



Purchases

A Short Story by James P. White
Artwork by Jules White

James P. White

Purchases



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Purchases

I find it reassuring to pass all the unknown faces as I walk along the streets in New York. Strangers are essential to what Manhattan offers me— anonymity, yet the chance to encounter success and failure from walks of life that I would never experience. Strangers are absolutely necessary. And of course I am one of them. Strangers fill up every street, every business, restaurant, every theater and church as well as every subway and bus. Ultimately they are the city's way of swallowing up me and everyone else as we leave our apartments and offices and hotel rooms and merge walking on the sidewalk or driving in our cars on the streets. We strangers compose an identity inside which our thoughts are spinning. It is important not to know each other.

When I flew to New York in 1968 with two bulging suitcases, I already was aware of the importance of strangers.

As soon as the plane landed at La Guardia, I flagged a taxi, rode to Manhattan, rented a hotel room on West fifty-second, then set out to find an affordable apartment. The unfamiliarity of the city aroused my yearning for new

experiences. I walked first to Times Square because it was nearby and I had heard of it. The area was seedy and had far more character than today. A few desultory blocks where people could nose around in New York erotica. A gay friend from graduate school had told me how guilty he felt cruising there during summer vacations. His mother worked at a five and dime to save money so he could be free since he wasn't in school. He spent this leisure time at Times Square. But I was shocked. Who on earth would want to live here? I wondered.

I crossed over to Fifth Avenue, which I also had read about, and started up the East side, looking into store windows. When I reached the 60's, I decided that I could live there. Then, glancing at photos of rentals in a real estate firm's display, I saw how much the apartments cost and how few were available. I proceeded, to the 70's, 80's, and 90's, and returning the next day, I located an unfurnished studio at 88th and York.

Neither the former tenant nor the landlord had cleaned the room. The tenant left his collection of several thousand match covers scattered on the floor. When I moved in days later, I hauled off the covers, then cleaned the rest of the tenant's slovenliness. As I swept the floor, the carpet changed from brown to green.

A day later I bought a bed, an oak table, a desk and a chair.

The very next morning I took a seven thirty train to a girl's preparatory

school in Brooklyn where I started teaching history classes: two eighth grade U.S. history, one Rise of Socialism; one seventh grade world history. I spent my lunch hour thinking about the short story I was drafting. I was new to writing. After school I ate at an Italian deli in Manhattan, then decided to get a drink and hunt around store fronts to find places where I could purchase more furniture and household goods over the weekend.

At eight p.m. I was sitting by myself at a bar on Lexington Avenue, at 66th. I didn't know the name. I nursed a second straight scotch and thought about what it was going to be like to live in Manhattan. Who would be my friends in a year? What was I going to accomplish? I looked down the bar and noticed a tall, unkept stranger in a sports jacket, sitting two stools over. His blonde hair was in disarray from his habit of running his knobby fingers through it. I opened my mouth and like the Texan I was, I spoke to him.

“Where would somebody go to find some inexpensive furniture?” I called out. “I just moved into an apartment around here.”

I was surprised to see the man pick up his drink and carry it along the bar to the stool beside me. He sat down. Up close I could see that he did not need the drink.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“Everything,” I said. “Lamps especially.”

He stared directly into my eyes. “I’ll be honest with you,” he said. He

leaned closer, his breath pungent. “I have some very good lamps myself for sale cheap. I’ve had some bad luck.”

“Where are they?” I asked.

“At my apartment. I live closeby. On 69th. Do you want to see them?”

I was caught off guard. “Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

“Let’s go.” He got up immediately and paid his tab. I paid mine. Then I followed him onto the lighted street which was noisy with taxis. He walked fast, weaving a little. His heavy coat was black cashmere. He took leather gloves from his pocket and put them on.

“Just up Lexington,” he said, “at 69th.”

“That’s a nice area,” I said.

“It’s between Lexington and Madison. My aunt had the apartment before I did, but I’ve lived here twenty-five years.”

“Oh really?” I asked.

“Yes, and if I don’t pay the rent soon, I’ll lose it.” He hesitated, his voice deepening. “And I’m not going to lose it.”

We stopped at a curb, under a bright streetlight. I almost felt as if he had warned me. “How much is your rent?” I asked.

He glanced over, deciding whether or not to tell. “Two fifty a month.”

“Good lord,” I said. “In this neighborhood?”

“Yes.”

We continued walking hurriedly. “The apartment is in my aunt’s name. It’s a one bedroom on the ground floor. It even has an attractive garden. We go left at the corner.” He quit talking. I followed him past several buildings, then turned left, too. At 128 69th, he stopped under the entrance light and fished into his pocket for a key. In the glow of the lighted marble lobby he looked like he hadn’t cleaned himself up in a good while.

“I used to have a proper job,” he said. “I look a mess.” The key took us into the foyer. We continued past a polished mahogany table with a Chinese vase of artificial irises set in front of a mirror, then stopped at the end of the hallway. The apartment door was painted black and had brass locks and knob. He used two keys in the locks, then swung open the door.

He walked in first. “Come on in,” he said.

I suddenly felt very ill at ease.

He switched on one lamp, then another.

The living room was in some disorder, but was elaborate. Long blue silk draperies with swags. Shining tables and blue velvet antique chairs. I looked across at a white marble fireplace. “That’s beautiful,” I said.

“It’s for sale if you’re interested,” he said. “Have a seat. Would you like something to drink?”

I hesitated. Surely this was his apartment. He had a key. “Yes,” I said.

“Vodka?”

“Uh huh.”

“It’s all I have.” He stepped into the kitchen and rather than sit down, I followed him to the doorway where I watched. He knew where everything was in the cabinets. He took two jiggers from a shelf, then a bottle of vodka from the freezer.

“What happened to your job?” I asked.

“I was fired three years ago. I was a supervisor of over forty people.”

“Three *years* ago?” I asked.

“I’ve had problems,” he said. He poured the vodka into the jiggers and handed me one. Then we returned to the living room and I sat on the sofa. It was very comfortable. He brought the bottle of vodka and set it on the coffee table. He chose a chair close by.

“I contracted a bad case of hepatitis and was sick for a long time,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“So am I,” he said. “I loved my job.”

“You have nice furniture,” I said.

“Most of it is good. By the way, my name is Patrick Owen.”

“I’m Bill,” I said. “What’s for sale?” I asked.

“Anything. As I’ve said, I’m desperate.”

“How much is this lamp?” I asked, gesturing to a dark green Chinese

porcelain on the side table.

“Twenty dollars.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said.

“I don’t want to cheat you,” he said. “Where else would I get that much? I can’t carry it to a shop. Do you want it?”

“Well, yes.”

“What else do you like?”

I looked around the room and spotted the dining table. A pair of gleaming two-foot high candlesticks sat on top. “The candlesticks are beautiful,” I said.

“They’re Steuben,” he said. “You have good taste. You can have them for one fifty. There is a crack in the base of one.”

I got up, went over and examined them. “Okay,” I said. “How about the brass lamp?”

“The initials are mine. Mother gave it to me for a birthday.”

“Oh” I said.

“It’s forty dollars.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Why don’t you call an antique dealer? They’d give you more.”

“I don’t want my neighbors to know what I’m doing,” he said. “If they did, they’d try to force me out. And the dealer I called offered \$200.00 for everything sight unseen. They wouldn’t come by first. Moving furniture here is

expensive.”

“Have you really not worked for three years?”

“I had severance. Then unemployment. Yes, three.” He turned the cap of the vodka, lifted it off and poured us two more jiggers. He handed me one level full.

“How do you buy food?” I asked.

“I eat very little. When I first ran out of money I’d invite friends to dinner at a place like the Sherry Netherland. Then when it was time for the bill I’d simply say I had no money. Either someone else paid, or the manager ordered me to leave and never come back.”

“You didn’t,” I said.

“I require a certain standard of living. What was I supposed to do?” He took a deep breath. “I’m not the only one who is broke. My friend Winston, who is on the social register, lives in a two-bedroom apartment on Fifth and has less money than I. He’s a bit off, though. Last week he was feeding canned food to his Persian Katrina and he said it smelled so good and he was so hungry that he decided to taste it. The cat didn’t understand when Winston began eating her food. She scratched his hand. Winston picked up Katrina, dropped her out the window, then ate the entire can. Only after he finished did he remember that he lives on the ninth floor.” Owen roared laughing.

For some reason, I did, too.

“What’s your name again?” I asked.

“Patrick Owen,” he said. “What’s yours again?”

“Bill.” I sipped from the jigger. “You didn’t really stiff them at the Sherry Netherland Hotel, did you?” I remembered walking past.

“I did much worse.”

“Like what?”

“I charged diamond cufflinks to a friend’s account at Tiffany’s. Then I pawned them for twenty percent of the price I’d just paid.”

“How did you charge them to someone else?”

“I’d been a good customer there for years. They knew me.”

“What did your friend say when he found out?”

Patrick gulped his drink then refilled it. “What do you think?” he said. “He quit being my friend. Everyone has. They say I’m the worst kind of drunk.” He slouched back against the down filled sofa. “And I am.”

“You have to find another job,” I said, promising myself not to ever trust him.

“I’m an alcoholic. And I am utterly exhausted all the time. When are you going to pay me?”

“I’ll have to get the money and come back for the things,” I said.

“You can take some now if you like,” he said. “Look in the bedroom and see if you want anything.” I stood up, seeing the open door. I walked to the

doorway. The four poster bed had a genuine looking tapestry above it.

“I hate taking your things,” I said.

“Please, buy whatever you want.”

“You really do have to find a job,” I said. “Maybe you should do something else and when you’re better, try to find work at a bank again.”

“Like what?”

“You could be a cashier at that Howard Johnson’s at Times Square,” I said, out of the blue.

He nodded slowly. “It all sounds very depressing,” he said. “Do you see anything else?”

“Well, sure,” I said.

I returned after work the next afternoon with five hundred dollars and two cloth bags to carry the candlesticks. I rang the buzzer and Patrick let me in. I walked through the foyer to his apartment which was unlocked.

“Hello, Bill,” he said. “My girlfriend may come by. She’s very elegant, but nutty as a loon. Her name is Diana. Don’t believe a word she says.”

“Have you been drinking all this time?” I asked. He lay on the sofa, his shoes unlaced. He wore the same slacks, shirt and jacket. Several books were open on the coffee table.

“This isn’t the same bottle,” he said.

“How do you afford liquor?”

“I go to a different store and charge it. Or I have them deliver it and give them a hot check.”

“It sounds difficult,” I said. It made me more uneasy that he told me these things so freely. Would I confess to him anything illegal that I had done? Nearly every word that came out of his mouth horrified me. He looked like a British gentleman. More proper than I did. He enunciated better, too. Imagine for one instant, I thought, if I did what he said he did. I’d be behind bars, even if they were mine.

I always assume that someone else has been taught not to steal. But perhaps no one ever told him. My two hundred and fifty pound grandmother with a sweet, high voice, would sing, “There’s an all seeing eye, watching you,” and then she’d raise the pitch, directing the words, “watching *you*, watching *you*; there’s an all seeing eye watching you.” While her warning was of course her own opinion, it was detrimental to my view of god. It did make me listen to what she said was right and what was wrong, however. I mean that it helped persuade me not to do wrong and certainly not to steal. Stealing became something that was never secret to me because some omniscient force was watching.

It wasn’t just Patrick’s stealing that bothered me. There was something very anti-American in stiffing the Sherry Netherland and in getting Tiffany’s into hot water. Almost as bad as his stealing was the trouble he was making for

others.

And why hadn't he been taught in school to do his best? It had been a refrain throughout my grade school. Every teacher at some point reinforced the need to 'do your very best.'

Or was his drinking causing it?

"Here," I said. "I brought cash. I'll take the candlesticks and come back for the rest."

"Sure," he said. He took the bills. "Be careful. Don't break them."

I walked over and began packing the crystal into the bags. "When you get on your feet you can buy them back," I said.

"That's very good of you," he said. "If I do, I will."

I carried the candlesticks to the curb and got a cab to my apartment. The instant I set them on the table, they made everything else in the room look cheap. Especially the table. I took a few minutes trying to improve things. Then I made a second trip for the brass lamp and a large golden silk comfort. Patrick had exquisite taste, I realized, as my apartment began to transform. On the third trip, this time to get the green Chinese lamp, I accepted a drink from him.

"I paid the super," he said. "I'm okay for another month."

"You are selling these things too cheap," I said.

"I don't care," he said.

“You know, Patrick,” I said. “I’ll help you sober up if you will apply for a job. Take a last drink and I’ll throw out the bottle.”

“Let me finish the bottle,” he said.

“Then will you stop? You’re killing yourself. Think about what’s going to happen to you.”

“What do I have to live for?” he asked. He took a long swig.

Oh my god, I thought. I walked over to him, took the bottle, and carried it into the kitchen. I put the vodka into a cabinet. Somehow I was being the good Samaritan. I had heard the story hundreds of times without the slightest interest. Yet here I was. I went back into the living room.

The foyer door bell rang. Diana was at the outside entrance.

He got up and pressed the button to let her enter the foyer. He walked as if he hadn’t drunk a drop.

I stood across the room, by the windows, and waited to meet her. Outside, in the garden were several pots of anemic green plants.

When she knocked on the apartment door, he hurried, opened, then closed it. I turned around. A small, thin blonde about thirty-five, walked toward me.

“So you’re Bill,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Pat’s told me about you.” She sat down, very lady like. Her lips were carefully painted, like a model’s. Her blonde hair curled just at her shoulders.

“Oh Pat, darling,” she said. “I saw the most divine French restaurant on Lex. Should we go there?”

He glanced at me. “Would you like to join us for lunch?”

“No,” I said. Of course they wanted me to go so that I would pay. She was as bad or worse than he was.

“Darling,” Diana said, “I had a modeling job this morning. I have money.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I’ve been telling Patrick he needs to sober up.”

“All of us should,” she said. “But especially him.” She turned to Patrick. “I wish you’d listen to him,” she said. “He’s your friend.”

“I’m going to apply for a job at the Howard Johnson’s at Times Square tomorrow,” Patrick said. “Bill told me to.”

I was only making a suggestion, I wanted to say.

“Wonderful,” Diana said. “Then we’ll celebrate tonight. Tomorrow you look for a job. All right?”

“If you have the money,” he said.

“I have to leave,” I said, going over to Diana.

“Will you come by tomorrow night?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. I shook her hand. Up close, she smelled of flowers. She gave me an intimate expression.

“I’ll see you then,” he said. “I’d better get ready if I’m going out.” He got

up from the sofa, weary, and started to the bathroom.

“You are a divine person,” Diana said.

“I’m practical,” I said.

“You aren’t at all or you wouldn’t have a thing to do with Pat or me,” she said, as I was leaving.

The next evening when I arrived at 8:30, Pat was throwing up. He hurried from the doorway back to the bathroom after he let me in. Then he came out of the bath. “It’s just terrible,” he said. “I hate it.”

“Hate what?” I asked.

“The manager at Howard Johnson’s hired me. Someone had quit and he needed me that instant. Of course I can use a cash register. I stood on my feet, with a hangover, all day long. But I have a job.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said. “Just for a while. Then you can find another position in a bank.”

“No one will ever hire me in a bank again.”

“Yes, they will.”

“You can’t imagine how tired I feel,” he said. “And I have a favor to ask. Have you seen the little blue painting in my bathroom?”

“Yes.”

“The one of the hills?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I want you to keep it for me.”

“Why do you want me to keep it?”

“Because I stole it from a good friend four months ago. He knows I have it.”

“Why would you steal it?”

“He has so many valuable paintings. I was at a party at his place. It was in the bathroom. I put it under my shirt and carried it out. He might have me arrested. He knows I took it.”

“Give it back to him,” I said.

“Oh no!”

“Then throw it away.”

“It’s lovely,” he said. “You can’t throw art away.”

“I don’t want it,” I said.

He went out of the room and came back carrying it under his arm. “Here,” he said. “Please. Just store it for me.”

“I don’t want involved.”

“It’s nineteenth century,” he said. “For a month? Please? I’m getting frantic.”

“What were you thinking?”

“I was drunk. It would relieve my mind if you’d take it for one month.”

I looked at the lovely small painting. “Only,” I said, “if you give it back to him then.”

“I’d give it back this instant if I could. I’ll return it.”

“Why have you stayed in Manhattan?” I asked him. “It’s much more expensive to live here.”

“I’ve only lived in Montreal and New York,” he said. “And I was a child in Montreal. I lived in an orphanage.”

“But you mentioned your mother.”

“Sit down,” he said. “Do you want some orange juice?”

“I’m fine,” I said, sitting on the sofa.

“My father died when I was eight.” He sat farther down on the sofa. “I had a sister three years younger. Mother tried, but she couldn’t support us. Rather than let us starve, she gave us away to an orphanage.”

“She gave you away?”

“My sister and I were separated by the nuns—boys were kept on one side of the school and girls on the other. The last time I remember seeing Ellen she was on the playground on the other side of a fence. She had a terrible cough. Shortly after that they told me she died of pneumonia.”

“When did you move back in with your mother?”

“Four years later. But I never forgot my sister.”

“Your mother knew about how she died?”

“She was a refined woman and she made the best decision she could. I have a photograph of her. I’ll get it.”

He got up, went into the bedroom, then returned with a faded photo of a beautiful older woman with long, pinned-up hair. I noticed that the antique frame was most unusual.

The phone rang and Pat stopped talking. He answered it. “Oh, Diana,” he said. “I was going to call you back. Yes. Bill’s here. Oh yes? Just a minute.” He handed me the receiver. “She wants to talk to you.”

I took the phone. “Hello,” I said. “How are you?”

“Bill,” she said in a sweet voice, “I wanted to invite you and Pat to dinner tomorrow. I know he’s too tired tonight.”

I glanced over at Pat. “She wants us to come to dinner tomorrow,” I said.

“Will you go?” he asked.

“Okay,” I told her.

“Do you like baked chicken?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And a merlot with it?”

“Yes.”

“How about braised carrots and new potatoes with real English peas?”

“It sounds delicious.”

“Fine, then,” she said. “There’s a lovely little shop on Broadway close to where I live. It’s called Frankl’s. Would you mind picking those things up and I’ll have everything ready here.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised.

“Pat knows the way,” she said. “Bye.”

“Goodbye,” I said and hung up.

“She wants us to bring the food, doesn’t she?” Pat asked. “She always does.”

We both laughed. Pat leaned back in his chair. “I do feel better,” he said. “Who would have thought having a job would make such a difference?”

“It gives you something to do,” I said.

“I don’t need something to do. I need the money for the rent.”

“Well, it gives you that, too.”

“There’s a man who busses tables there who is very ill,” Pat said. “He has the flu. He told me he’s had it for three months, but can’t take off to get well because he has to have the money.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And the manager came up to me before I left and actually said I add some class to the place. Believe me, it needs it. I even got to where I enjoyed working the register. It’s always crowded. And I thought before I left work that maybe you are right. I might get back into a bank again after six months or so.”

“If you can get by with all you’ve done, you can find another bank,” I said.

“You know I’ve never asked what you do,” he said.

“I teach,” I said.

“Where?”

“In Brooklyn at a prep school.”

“Oh, which one?” He smiled, but he was clearly getting information.

“It’s called Berkeley,” I said. “Why?”

“If I hadn’t been drunk, I never would have brought someone I didn’t know to this apartment,” he said. “Where do you live?”

“On 88th and York.”

“In the Russian neighborhood?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” He was disappointed. “I tried to think,” he added, “and I don’t remember your telling me your last name.”

“Hooper,” I said.

“Bill Hooper?”

I nodded. I lied.

During the next two weeks. Patrick went to work regularly. He took the subway to 42nd and crossed over to Times Square. Every evening he indulged and

paid for a cab back to East 69th. He went to bed early. He said he had never slept so well. I saw him twice a week, but I never stayed longer than an hour.

In this short period of time, his appearance changed. He washed his wavy hair and combed it carefully. He bought new glasses. He was fair skinned and had a thin, aristocratic nose. Like an English lord. He took his clothes to the French cleaners. He ate at Howard Johnson's and said he had energy for the first time in months. He began to look like someone who should live in his building.

Then one evening when I dropped by to check on him, in the middle of telling me details about his day, he suddenly said, "Bill, I have the money to buy back some of my things."

The beautiful things I had bought and taken away did change his apartment. "Oh," I said. I'm sure he noticed my tone. "What do you want to buy?"

"The brass lamp," he said. "If you still want to sell my things back."

"Of course."

"I'll give you twice what you paid."

"I'm not a pawn shop," I said. "You can have it for the same amount."

"The Steuben," he said.

I frowned. I loved the candlesticks.

"I sold you everything so cheap," he said. "I really was drunk."

"Yes," I said. "What else?"

"Next week I'd like the silver tray."

“Fine.”

“And the mirror for the hallway.”

“Okay.”

“And the gold comfort.”

“Yes.” He apparently wanted everything back.

“And I do want the green Chinese lamp sometime. I’ve always loved it.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Thank you.” He was noticeably cheered. He gave me a wide, toothy smile.

Although before I had felt I was robbing him, I now felt that he was robbing me. He should have a better sense of fair play than to buy them back. What if I said no, I wouldn’t sell them? I wanted to say something about how I felt, but I wasn’t sure how. I agreed that they weren’t exactly my things even though I had bought them. Or were they? Didn’t I own any part?

“Do you want to keep them?” he asked.

“I’ll start bringing them tomorrow,” I said.

“Whenever is convenient,” he said. “I’ll be glad to come get them.”

“I’ll bring them.”

“I’m exhausted now,” he said.

“And I need to go,” I said. He walked me to the front door of his building.

We passed through the elegant lobby and I exited out the marble entrance, onto 69th.

It had just begun to rain. The sidewalk was crowded with pedestrians, people shopping or out walking. I joined them, glancing at face after face that I passed. How odd it was, I thought, that I had met Pat that evening at the bar. He had been a total stranger. How unlikely that I had bought his things and liked them so much. His silk comfort was on my bed, his Chinese lamp on the table beside it. I was reading *The Conquest of Mexico* by its bright light. The Steuben was now displayed on my desk. I knew that each piece had some of his history. It was even more unlikely to me that I now was selling them back. Like I ran a storage facility.

As I walked, I couldn't help wondering who all these strangers were around me at the moment, carrying packages and thinking about god knew what.

Like the woman just now, wearing a beige leather coat and hat. Where did she live? Or the heavy set worker in a hurry, his back to me. Where was he going? For one second, I thought about all their intentions.

At first I had intended to buy furniture. Then I intended to help Patrick if I could, partly because I liked the furniture he sold me and he was so generous. But his intentions—to pull himself up, which was good, and to get his things back, which was good for him and bad for me, changed our situation. We had

become acquaintances of a different order, brushing up against each other. It made me realize the value of stores with sales people and shelves of goods and cash registers and receipts and even sacks and boxes. What if we knew who made the things we purchased, or those who packaged, transported and sold them? What if their stories were a part of what we faced when we went in somewhere to make a purchase? Suppose we knew the woman at the register had a husband with pancreatic cancer or that the object we were buying was made by a suicidal schizophrenic? What if we knew the actual trees that the register tape was made from? Or what if we saw the money of all the sales going on, nationally changing hands, flurrying, adding here and subtracting there with every transaction all over the country? Suppose we saw what this money did and did not do. It was too much. Being a stranger was absolutely essential.

I began to hurry home where as quickly and safely as I could I would gather and return Patrick's things. I knew too much about them.

The Times Literary Supplement writes that James White’s “convictions make him a writer that goes his own way.” Gwendolyn Brooks writes of White’s novel *Birdsong*: “What a delight even if a difficult delight! it must have been to write it!” James White has had a Guggenheim and other fellowships. He is Executive Director of the Christopher Isherwood Foundation (www.isherwoodfoundation.org).

The *Fort Worth Star Telegram* writes: “Using intense color and distortion of form, Jules White turns traditional subjects into sites for meditation...” The *Birmingham Weekly* writes: “The colors in his paintings bulge and glow from the canvas...” Jules White’s work has been shown in the Cambridge National Prize Show, the Upstairs Gallery in Arlington, Texas and the Summit Gallery in Fairhope, Alabama as well as galleries in Austin, Texas and Albuquerque, New Mexico. White is Editor of *The American Center for Artists*: www.americanartists.org.



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