



RECYCLED NOTE
AND OTHER ENTRIES

PETER KANG

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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FOREWORD

I SOMETIMES CARRY a yellow notebook that I bought at Staples for 99 cents. I primarily use it to jot down random observations, sweet-sounding lines from books, deeply buried memories suddenly revived, and snippets of what never turn out to be complete stories. I call it “PK’s Book of Literary Follies” and have labeled it so on its front cover. It is a notebook that I keep private, *precisely* because it seems like one folly after another: re-reading earlier entries often causes deep embarrassment and a lot of wincing. But it is also from these very follies that I am able to build my confidence as a writer and to retrieve ideas and details that might otherwise be forever forgotten.

My online blog, the aptly titled “pkblog: confessions of a stagnant mind,” has been my series of follies on permanent (and continually expanding) exhibition. As much as I take my time crafting each entry, reviewing and editing before posting, I know that what feels great as a piece of writing today will most certainly provoke wincing and regret later on. But one thing never changes – no matter how terrible the entry, I would

always prefer that it be written and posted than left to wither away in the back of my mind. For a collection of follies is, in the end, something you can bear with good humor and even use as markers of maturation (provided that you’ve continued to improve, of course).

I recently went through all of the entries I’ve written in the past two years and selected ten of them – a mix of mini-essays and short stories – that read better and didn’t make me wince as badly as the others. After carefully editing each, striking out irrelevant paragraphs and restructuring several sentences, I reviewed the entire batch again. I wanted to share this improved collection, but I was worried about how others might perceive the gesture. Is this guy so vain that he’d send me a collection of his own writings – no, a collection of his *blog entries* – as a holiday gift? Or, as my mother would add, his *self-indulgent* blog entries? I decided that perhaps ten would be overkill and decided to narrow it to four.

The four entries you see here were selected not so much as works representative of my entire blog, but as four pieces of writing that offer enough variety to hopefully keep you from abandoning the collection too soon. And please, if you find yourself raising your eyebrows and wondering what-the-hell-is-this-doing-in-my-mailbox, don’t fret – think of it as just another folly committed by a silly guy who’ll probably also wonder what the hell he was doing in mid-December 2006.

Happy holidays!
PETER KANG

CALL ME AN R.R.

AUGUST 15, 2005

I FIRST HEARD about the Series 7 when I watched the movie *Boiler Room* a few years ago. I learned that it was a test that people took in order to become licensed brokers – people who were authorized to sell securities for commission. When I accepted my offer to be an analyst at Lehman Brothers last November, I had no idea that I would be required to take the Series 7. My job, according to descriptions I had read about it, would have little to do with speaking directly with customers or making market transactions. But as part of Capital Markets, it was mandated that all new analysts pass the Series 7. I was handed two three-inch binders at the beginning of training and told that the Series 7 lurked in the near future.

The binders sat in my room untouched for about a month. I hadn't heard any instructions on studying the material beforehand, and I saw on our schedule that we would have a full week

of training devoted to the test at some point. “How hard could it be?” I thought. I remembered that the fresh-faced recruits in *Boiler Room* were middle-class suburban white boys who went to crappy colleges. If they could manage to pass this test, I knew I’d be in pretty good shape.

Except I also remembered that *Boiler Room* is a movie.

Panic seized me when I took my first practice exam exactly one week ago. I scored somewhere in the fifties and many of my correct answers came from wild guesses. I had read some of the sections of the graded exam while in the bathroom and on the subway, and noticed that some of questions were just too damn specific:

Accrued interest on new municipal bonds is calculated from the:

- a. purchased date
- b. Settlement date
- c. dated date
- d. last interest payment

Each practice exam was 125 questions. The real test would have 250 questions. There were options, muni bonds, NASD rules, FX, underwriting, interest rates, mutual funds, annuities, RE-ITs, and all other sorts of things under the umbrella of this very basic level of finance. And yet, the amount of details seemed mountainous. Some of my peers, many of whom had taken finance courses or had previous finance internships, expressed some anxiety as well. At least I’m not alone, I thought.

Statistically, 66% of those who take the test pass. The average score of all who’ve taken the test is 73%, and you need 70% to pass. We were sternly told by HR that failure to pass the Series 7 in two attempts would lead to termination. Yikes. The very possibility of losing my job so soon was intimidating. I hadn’t even sat at my cubicle yet!

Throughout Series 7 training, I couldn’t stay awake in class. We sat in a windowless classroom somewhere near Battery Park every day from 9AM to 4PM. I came to love the Korean-owned deli downstairs and looked forward to the sausage, egg and cheese sandwich each morning. And although we had an excellent instructor who gave us very effective notes and tips, I for the life of me could not keep myself from burying my head into the desk and passing out. It was as if I was getting rest so I could do serious studying later on (which, thankfully, I did) – but I sometimes wondered if my life wouldn’t have been simpler if I had just paid attention in class. It also didn’t help that I lost feeling in my right hand on some of the mornings. Do you ever get that, when you can’t grip a pen for a few hours at a time or your hand starts to tremble? Hopefully just a passing thing, like twitches in the eye when you don’t sleep enough. Anyway, I didn’t (and really couldn’t) take down any notes.

For the next six days, I found myself after training either at my desk in my room or at Columbia’s Butler Library taking practice exams and reading sections from the binder. There were moments when I thought about contingency plans - what kind of job I could apply for if this finance thing didn’t pan out, how I would go about making payment on rent, how I could

show my face around to my friends and family, and other bouts of anxious planning. It was an uncertain time, and it certainly didn't help that my scores could not break the magic 70%. I tried to type up every single answer from the answer keys to help me memorize better. My roommate Rich, who is training at Bank of America as a trader, gave me a private lesson on options which helped me a great deal. I also tried to see if certain Wall Street Journal articles made more sense each day after I had soaked in new knowledge.

I broke 70% on Saturday, two days before my test. I remember holding my answers in my hand and staring at the handwritten score on top. It was a great feeling, even if it was just a practice test. I promptly treated myself to a shrimp salad at Le Monde while I went over my incorrect answers. Progress, hope, and encouragement - good things, and just at the right moment.

Later that day, I took what is called the "Greenlight Exam." Our instructor told us that the results of the Greenlight Exam would, 94% of the time, reflect the score we would get on the real Series 7, "give or take 5%." I dove right in. A few hours later, I found myself with a score of 77%. I pumped my fist like Tiger Woods on the final hole of a victorious major.

On Sunday I reviewed my notes and took another practice exam. I scored 66%, but convinced myself that the questions were a lot harder than the ones I had seen on previous tests. The Greenlight is my winning ticket, I thought. I caught glimpses of *In the Mood for Love* on our beautiful big screen television as Warren and Jackie watched in the living room. I felt relaxed and even a

bit confident. I bounced pep talks in my head - *Yeab, Pete, you worked hard! You'll get it done, man. Com'on, you went to an Ivy League School - you can't let yourself down now!* Every little thing sometimes helps.

This morning at One Penn Plaza, I saw my peers walking into the building with heavy steps, all wearing looks of fatigue and/or anxiety. "Man, I took the Greenlight this morning and got a 70," said Adam, an analyst in Real Estate and a frat brother with Warren at MIT. He looked very tired and talked about having crammed everything into a weekend. Brandon, a friend doing Public Finance, told me about taking six exams all on Sunday and another one very early in the morning. By comparison, I had paced myself well and even felt well-rested.

The tests were given on computers and there were very strict security provisions. No phones, notepads, or anything was allowed inside the testing rooms. I had to throw out my Starbucks coffee, only a few sips old. I was wearing a button-down flannel because offices are usually air-conditioned and cold, but they told me that if I thought about taking the flannel off during the test, I would have to come out of the room to do so. The office was impersonal and bland, in that dull crème-gray color which most offices seem to prefer. I took a deep breath. I took several deep breaths, and went inside.

We were given a mandatory 30-minute break in between the two sections, each containing 130 questions - five of them "experimental." After the first session, which I finished with more than an hour and a half left, I met up with Matt, a fellow

Securtization banker, and walked the streets outside the office to collect our thoughts and to get a breather. We agreed that some of the questions were challenging while some were easier than we had ever seen on our practice exams. Matt complained about the many mutual fund questions he had seen. I told him that mine was loaded with options. The Series 7 drew randomly from a bank of questions, so everyone would be given a uniquely-generated test. We quickly grabbed coffee, had a pastry, and went back inside.

I finished the second section with two hours left. I went back and reviewed every single question again. I ended up changing a few answers here and there. As the number closed in on 130 the second time, my heart began to pound. One peer sitting a few seats away, Anand, had completed his test a few minutes earlier and let deep breaths of relief out as he left the room. He had obviously passed. I looked at my computer screen and wondered if I was ready to press the Exit button, which would go ahead and calculate my score. I was reminded of the time I was in elementary school and reading my essay in front of parents and teachers at some appreciation event. My principal had to come over and tell me to slow down and take a deep breath because I was so nervous and reading too quickly. Damn, how impersonal and cold was this test, just needing a few seconds to spit out my fate?

84%. Whew.

I packed up my things and left, a certain amount of glee escaping and forming a smile at the corners of my mouth.

There is a small affair left. It's called the Series 63, a test about state legislation with regard to securities transactions, but I won't get into it now. It's on Wednesday and I'll be studying for it tonight and all of tomorrow. But for now, please, call me an R.R. – or if you prefer the longer version, a Registered Representative. Ha!

The entire Series 7 experience, for me, was trying and sometimes unbearable, but you can't deny the uplifting effect of an adversity story with a happy ending. Yep, that is my current life, where taking a test about making money qualifies as an adversity.

RECYCLED NOTE

APRIL 18, 2005

“AT ELLA’S FOR omelette... around noon, Monday. Come?” he wrote on a piece of Starbucks napkin. He folded it up and put it in his pocket.

Later that day, he saw her walking to the corner grocery. She wore a flower print skirt and a light tank top. She also wore thick sunglasses and carried a red bag. He walked up to her and handed her the piece of napkin.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he said as he walked away. He did not turn around and kept on walking.

§§§

Six days and three thousand miles later, he sat at Ella’s on Presi-

dio Ave. It was foggy outside but the air was still very crisp. He had taken the bus and then walked about twenty blocks to work up his appetite. He had carried a copy of the *Guardian* that he picked up from the street corner back at his hotel in Nob Hill. He still preferred the *Voice*, but when it came to free papers, he never held them to a high standard. He read the latest “Edible Complex” column which talked about Thai food in the Upper Haight. He thought about swinging by later since he loved cheap Thai joints wherever he went.

“I’d like orange juice, spinach and mushroom omelette, and a side order of bacon please,” he told the waitress, a slim blonde with hazel eyes. She wore a maroon apron and navigated her way through the tables, all filled by the young professionals and senior citizens who frequented the place during lunch hours.

He looked through the classifieds and wondered how much rent went for, not that he’d move out here just yet. Maybe in a few years after he had tired of New York and its cold winters. Maybe to pursue an opportunity in Silicon Valley, he thought.

The juice and the food came. He ate slowly and continued to read the paper. He began reading articles that at first glance held no appeal. He checked his watch, a silver Seiko that his great aunt from Japan had given him for his graduation, and noticed that it was already a quarter to one. He paid the bill and left.

§§§

It was half past ten and the restaurant was nearly empty. An

old couple sat by the window sipping on decaf coffee while a father and his son, about seven, shared a stack of pancakes and a plump brown sausage.

She sat alone at the table closest to the open counter area, behind which you could see the kitchen staff preparing for lunchtime. Ella's prided itself for its cleanliness and wanted its patrons to notice. This place gets really good sunlight, she thought to herself.

She opened up her *Chronicle* and read the op-ed page. Definitely nowhere near the quality of the *Times*, she thought. She decided not to read anymore, folding it up and putting it away in her red bag.

"I'll have coffee - black, a bowl of fruit, and a side order of toast," she told the waitress, whose short blonde ponytail and hazel eyes reminded her of a close friend from her college days.

She stabbed the last piece of fruit - a strawberry - and looked at it momentarily before sliding it off the fork with her lips and into her mouth. It was sour at first but eased into a familiar sweetness. She took out her cell phone and checked the time. It was almost eleven. She paid the bill and left.

It had been a nice trip. She loved Chinatown because it felt older and more established than the one back home. She stopped by one of the many jewelry stores and bought herself a necklace with a donut jade pendant because it matched well with her bluish green skirt. She said thanks to the Chinese lady who

resembled her aunt and left.

She looked through her red bag to take out cash when she noticed the Starbucks napkin lodged between her book - *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (for the third time) - and her sunglasses case. She took the napkin out and read the scribble on it one more time.

She knew he would be there at noon, and yet, she couldn't bring herself to see him face to face. She had come all the way out here on relatively short notice - the ticket wasn't cheap - and she could only imagine, sitting by herself at Ella's, how he would feel a few hours later. It would never work out anyway, she told herself. And yet, she was here, three thousand miles from home.

Her cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Meet me at a place called Lotus Thai at seven," he said. He hung up.

She smiled. She hoped to get there by five for an early meal.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

JANUARY 9, 2006

I recently read E.B. White's *Here is New York* and immediately wished that I possessed such powers of prose and wit to render my own vignette of the city. Is there anything I can say about New York that has meaning or value? I'm doubtful, but it wouldn't hurt to practice and jot down a few observations. Here goes.

Today was an unusually warm day for January, perhaps in the low fifties, and the weather encouraged me to catch a late movie, something I normally wouldn't do on a Sunday night.

I walked east on 42nd Street to catch the N to 57th Street, where the movie was playing at the Paris Theater. Being located in a posh neighborhood, the Paris Theater is a one-screen venue which usually selects artsy independent films, recent European releases, and documentaries. My previous screen-

ings have included *Winged Migration*, a French documentary about the migration of birds, and *A Very Long Engagement*, a French movie about a woman in search of her long-lost fiancé after World War I. Tonight's selection is *The White Countess*, a Merchant Ivory production about a blind American diplomat who builds his dream bar in Shanghai against the backdrop of political uncertainty. My reasons for watching this movie were very specific: 1) the script was written by Kazuo Ishiguro, one of my favorite novelists, 2) the film was directed by James Ivory, whose work and style I admire very much, and 3) it was playing at the Paris Theater, which, with its soft velvet seats and screen curtains, is a nice change in scenery from the crowded brightly-lit mega cineplex. And it happens to be located right next to the Solow Building (Nine West), which always fascinates me and makes me wish more buildings in New York had its elegant yet very functional architectural design.

Backtracking a bit, I walked east on 42nd Street: the walk from 8th Ave. to 7th Ave. is a long and slow one, especially on a day when the weather has people unafraid of the outdoors. It is a carnival compressed to a sidewalk. Street vendors sell Sabrett hot dogs and salted pretzels, and I catch a whiff of slightly burnt beef coming from a steaming row of shish kebabs waiting to be bought by a hungry tourist who wants to taste something "genuinely" New York. The Chinese artists sit and quickly draw charcoal portraits for patient customers, most of them Latino families who would like to see their children skillfully drawn on paper. I wonder how everyone can sit still outside for so long – after the long hours I've spent in an office cubicle, I've probably grown too sensitive to uncontrolled climates. A few

Chinese artists don't seem to be having any luck and stand idly, next to the African-American man who superimposes photographs on popular magazine covers and prints them right away on his photo printer. I'm always wondering how he powers his workstation because it isn't plugged in to anything. He probably uses some sort of battery that lasts him all day. Walking by Madame Tussad's wax museum, I see for the three hundredth time giddy tourists posing next to the wax figure of Samuel L. Jackson, which seems to have become an almost permanent fixture on the street. People of all races and ethnicities enjoy being next to it (or "him"), which makes sense since many of those same people probably enjoy watching Mr. Jackson in movies.

In the Times Square subway station, I see a lone Korean man readying his traditional drumming equipment to perform at the spot which also hosts, at different times, break dancers, singers, and men who dance with life-size dolls. The Korean drummer cannot start because down the stairs near another exit, two African-American men are already playing on two drum sets which they've managed to set up as if inside a studio. I take a peek at the Korean drummer's drum case to see how he's been making out on the donations. I see a few dollar bills and change.

Waiting for the Uptown N, I notice a rat crawling around on the tracks. As much as I would hate to see a rat in my apartment, I always find myself enjoying the sight of rats in the subway, especially when I am standing on a platform and the rat is a few feet below. This rat seems to be scavenging for food but quickly disappears when it hears the sound of an oncoming train. I step into the familiar orange and yellow seats of the N

and try to read a few pages from Murakami's collection of short stories. The one I happen to read on this short ride is called "The Kangaroo Communiqué," a very bizarre piece about a department store clerk who replies to a consumer's complaint in an amusing manner. When I get off the train, I overhear people speaking in Korean. It's two young daughters and their mother getting off at the same stop as me. As I quicken my pace towards an exit, I wonder if they are a family visiting from Korea and staying at a very nice hotel, especially since there are some fine hotels near the Fifth Avenue subway stop. I also wonder if they are coming back from Koreatown after dinner.

The older prewar buildings in the 50s and 60s Streets of Manhattan never cease to amaze me. The intricate patterns and figures carved out of stone adorn the facades of buildings, which proudly wear a look of permanence and stability. The glass-happy buildings of residential and office skyscrapers may be sleek, but I often prefer opaque walls. Tonight, however, I dash my hopes of living in a prewar home anytime in the near future, especially in an expensive neighborhood so close to Central Park. The walk, however, leaves no trace of despair, and I enjoy imagining how each tenant may have decorated his or her interior space.

I meet up with Wook, who has come down from Columbia via the 1 and is carrying with him Louis Menand's *American Studies*, which I strongly encouraged him to buy a few months ago when we were browsing books at Strand Bookstore near Union Square. We enter to watch the movie. The theater is mostly empty on this Sunday night. A few couples, all of them

white, are scattered throughout the theater. An Asian woman, probably in her late forties, sits by herself in the row in front of us. She is elegantly dressed in clothes not unlike the clothes you see on mannequins on window displays of Neiman Marcus or Saks Fifth Ave.: the camel-colored coat definitely seems cashmere. She is tall and thin, and in watching a movie like this on her own, I find myself imagining her to be articulate and cultured. I even wonder if she might be an Ishiguro fan like me. After the movie ends, she walks out and disappears. Wook and I, having enjoyed the film, make our way back towards Columbus Circle to take the subway back to our respective homes. I decide to take the A train back since it is also where the 1 happens to be.

An African-American man standing at the corner of a street calls out for us and asks for a dollar. When we casually ignore him and walk by, he calls out again and tries hard to get our attention but finally gives up. We hear him making the same request to another pedestrian. I wonder what his success rate has been. Wook notices a store that sells very expensive-looking pianos and also spots a man walking two dogs - one of the dogs has a stuffed animal in its mouth. A little further along, Wook points out to a parked yellow cab inside which three cab drivers are playing cards and smoking. We both let out appreciative laughs, and as condescending as we may be from time to time in this heavily class-stratified city, there's a warm moment of identification with these drivers and their time of relaxation and bonding. At Columbus Circle, Wook and I go our separate ways.

Walking west on 42nd Street back towards my apartment building, I think about the things New York has meant to me - the diversity of sights, sounds, smells, and memories, the awakening and refining of class and race consciousness, the obsessive idea of status, and much more. With these things in mind, I've envisioned myself becoming a certain kind of New Yorker down to every minute detail, in both demeanor and material possessions. But then I tell myself that what I want to become today will probably lose its appeal next week - and it usually does. I often think about the way I've made my decisions in shaping my own version of New York - the things I've seen, the food I've eaten, the people I've met: it's nothing too deep and I try not to read too much into it, but I do tell myself not to get complacent with the city - not yet, and hopefully never. There are still corners to explore with fresh eyes, appetites to fill with varying budgets, and a heart to open to new people. And perhaps a prewar apartment to inhabit before it's all too late.

Here is New York.

A CARD I MADE HER FOR VALENTINE'S DAY

FEBRUARY 14, 2006

Back when I was in middle school, pimply-faced and voice always cracking, I had a crush on this girl. She was in my social studies class and her name was Chloe. She was half-Japanese and half-Irish with green eyes and dark brown hair. She was very pretty and had incredibly smooth and pale skin. We never really spoke to each other except for the one time when we had to work on a group project together. I remember spending a Sunday afternoon at Seth's house making a collage of West Africa while sitting next to Chloe and cutting up letters from construction paper. She had great control of the scissors and made the neatest letters I had ever seen. She told me that she had a pet cat named Jiro.

The day I started having a crush on Chloe was when I saw her in class on a brisk autumn day. She wore these very shiny cowboy boots that had high heels and a ruffled blouse that gave her

an old Western movie sort of look. She stood out from all the other girls, and the more I looked at her, the more I just wanted to have her to myself. I didn't know or learn much about sex until high school, so my attraction towards her was more akin to the attraction that a kitten might have to a shiny object. I couldn't stop looking at her and I just wanted to play with her.

I was too shy to do anything about my crush, so all I could do was tell a few of my close friends how I felt about her. The rest of the time, I sighed to myself and wrote out her name in bubble letters on my marble notebooks. When Christmas time rolled around, I paid a dollar to some club that sent anonymous candy grams and attached a note for Chloe that said, "I wish I got to know you better. Happy Holidays!" I wondered for many weeks afterwards how she might have responded to the message.

When Valentine's Day rolled around, I decided to finally let her know how I felt about her and started to make an intricate Valentine's Day card. I bought a thick pack of colored construction paper from the stationery store and tried to be creative, only to realize that I had done nothing more than cut hearts of different colors and sizes. It was hard to escape the prevailing commercial symbol of Valentine's Day. A bolt of creativity eventually struck. I looked through our school yearbook from 6th grade and found a black and white portrait photo of Chloe. I cut out her head and pasted it in the middle of flower petals that I had cut out. The petals could probably have been confused with a lion's mane, so I added a green stem just to clarify. I then looked for my own school photo and cut my head out as well. If you haven't done it before, try and see how weird it feels

to hold a cut-out photo of your own head – it was unsettling for a second. I made an oversized bee from strips of yellow and black and placed my head at one end. The card showed me as a bee hovering around Chloe the flower. I even added a sun and pretty white clouds to suggest a bright, happy day. Inside, I wrote: “Catch the buzz? He likes you! Happy Valentine’s!” I also signed my name in case she couldn’t tell from my photo. Overall, it was a short and corny message, and I remember my struggle in deciding whether or not to address myself in the third person. But the card looked nice by my standard, and I somehow managed to feel confident about the effort. I put the card into a nice white envelope and took it to school the next day. Making sure nobody could see me, I slid it into her locker.

She thanked me the next day when I saw her in class, but didn’t say anything else. That day she wore a white and dark green striped long sleeve shirt with a bright green t-shirt on top. She also had on very bright orange sneakers and dark jeans. I wondered where she got her style. An older sister or a hip, young mother, I guessed.

A few weeks later, she started dating some boy in high school. He would come by our middle school in his Toyota Camry to pick her up after school. I think he was sixteen years old. I thought it was weird for Chloe to date someone like him because he was three years older, but then I thought that maybe she was too good for boys her own age and needed someone older and more mature. I continued to see her in social studies class but knowing she had a boyfriend made me like her less and less until one day, I stopped paying attention to her. The

next year, we weren’t in any classes together, so I hardly saw her around. Whenever I did happen to think about her, I always wondered if she had kept my Valentine’s Day card. I’m not even sure we ended up going to the same high school, but there were moments when I wondered if she had stayed pretty or if she had changed at all.

Several years later, when I came back home from college, I caught sight of her at the local supermarket. She was studying the various brands of pudding and yogurt while I was looking through egg cartons to find the perfect dozen. I recognized her instantly and felt my heart racing at many miles per hour. She looked stunning and more stylish than ever. She turned her head and made eye contact with me, but she didn’t seem to recognize me at all and walked right past me. I didn’t want to embarrass myself so I casually moved on to the bacon section and threw a pack of America’s Choice bacon into my shopping basket. I looked at her backside as she walked gracefully towards the checkout line. She *had* stayed pretty.

Sometimes I wish I had written a bit more in that Valentine’s Day card, maybe telling her a bit about myself and asking her some questions as well. I might recall to the finest detail all of the things she wore back in middle school, but I will never know anything else. What kind of books did she read? Did she like edamame? Had she ever gone to a Dashboard Confessional concert? Would her pale skin feel warm and smooth against mine? Would her kisses be soft and gentle or rough and passionate? These things, I will never know. All I know is that she may or may not still have a card I once gave to her.

Unedited versions of these entries can be found at www.peterkang.com/pkblog.



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