

A DECONSTRUCTED DOLLHOUSE
by Margaret Dragu
October 1996



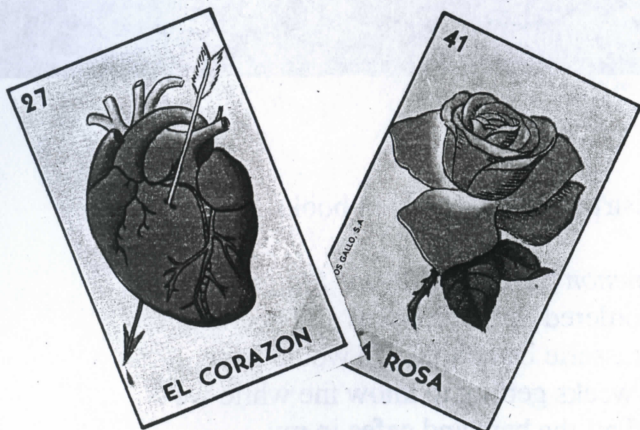
This isn't how it happens in books.

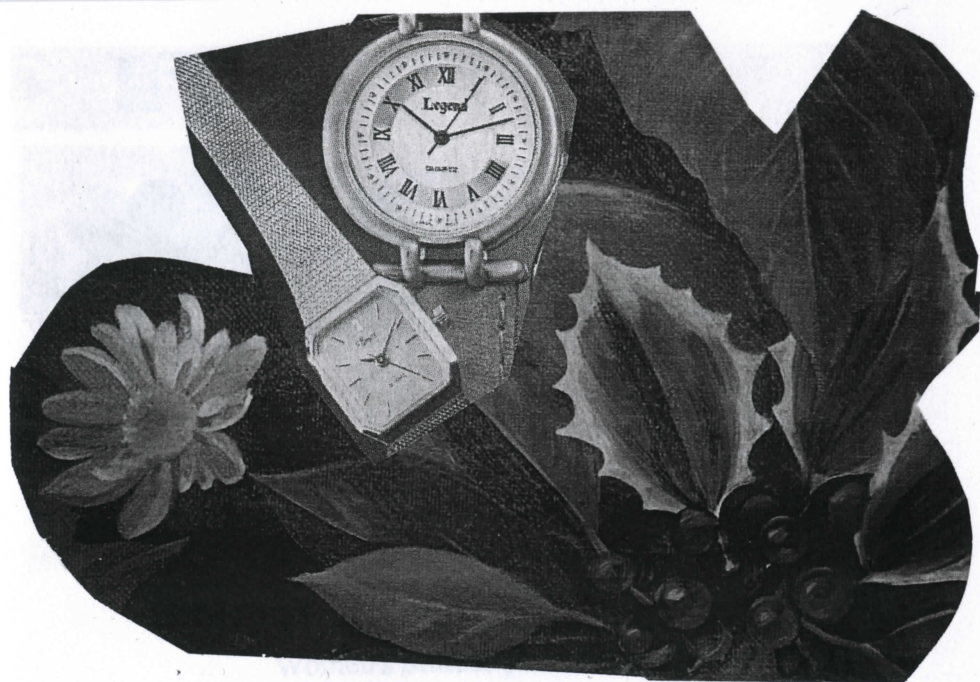
In *Simenon* novels, *Inspector Maigret* would have ordered up sandwiches and beer from the Brasserie Dauphine. He would have spent weeks getting to know me while we visited all the bars and cafes in my arondissement of Paris. By the time we got here, I would be dying to tell him everything.

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In *Freeling* novels, *Henri Castang* and I would already be a little bit in love. He would be fighting Dutch bureaucracy to make things easier for me here at the station. In American novels, I would be accompanied by a private detective who was the person who had really solved the "who-and-why" of my "done-it". There would be name-calling between my private detective and the cops. We would drink bad coffee and smoke cigarettes as more officers would watch me through the one-way mirror in this room.





Instead, *Officer Mueller*, I am in this plain beige office with someone who looks like somebody's mother. No offence. I'm a mother, too.

A lawyer? No thanks. I just want to tell the whole story.
Which is funny if you knew me.
And my relationship with narrative.

If I tell you that I don't know where to begin, you will say to begin at the beginning and keep going till I get to the end. Which, *Officer Mueller*, is easy for you to say. Shit! I can tell that you and I live on different planets. You can't really hear my voice. Maybe if *Henri Castang* were here? *Monsieur Freeling* seems to have wrestled with language and culture -- if not narrative itself.
OK. OK.



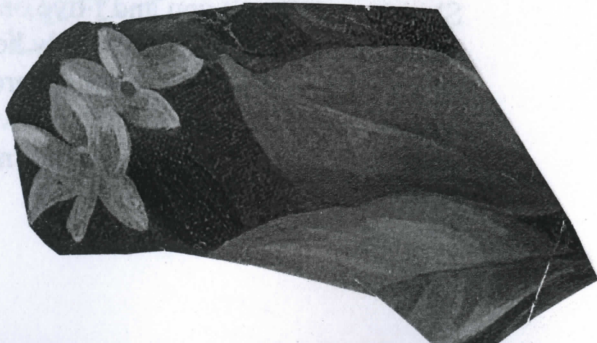
Natraj

नटराज



Bihu (Assam)
बिहू-नृत्य (असम)

Krogstadt showed up at my house. Middle of the afternoon. While my children were there. It wasn't even the first of the month. Besides, I had rarely been late for even a single payment despite all his compounding interests and other gouging techniques. But he said it wasn't about the money I owed him. He wanted me to use my influence with *Torvald* to secure him a position at the bank. He was blackmailing me. He threatened to expose me as a forger even though the reason I had signed papa's name was to save *Torvald's* life and to protect my poor dying father. *Krogstadt*. How he hounded me!



It is a long story, but, I left *Torvald* and the children. I went back to my maiden name: *Beaudriard-Bellieu*. I picked up a couple of courses to finish my degree and was lucky to get a part-time job at the community college teaching Feminist Literature.

Who should be at my first faculty meeting? *Krogstadt*. He had two Writing for Business courses and one so-called Creative Writing course where he taught the five paragraph expository essay. Oh gag! I hate the five paragraph expository essay.

"I think we should use a method from our Women's Studies professors," said *Krogstadt*, "I suggest we hold hands and share our personal histories. Whoever has suffered the most can chair the meeting ... ho ho har har ... Just kidding - really - come now - I am sure *Nora* understands my sense of humour - har har - eh, *Nora*? You know I'm kidding!"

I had to bite my tongue and grind my teeth during every meeting.

र नृत्य



Andhra Folk Dance
आन्ध्र प्रदेश लोक-नृत्य



Santhal Dance (Bihar)
संथल-नृत्य (बिहार)

At 8:30 am he would bellow across the hall,
"How goes the smashing of the canon?"

At faculty cocktail parties, he would drink too much and rant about being an endangered species on campus -- you know, about being the great white male oppressor. And moan about Declining Standards and Death of Real Education due to the Quota System and all that tired old stuff. He was an A-1 prick. I kept praying he would get fired but there were never any formal complaints about sexual harassment or verbal abuse from faculty or students. He kept it all couched in so-called humour. No one ever called him on it. And I didn't. I couldn't. He would have exposed me as a forger and I would have lost my job immediately.



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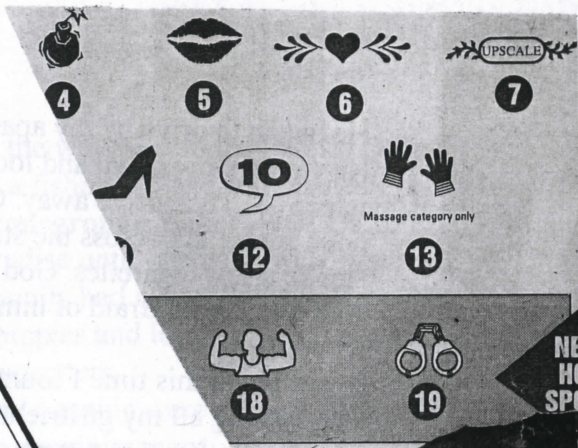
GES

NDIA

DAN

OF

FOR STYLING: ANITA GIBBS
Rear and worry always lead to defeat.



Then the weird phone calls and messages began.

Heavy breathing. Hang-ups. Drunken recitations from *Homer*, *Milton*, and *Shakespeare* filled my answering machine. Then the messages got weirder.

"*Nora*, people crave stories. They need conflict and resolution. Just like in music. They want to sing along with the tune - not be assaulted by discordant noise. Remember that Theatrical Conventions are actually laws, *Nora!* You break them at your own peril. Please don't forget our friend Chekov who said '**gun that appears in 1st act must go off by 3rd**'. Bang Bang."
Krogstadt was driving me crazy.
I hated him.

6

He began to drive by my apartment at night.
He would slow down and look into my
windows. Then drive away. Come back an
hour later. Park across the street and sit and
smoke a few cigarettes. God - I hated him.
And then I was afraid of him.

It was about this time I found out my lover
was fucking all my girlfriends. Look.
My grandfather was a gypsy. He taught me
when the going gets tough, you move.
Like when the cops drop in and ask for
fortune-telling licenses or the local
shopkeepers assume their shortfalls are due
to your shoplifting -- it is time to pack up the
caravans and go go go. So I did.



I went all the way west to the Pacific Ocean.
Settled in a fishing village and opened up
Nora's Stoneground Bakery and Cafe.

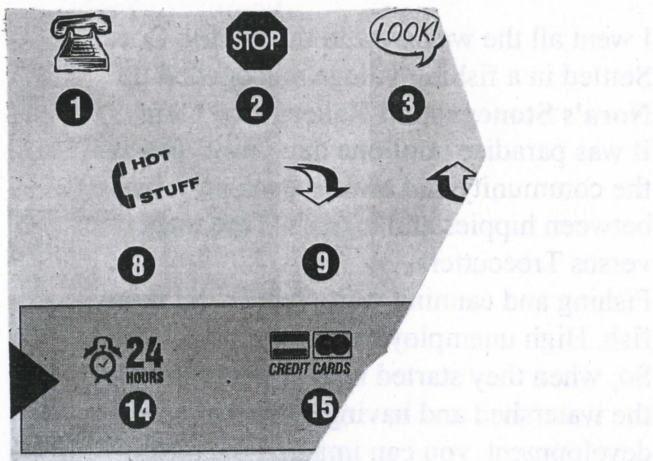
It was paradise until one day...well, you see,
the community had always been polarized
between hippies and loggers. Treehuggers
versus Treecutters.

Fishing and canning were dying -- no more
fish. High unemployment.

So, when they started talking about logging
the watershed and having a big real estate
development, you can imagine the bitter
dispute that occurred. Neighbours became
enemies. Everything symbolized something.
Nora's Stoneground Bakery became the
eco-terrorists' clubhouse.

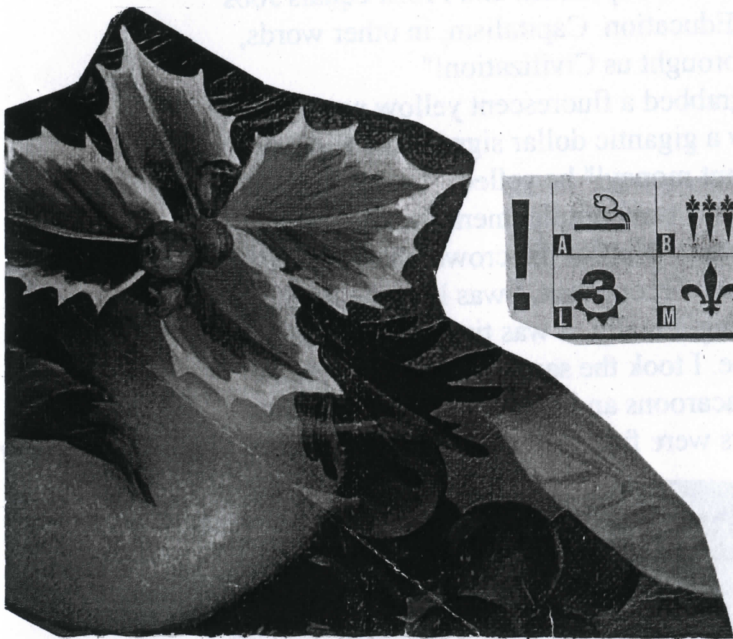
Thelma (widow of a logger who died on the
job) started **White Sliced Bakery** which
became the cafe for loggers, developers and
anyone-desperate-for-a-job.



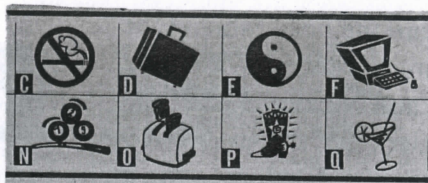


Then the community meetings began. Both sides agreed to attend a meeting a month for six months - as a "gesture of good faith in the process towards resolution". In for a penny. In for a pound. I took my knitting to the first of these meetings as I had recently stopped smoking and also given up chewing gum. And who should be representing the real estate developer?
Krogstadt.

He waved at me from the head table at the front of the community centre. By the time we stopped for tea and cookies, I had finished an entire sleeve of the sweater I was working on. *Krogstadt* saddled up to me at the tea pot. "Its been a long time, *Mrs. Helmer*. Or is it *Ms. Beaudriard-Bellieu*? Or have you deconstructed or reconstructed yourself again, my dear *Nora*?" I told him I was *Nora Joyce*, now. He addressed me as *Miss Joyce* and patted my cheek. "So good to have found an ally in this foreign turf; and you are my ally, aren't you, my dear *Nora Joyce*, my sweet little wren."



A few days later, the phone calls began. And then the nocturnal car visits.



Four months went by and it was time for meeting number five. And my turn to bring cookies. I made macaroons. *Krogstadt* was in Mode Big. In Oratory Select.

"Some of you, like *Ms. Nora Joyce* here, think profit is bad. Money is evil. And Capitolism is corrupt. You, good people, are mistaken! Capitalism and Profit equals Jobs and Education. Capitalism, in other words, has brought us Civilization!"

He grabbed a fluorescent yellow pen and drew a gigantic dollar sign on the flipchart. "I want money!" he yelled. "I want Big Bucks! I want employment for all! I want progress!" Half of the crowd cheered. Half boo-ed. Throughout, I was knitting knitting. Finally, it was time for tea and coffee. I took the saran wrap off the plates of macaroons and made sure the milks and sugars were full.



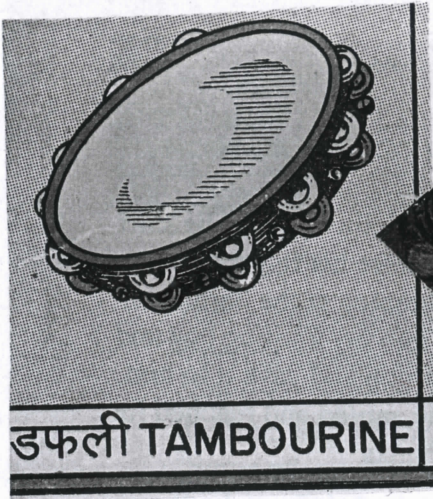
I went outside where *Krogstadt* was smoking. He looked awful. Exhausted. Pale. Nicostained fingers. Yellow teeth. His shirt collar was dirty. So were his fingernails. His stomach was straining at the buttons of his shirt. I reached into my knitting bag and pulled out his macaroon and gave it to him. He was suprised. He smiled and reached for it and nodded his thanks.



तबला TABELA

12

Just before his first bite he paused and said, "*Nora*, I've been wondering if it is narrative you hate or just endings. Perhaps you despise the predictability of climax and denouement. The three minute radio love song." He broke the cookie in half and held one piece in each hand as he continued, "Because I actually see a happy ending for you and the other luddites of this little burg.



डफली TAMBOURINE



"It goes like this. You win. You get a reprieve on logging of the watershed and town council votes to save your historic fishing village. You collectively sigh in relief. But development keeps bearing down upon you until one day you look up and there is a huge shopping mall right beside you. And one of the older fishermen says who-wants-to-live-in-the-armpit-of-a-mall and he sells his historic shack to an ...uhmmmm ... a dentist. And the dentist is a nice guy and keeps the outside of the house looking like everyone else's shack but inside he invests piles of dough and makes a palace with a jacuzzi and a sauna and microwaves and he puts in more electric power and the community goes along with that because they get more power for free 'cause the dentist is paying for the whole shot and everyone is happy.

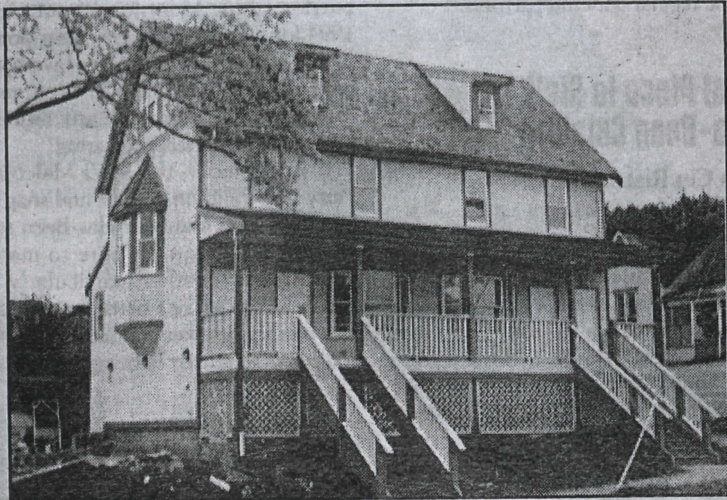
The dentist entertains his dentist friends and they just love the place and finally another old-timer sells to another dentist and another and another until the whole village is full of dentists. The dentists install sidewalks, streetlamps and covered parking and soon the fishing village looks exactly like the mall across the street. There are just a few photographs left of what the fishing village used to look like way back when. You see, my darling *Nora*, even if I lose - I win. Time is on my side."

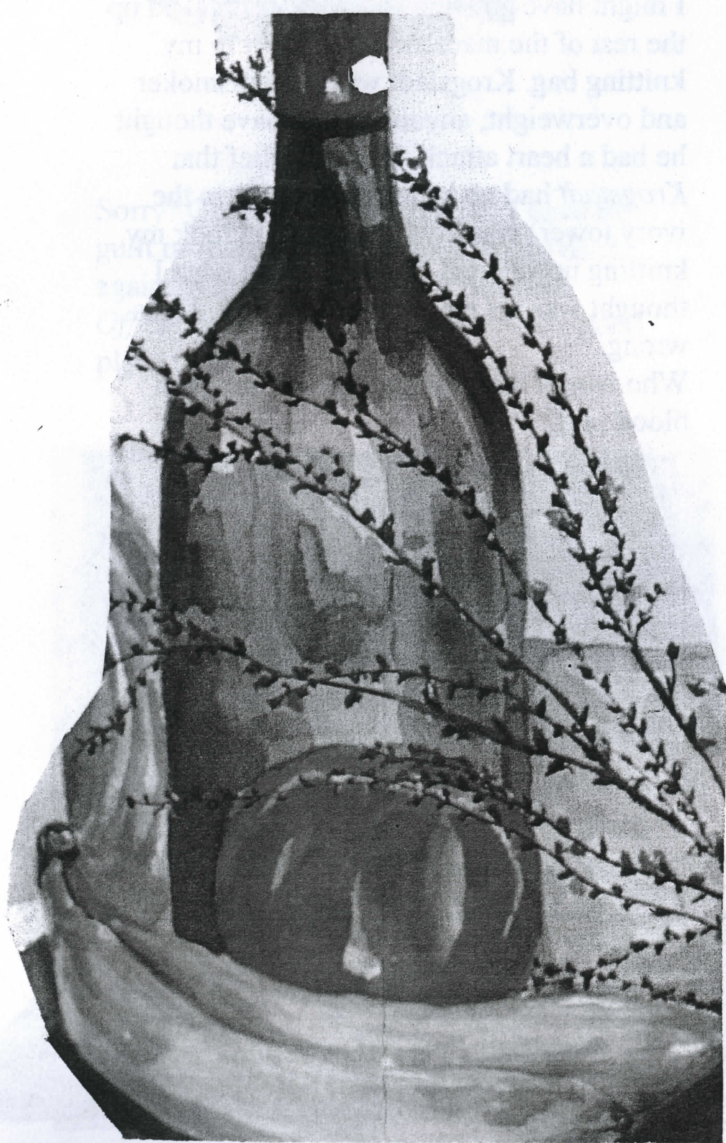
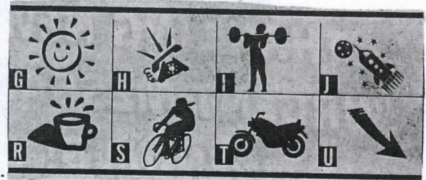


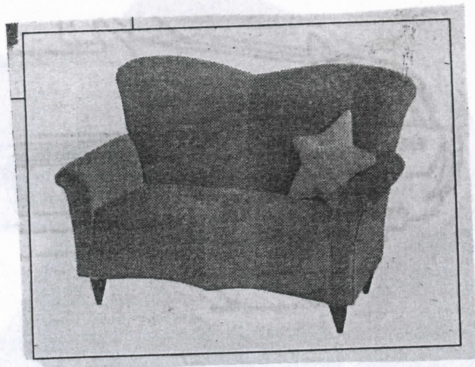


Finally, he popped half the macaroon in his mouth and chewed and swallowed and almost immediately he knew what I had done. He clutched his throat with one hand. He grabbed my shoulder with the other and fell down to the ground dragging me with him. "Oh, *Nora!*" he whispered to me, "you have changed the script."

"Yes, *Krogstadt*, I have," I said, "Its no longer *A Dollhouse* or even *Tea and Sympathy*. We are back to the summer stock classic of *Arsenic and Old Lace*."

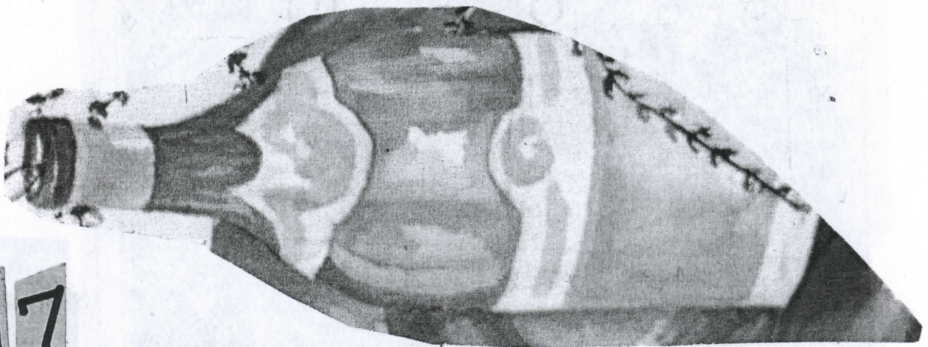






I might have gotten away with it. I picked up the rest of the macaroon and put it in my knitting bag. Krogstadt was a chainsmoker and overweight; anyone would have thought he had a heart attack. But my belief that *Krogstadt* had no heart (as they say in the ivory tower) was my **Fatal Flaw**. I took my knitting needle and stabbed him in what I thought was his empty chamber. But, I was wrong.

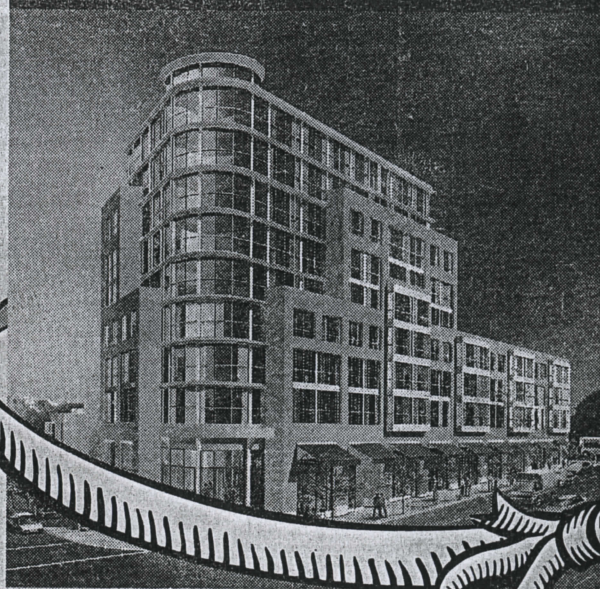
Who would have thought he had so much blood in it?





Sorry? Oh, no, *Officer Mueller*, I have no guilt or regrets whatsoever. I would do it again. With pleasure. Why? Because, *Officer Mueller*, everyone deserves a good place to live.

OCCUPANCY MID-OCTOBER



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