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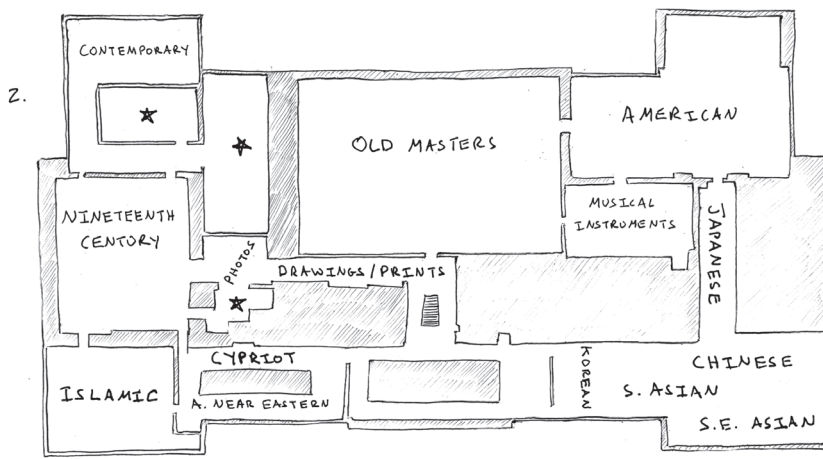
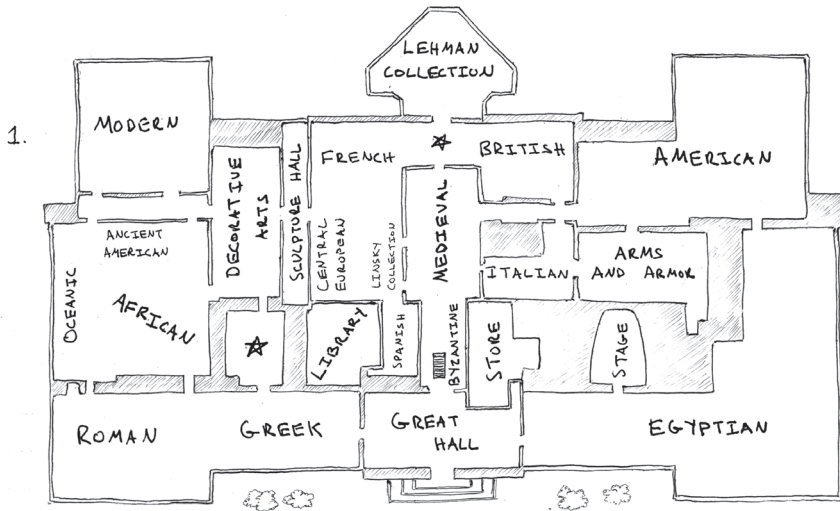
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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Information about every artwork referenced in the text can be found beginning on page 181, along with resources for locating objects in the galleries and viewing high-resolution images at home.

This book is composed of real events from my ten years as a museum guard. In an effort to write scenes that demonstrate the range of my experience, I've sometimes put incidents together that happened on different days. The names of museum personnel have been changed.

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★ SPECIAL EXHIBITION

I.

## THE GRAND STAIRCASE

**I**n the basement of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, below the Arms and Armor wing and outside the guards' Dispatch Office, there are stacks of empty art crates. The crates come in all shapes and sizes; some are big and boxy, others wide and depthless like paintings, but they are uniformly imposing, heavily constructed of pale raw lumber, fit to ship rare treasures or exotic beasts. On the morning of my first day in uniform I stand beside these sturdy, romantic things, wondering what my own role in the museum will feel like. At the moment I am too absorbed by my surroundings to feel like much of anything.

A woman arrives to meet me, a guard I am assigned to shadow, called Aada. Tall and straw haired, abrupt in her movements, she looks and acts like an enchanted broom. She greets me with an unfamiliar accent (Finnish?), beats dandruff off the shoulders of my dark blue suit, frowns at its poor fit, and whisks me away down a bare concrete corridor where signs warn: Yield to Art in Transit. A chalice on a dolly glides by. We climb a scuffed staircase to the second floor, passing a motorized scissor lift (for hanging paintings and changing light bulbs, I'm told). Tucked beside one of its wheels is a folded *Daily News*, a paper coffee cup, and a dog-eared copy of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. "Filth,"

Aada spits. “Keep personal items in your locker.” She pushes through the crash bar of a nondescript metal door and the colors switch on *Wizard of Oz*-style as we face El Greco’s phantasmagoric landscape, the *View of Toledo*. No time to gape. At Aada’s pace, the paintings fly by like the pages of a flip-book, centuries rolling backward and forward, subject matter toggling between the sacred and profane, Spain becoming France becoming Holland becoming Italy. In front of Raphael’s *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*, almost eight feet tall, we halt.

“This is our first post, the C post,” Aada announces. “Until ten o’clock we will stand here. Then we will stand there. At eleven we will stand on our A post down there. We will wander a bit, we will pace, but this, my friend, is where we are. Then we will get coffee. I suppose that this is your home section, the old master paintings?” I tell her yes, I believe so. “Then you are lucky,” she continues. “You will be posted in other sections too eventually—one day ancient Egypt, the next day Jackson Pollock—but Dispatch will post you here your first few months and after that, oh, sixty percent of your days. When you are here”—she stamps twice—“wood floors, easy on the feet. You might not believe it, my friend, but believe it. A twelve-hour day on wood is like an eight-hour day on marble. An eight-hour day on wood is like nothing. Pfft, your feet will barely hurt.”

We appear to be in the High Renaissance galleries. On every wall, imposing paintings hang from skinny copper wires. The room, too, is imposing, perhaps forty feet by twenty, with egress through double-wide doorways leading in three directions. The floor is as mellow as Aada had promised, and the ceiling is high, with skylights aided by lamps pointing down at various strategic angles. There is a single bench near the center of the room, upon which lies a discarded Chinese-language map. Past the bench, a pair of wires dangle loosely toward a conspicuously empty spot on the wall.

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Aada addresses it: “You see the signed paper slip,” she says,

## THE GRAND STAIRCASE

motioning toward the sole evidence this isn't a shocking crime scene. "Mr. Francesco Granacci was hanging here, but the conservator has taken him in for a cleaning. He might also have been out on loan, under examination in the curators' office, or having his picture taken in the photography studio. Who knows? But there will be a slip and that you will notice."

We pace along a shin-high bungee cable, which keeps us a yard or so from the paintings, and enter the next gallery under our watch. Here, Botticelli appears to be the famous name; and after that there is a third, smaller gallery, dominated by more Florentines. This is our domain until 10 a.m., when we will shift to the three galleries beyond. "Protect life and property—in that order," Aada continues, beginning to lecture with uniform staccato emphasis. "It's a straightforward job, young man, but we also must not be idiots. We keep our eyes peeled. We look around. Like scarecrows, we prevent nuisance. When there are minor incidents, we deal with them. When there are major incidents, we alert the Command Center and follow the protocols you learned in your classroom training. We are not cops except for when idiots ask us to be cops, and thankfully it isn't often. And as it's the first thing in the morning, there are a couple of things we must do. . . ."

Returning to the Raphael gallery, Aada gets on her tiptoes to stick a key in a lock and open a glass door on to a public stairwell. This done, she casually steps over a bungee cable—a startling transgression to witness—and drops to her haunches beneath a heavy golden frame. "The lights," she says, indicating switches in the baseboard. "Usually the late watch—that's the midnight shift—will have turned them on, but in case they haven't. . . ." She depresses a half dozen switches at once, and we are standing in a long dark tunnel, Renaissance paintings turned into silvery muddles on the walls. She flips the switches up and the lights kick on a gallery at a time with surprisingly loud *ka-chunks*.

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The public starts trickling in about 9:35. Our first visitor is an art



student judging by the portfolio under her arm, and she actually gasps to find herself all alone. (Perhaps rightly, she doesn't count Aada and me.) A French family follows in matching New York Mets caps (which they likely believe to be Yankees caps, the more typical tourist choice), and Aada's eyes narrow. "For the most part, our visitors are lovely," she admits, "but these pictures are very old and fragile, and people can be very stupid. Yesterday I was working in the American Wing, and all day long people wanted to seat their children on the three bronze bears! Can you imagine? With the old masters, it's much better—not so quiet as Asian Art, of course, but a piece of cake compared to the nineteenth century. Of course, everywhere we work we must look out for unthinking individuals. You see? Right there." Across the way, the French father is reaching over the bungee line, pointing out some Raphaelesque detail to his daughter. "Monsieur!" Aada calls out, somewhat louder than she needs to. "*S'il vous plait!* Not so close!"

After a little while, an older man saunters into the gallery wearing a familiar suit of clothes. "Oh good, it's Mr. Ali, an excellent teammate!" Aada says of the guard.

"Ah, Aada, the very best!" he replies, catching and adopting her cadence. Mr. Ali introduces himself as the "relief" on our team (team one, Section B) who is "pushing" us along to our B post.

Aada agrees emphatically. "Ali, you're first platoon?" she asks.

"Second platoon."

"Sunday-Monday off?"

"Friday-Saturday."

"Ah, so this is overtime for you. . . . Mr. Bringley, Mr. Ali started a bit earlier than we did this morning, but he gets to go home at five thirty. He is not tough like you and me, not a third platoon, no, no, he needs to go home to his beautiful wife. You work what days, Mr. Bringley? That's right, you told me: Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Tuesday, twelve hours, twelve hours, eight hours, eight hours. It is good. The long days will feel normal and the normal days will feel short, and you will always have that

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third day off if you want to work OT. Stick with the third platoon, Mr. Bringley. Goodbye, Mr. Ali.”

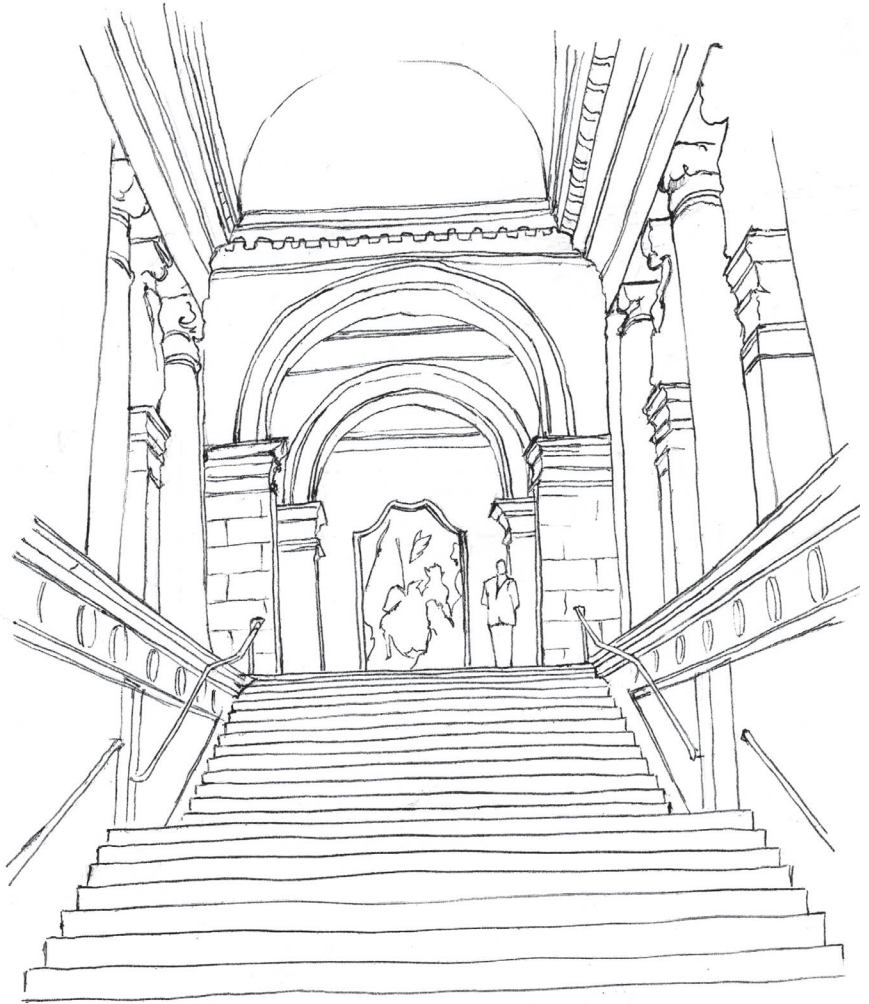
Our new post brings us both backward and forward in history, covering Italian paintings from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but also a large adjacent gallery of pictures from France at the time of the Revolution. As we explore, Aada occasionally points out cameras and alarms whose necessity she accepts but to which she condescends. Human workers have her respect, and she is more interested in running down a supporting cast of characters that are almost as important in her eyes as the guards: custodians, our union brothers and sisters; the nurse, who will distribute Excedrin; the elevator man, who’s a contractor and gives himself just one day off a month; two off-duty or retired firefighters on the premises at all times; riggers, who move around heavy art objects; art handlers, or techs, who have the finer touch; carpenters, painters, and mill workers; engineers, electricians, and lampers; and then a lot of people one sees somewhat less, like curators, conservators, and executive types.

This is all very interesting, but I can’t help but notice we are chatting just feet away from the *Madonna and Child* by Duccio, dating from about 1300. All morning, I haven’t faced up to a painting, and I wonder if I might swing Aada’s attention its way by making reference to its reported \$45 million price tag. Aada is only saddened I would say such a vulgar thing. She pulls me in close to the diminutive panel and all but whispers, “You see the blackened singed bits at the bottom of the frame. Burn marks from votive candles. It’s a beautiful picture, isn’t it? These are beautiful pictures, aren’t they? I try to remind these people . . . the schoolkids, the tourists . . . I remind them that these are masters. You and I, we work with masters. Duccio. Vermeer. Velázquez. Caravaggio. Compared to what?” She looks over at our American Wing neighbors. “Some picture of George Washington? I mean oh come on now. Be serious.”

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Mr. Ali approaches, and from across the gallery makes a jocular push

ALL THE BEAUTY IN THE WORLD



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## THE GRAND STAIRCASE

gesture with both arms. This carries us out of the old master wing almost, through a pair of glass doors, and into a mammoth gallery overlooking the museum's Great Hall. At this busy crossroads, Aada is constantly interrupted by a wide variety of requests: the mummies, the photographs, the African masks, "ancient medical instruments, or something like that?" (To this last, Aada replies confidently, "We have none.") More than once, she apologizes to me for the quality of these exchanges, insisting that more interesting questions will come our way when there's quiet. After finishing up a deft set of directions to Degas's ballerina statue, she taps me and points out a well-tailored man passing by: "A curator in this section, Morgan, or something like that." We watch as he hurriedly walks past with his eyes on the floor and disappears down the Duccio hallway—"To his office," Aada tells me, "behind the door with the buzzer in the Rubens gallery." The irony doesn't escape either of us. Those of us who spend all day out in the open with the masterpieces, we're the ones in the cheap suits.

It is almost 11 o'clock, and we will soon be on our break. A short line of people has formed to query Aada, and I have a moment to peer down into the cavernous Great Hall. A kind of salmon run of visitors ascends the Grand Staircase toward me and just as quickly races past as though I am a half-submerged stone. I think of the many times I have climbed these steps in the past, with no thought of turning around to watch the influx of art lovers, tourists, and New Yorkers, most of them feeling their time inside of this world in miniature will be too short. I am astonished that mine won't have to be.

You don't forget your first visit to the Met. I was eleven years old and had traveled to New York from our home outside Chicago with my mother. I remember a long subway ride to the remote-sounding Upper East Side, and I remember the storybook feel of that neighborhood: doormen in

livery, proud stone apartment towers, wide famous avenues— first Park, then Madison, then Fifth. We must have approached on East 82nd Street because my first glimpse of the museum was of its generous stone entry stairs, which served as an amphitheater for a saxophone player. The Met's facade was impressive in a familiar sort of way, very columny and Greek. The magical part was that as we drew nearer it kept growing wider and wider, so that even out front by the hot dog carts and the geysering fountains, we were never able to get the entire museum into view. I immediately understood it as a place of impossible breadth.

We climbed the marble stairs and passed a threshold into the Great Hall. As Maureen, my mom, queued up to make our "suggested donation" (even a nickel would have gotten us in), she encouraged me to wander a lobby that seemed no less grand than Grand Central Terminal's, and full of the same energy from people preparing to venture someplace. Through the entrance on one end of the hall I could make out a snowstorm of blinding white statuary, perhaps Greek. Through an entrance on the other side, a sandy-colored tomb was just visible, surely the way to ancient Egypt. Directly ahead, a wide, straight, majestic run of stairs concluded in a color-splashed canvas appearing as large and taut as a ship sail. We affixed our little tin entry pins to our collars, and it seemed only natural that we should keep climbing.

Everything I knew about art I learned from my parents. Maureen was an art history minor in college and evangelized to my brother, Tom; my sister, Mia; and me with amateur zeal. A few times a year at least, we ventured to the Art Institute of Chicago, where we tiptoed through almost like tomb raiders, picking out our favorite pictures as though planning a theft. My mother was a Chicago theater actor by trade, and if you know anything about Chicago theater, you know it isn't showy or glamorous but rather hardworking and true believing. I can remember driving with her downtown, hearing actor friends greet her not as Maureen but "Mo," watching the houselights go down and the stage lights go up and learning there was room enough in the world for this sacred

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little playing space indifferent to the honking traffic outside. At home, we would gather in her big bed to read Maurice Sendak picture books, which we understood to be different from just ordinary books, asking us to clear a playing space in our minds for the Wild Rumpus to leap enormously into life. My earliest feeling about art was that it belonged to a kind of separate, moonlit world, and this was my mother's influence.

My dad was more hardheaded but had his own lessons to teach me. Working as a community banker on the South Side of Chicago, he was a latter-day George Bailey, with visceral scorn for the Mr. Potters of the world. To relax at day's end, he'd spend hours pounding on the family's upright piano. He adored the piano. For a time he had a bumper sticker that read in its entirety: Piano. And though he was never very good at it—he always said that his talent wasn't talent but rather diligence born of enjoyment—he played the music of his twin idols, Bach and Duke Ellington, with wobbliness but not shyness, all the while singing phrases out loud for the sheer pleasure of their beauty: "Da ta DA da doo." My sense of the artist as an unafraid person came largely from my dad.



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I took the lead that day at the Met and barreled us through at fantastic speed, haunted by the suspicion a yet more unmissable sight lay just around the next corner. Since its opening in 1880, the New World's greatest art museum has expanded in a largely illogical sprawl, appending new wings to old ones in such a way that entire new atmospheres seem to spring up out of nowhere. To wander through, particularly if you get turned around as often as we did, is like exploring a mansion in a dream, rooms generating in front of you and vanishing behind, twice-visited galleries seeming only vaguely familiar from a new vantage point. Amid the whirlwind, I have only two clear memories of artworks I saw that day. I had never seen anything so leapingly imaginative as the wood carvings of the Asmat people of Papua New Guinea, in particular, a long row of totem poles each made of single sago trees. My favorite was composed of tattooed men stacked on each other's shoulders until the penis of the topmost man widened into a kind of intricately carved palm frond. It seemed to prove the world contained so much more possibility than I'd given it credit for.

Roaming the old master wing, I was stopped and held fast by Pieter Bruegel's *The Harvesters*, from 1565. I responded to that great painting in a way that I now believe is fundamental to the peculiar power of art. Namely, I experienced the great beauty of the picture even as I had no idea what to do with that beauty. I couldn't discharge the feeling by talking about it—there was nothing much to say. What was beautiful in the painting was not like words, it was like paint—silent, direct, and concrete, resisting translation even into thought. As such, my response to the picture was trapped inside me, a bird fluttering in my chest. And I didn't know what to make of that. It is always hard to know what to make of that. As a guard, I will be watching countless visitors respond in their own ways to the curious feeling.

Seven years later, I moved to New York for college. The Met's fall exhibition happened to be a display of Bruegel's drawings and prints, and again I climbed the Grand Staircase, this time gripping a notebook in my new role as starry-eyed, ambitious student. My whole life I'd been nip-



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ping at the heels of my brilliant older brother—Tom, two years my senior, was a kind of math genius—and I saw myself as a plucky little brother with big artistic dreams.

Freshman year, first semester, I enrolled in the most serious-sounding course in the English department, a John Milton seminar in which we spent twelve weeks parsing the twelve books of *Paradise Lost*. Every couple of pages, there was a line like

*Abashed the devil stood,  
And felt how awful goodness is*

that I felt should have held us up another twelve weeks. Great books and great art felt that tremendous to me.

I took only a few courses in the art history department, but they were maybe the headiest of all. I entered a lecture hall, the lights cut out, a slide projector whirred into life, and up on the screen jumped cathedrals, mosques, palaces, all the grandeur of all the world, click, click, click. Or else it was quieter than that: a little Renaissance chalk drawing blown up a hundredfold so that it quivered like an early film still on the luminous screen.

I wish I could say that my studies humbled me, but I was still perhaps too young for that. I had a professor who had helped to direct the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and I felt as though I was up on those scaffolds myself, a soon-to-be-eminent scholar of big, important things.

The day I visited the Bruegel exhibit I was intent on absorbing every word the curators had squeezed onto the little descriptive labels. I felt I was ready to push past the stupefied response *The Harvesters* had once provoked in me, which I now suspected was childish and perhaps even stupid. I yearned to become sophisticated, and I thought that with the proper academic tools and up-to-date terminology, I could learn to properly analyze art and thus never lack for something to do with it. Did I feel a little bird beating its wings in my chest? Not a problem! I could



quiet the strange sensation by applying my mind to the painting's motifs or identifying its school or its style. Such a maneuver was a means of moving past my perception of soundless beauty and finding a language that might allow me to move and to shake out in the real world.

But then my brother, Tom, got sick and my priorities changed. After college, for a period of two years and eight months, the "real world" became a room at Beth Israel Hospital and Tom's one-bedroom apartment in Queens. Never mind that I was starting out at a glamorous job in a midtown skyscraper, it was these quieter spaces that taught me about beauty, grace, and loss—and, I suspected, about the meaning of art.

When in June of 2008, Tom died, I applied for the most straightforward job I could think of in the most beautiful place I knew. This time, I arrive at the Met with no thought of moving forward. My heart is full, my heart is breaking, and I badly want to stand still awhile.

In the afternoon, Aada grabs hold of my shoulder and says, "Young man, I will leave you alone. You will be here. I will be there"—and disappears into, if I have this right, Spain. I am not entirely alone, of course, but passing strangers don't feel very much like company, and the museum is so rambling (the size of about three thousand average New York apartments) that a gallery like this one is seldom crowded. For several minutes, I stand on my C post, feeling time creep forward at a pace that might be confused with its standing still. I fold my hands in front of me. I fold them behind. I try them in my pockets. I lean back inside of a doorway, pace awhile, and then lean against a wall. In short, I am restless, apparently unready for the abrupt transition from following Aada around like a duckling to standing watchfully still. Indeed, for these past several weeks, I have been advancing through a process that has made my life feel directed for the first time since Tom's death. I put in my application. I interviewed. I trained. I passed a state licensing exam, was fingerprinted,

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and had my measurements taken by the museum's tailor in the Uniforms Office. Now I have arrived! And the only thing *to do* is . . . keep my head up. Keep the watch. Let my hands remain empty and my eyes stay wide while my inner life grows all mixed up with beautiful works of art and the life that swirls around them.

It is an extraordinary feeling. After several long minutes more, I begin to believe this truly can be my role.

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