire carton out onto the counter. The *joint* was a stag, a solo. Lying between a dozen plump and tidy Life sticks, it looked very sad indeed, like the runt of the pack, like a single harlequin baby tainting an otherwise unspoiled litter, a green letter on a red letter day. Christ. He didn't have to *share* – not that she would have partaken – but there's something vile to be said about a man who doesn't at least give the whole disclosure bit a bumbling college try. What else had Mr. Grisham been withholding from her? What other secret tinctures, noxious powders, caustic herbs? Deplorable, she keened, how her chance to sieve out these secrets was fully expended.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent *hating*; regretting spasmodically. They were the Grishams...Mister and Missus...solid and sturdy, hostages of attrition...between them so much jungle...

The last intersection of husband and wife occurred at dinner. Some camaraderie restored. Wounds cured by time, by a work-day apart. The Grove-eyes were still fixed grossly

downwards, at Grove-nonsense. Mr. Grisham regaling with one of his vile work-stories. Mrs. Grisham aloof and still. Right on the cusp of It. Any moment now...Any goddamned moment...

“So this little bald-headed guy from M & A stands up, he’s a Jap, mind you—”

“That *word*. Don’t use that word.”

“Sorry dear. This little bald-headed Gook from M & A stands up—”

“Donald!”

“Whatever, this foreign guy, I don’t know his name, gets up in the fuckin’ middle of the pitch, and he does this, Christ you’re not gonna believe it babe. He gets up and says right to Guy Finch’s face: ‘Hey! Fucker you! You run us into ground! You keel me, my children, blind, fook blind!’ And then he waddles over to the corner of the room – there are about 50 of us round the table, all the important folk and such – and he curls up fetal on the floor. Suit and all! Fetal! On the damned floor!”

At this Mr. Grisham snorted through another lamb chop and went to work on a hefty knob of celery greens. Then a coy glance at the missus, prodding for the warmth of amusement.

‘That’s very good dear,’ she yawned.

‘I suppose it is. Leave the heavy lifting to us. Don’t know how M & A is gonna deal with it though.’

‘I don’t know dear...’

‘Have to see tomorrow I guess. About that. I imagine I’ll be a bit late coming home. You know the deal – filings and whatnot. Can’t be helped really.’

‘Oh? Tomorrow?’ The last bit trailing off terribly...

Mr. Grisham seemed not to notice. Eyes shining, he droned through a teeming wine-and-mash mouthful, ‘So how was your day?’

‘Hmph,’ said Missus, with recaptured poise.

‘Excellent. Quite excellent,’ said Mister.

And loving Apophis struck 2900 degrees F in the stratosphere.

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