

New Nonfiction from Patty Prewitt: "Missing Amy"

Missouri inmate Patty Prewitt has been in prison for almost 40 years. She is serving a life sentence for the murder of her husband, Bill, in 1984. The conviction, however, is problematic. The prosecution's case relied upon slut-shaming Prewitt and questioning her fitness as a mother based on relationships that took place five and more years before the murder, a time when the Prewitts were separated. The prosecutor did not share with the defense evidence that established a strange car was seen parked around the corner, a significant omission. A pathologist, brought on only weeks before trial was discredited in a number of trials where he served as a witness for the prosecution.

Prewitt is not eligible for parole until 2036, when she will be 86 years old. Maintaining her innocence, she declined a plea bargain that would have made her eligible for parole after just seven years. Had she taken the deal, she would have been released many years ago.

Former Missouri Department of Corrections Director George Lombardi who, during his 41 years in corrections, has never recommended anyone for clemency supports Prewitt's release.

In light of "the long sentence she has already served, the total support of her children and grandchildren, and her unprecedented contribution to the culture of the prison and to her fellow offenders," he recommends that "Missouri Gov. Parson take the just, responsible and compassionate action and grant Patty Prewitt clemency." Warden Brian Goeke identifies Prewitt as a woman best suited for release.

"Where'd you get these? Did an officer give 'em to you?"

"You think I'd do a guard for protein bars?"

He looked appropriately shocked, so I continued, "No one trades a protein bar for sex! Look around! These horny hos give it away!"

Unabashed because he actually thought he'd made a good bust, this skinny eighteen-year-old corrections officer then asked, "Then where'd ya get 'em?"

With the same degree of furious indignation, I spat out, "At the can-efing-teen! There's a list on that wall of what they sell! Why don't you check it out before you accuse this old lady of trading geriatric sex for protein bars!!!!"

As a mic-drop finale, I snatched the three bars from his hand, turned on my heel, and marched down the hall to my freshly-tossed cell to survey the damage.

At that very moment I missed my prison kid Amy with a heart-squeezing ache. We shared a cell for a decade and like an old married couple we regaled each other every evening with the events of the day—mostly tales of how stupid this prison and these people are. She would have howled at this encounter.

Because of her drug addiction, Amy passed through prisons for a couple of decades. I knew her during every incarceration and warmed to her readiness to see humor within the darkest of prison days. During her next to last confinement, she gave birth to a son. He was the one that she gave up entirely. She was finally mature enough to know she couldn't provide a child with any kind of stable life. Her two daughters weren't so lucky, and both ended up in this prison with us.

At the beginning of her seventh and final prison bid, I spied her across the chow hall at breakfast. I hadn't heard that she was back. Self-disgust radiated from her slumped shoulders and bowed blonde head, so this captain-save-a-ho ambled over to hear the sad story of why she was back. Again. As a conclusion to the convoluted tale about how she ended up with two sevens and two fives running wild, she quietly added, "Yeh, Patty, I

fucked up again. I'm under a mandatory fifty percent. Twelve years flat. I really fucked up this time." My heart broke for her and all the broken-winged sparrows who fall from freedom into prison. Breaking my reverie Amy asked, "Ya gonna eat that toast? Butter? Jelly?"

As I shoved my tray her way, an idea sprang to mind. "What wing are you on?"

"A, and it's a loud, disrespectful, trap-house zoo. Plus they put me on a top bunk above this rude, loud-snorin' bitch with boils all over her butt. Boils! She says a spider bit her, but I bet it's staph. No self-respectin' spider would put his mouth on that ass!"

"Amy, I have an empty bottom bunk in my room. If you want, I'll ask Ms. Raspberry if she'll move you over. They train service dogs now, and you'll love those pups."

Amy brightened like the sun breaking through a cloud. That's how we began our decade of cohabitation.

Because Amy owed nearly \$2000 in unpaid parole fees, she reluctantly headed straight to the dreaded clothing factory to get a job. The factory was the only place that paid a living wage, and she had no one on the outside to help her.

Within the relative safety of a four-person concrete prison cell that had been converted to jam in six, we made our home. The other four bunks were inhabited with a parade of girls just passing through. Some joined our conversations. Some didn't. Amy and I made a pact to keep the cell peaceful, and we did. During count times, I sat cross-legged facing her, while she perched on the edge of her bunk swinging her short legs. We verbally painted scenes, crimes, and memories from our free lives. We mulled over how the snarky librarian had admonished us. We worried about our kids. We conspired, aspired, perspired. No subject was off-limits. More importantly, I listened, really heard her. I didn't give her a

load of unsolicited advice. I just loved and listened. Therein lies the magic of healing.

When Amy was just a little kid, her father had her and her older sister at his place for the weekend. On the way to go fishing, he told the girls to run out to the pickup. He'd be right there. They waited until Amy couldn't stand it any longer. Disregarding her sister's protests, she raced back into the house to holler at him. When she burst in the living room poised to yell, "DADDY," she choked. His limp body lay crumpled across the rusty-orange shag carpet, a ragged pool of red blood oozed from where the top of his head had been, the smoking shotgun muzzle still stuck in his gaped mouth, hunks of brain tissue, blasted across the wall, lost their grip and splatted on the console TV.

Less than ten years later, Amy was a pregnant teenager. Her heartless mother never spoke to her again. Small wonder she self-medicated.

Amy was the same age as my daughters, so I couldn't help but mother her. I made sure she had the hygiene items she needed. I religiously placed a multivitamin on her locker every morning and encouraged her to eat her veggies, because she had Hep C. She loved softball and created, out of misfits, the best team in this prison. We didn't win every game, but she made sure everyone felt good about themselves. We laughed a lot. Even through tears.

When the goon squad busted in like rabid Nazis to tear up our cells, Amy would want to lay down and take a nap. Tornado warning? She would be overcome with drowsiness. Prison is one anxiety-producing occurrence after another, so I mercilessly teased her that she suffered from some form of stress-induced narcolepsy.

As an integral member of our prison theater troupe, Prison Performing Arts, I tricked Amy into taking a speaking role in

The Rover, a period piece with sword fighting. We were issued foam rubber swords, but during the first performance, as Amy thrust, the blade part fell to the floor. She was left holding the handle. At that moment Amy discovered she was a natural comedienne. She never looked back and was in every play we produced. A star was born.

All her life, Amy had considered herself a royal loser. A slut. A drug addict. A thief. A horrible mother. Stupid. Unlovable. A poor excuse for a woman. Ugly. A midget. (She was short, barely 4'10.) She had never glimpsed or believed in the special, talented human being that I saw in her. Acting became her saving grace, and she thrived on stage. When college courses were offered, she enrolled. Even though she doubted that she'd be able to do the work, with a bit of my tutoring, she turned out to be an excellent student. I'm a certified fitness trainer and talked her into training, too. The physical and mental work was hard, but she persevered and puffed up about an inch after passing the exams.

Our prison time marched on in its petty pace until we got the proverbial good news/bad news. The good news was that legislation had been passed that would free Amy soon; the bad news was she was not prepared. We always planned for her to work at the nursing home when she was eligible so she could save up a healthy nest egg. My daughter Jane set up a hasty go-fund-me account that raked in enough to buy her a laptop so she could continue her college. Amy left here with nothing but thrift-store clothes on her back.

It's hard starting from scratch, but she was doing so well out there in the free world. Clean and sober, working to keep spirits up in the nursing home. Then Covid hit, and life got really scary for the confined. She had the Department of Corrections on speed dial complaining about how prisoners were poorly treated. Out of the blue, Amy fell in love with a man unlike any she'd ever known, a kind and honest man who truly adored her. She was making me believe in happily ever after.

But Amy died. Suddenly. The addicts all attributed her sudden death to drugs, but I knew better and felt vindicated when the autopsy proved me right. Amy's big broken heart had failed. She suffered cardiac arrest as she was preparing to go to care for those women and men in the nursing home prison.

Real life is no fairy tale, Amy. I miss you.

New Fiction from Matt Jones: "The Fisherman"



"You coming to work, New Guy?" Sailor asks, and I snarl at my nickname. Dude gives me the creeps—somehow they stuffed a three-hundred-pound bear who never blinks into a uniform. When the plane landed in Kandahar last night a sergeant with bagpipe lungs paired us off. New blood was teamed with guys who'd been here for a while—I got saddled with Sailor. Ain't no way some Navy goof is gonna push me around, even this missing-link motherfucker whose voice rumbles like grenade day on the range.

We leave the barracks and the Afghan sun kicks me square in the coin purse. Next thing I notice is the stink. Like when your little brother drops a deuce under your bed and, reaching for a sock, you grab it by mistake. "Hey Sailor," I say, "Does it always reek like this?"

"Yep." Deadpan. "Civilians wisely bury their shit to keep the stink at bay. Here in Kandahar we pool it in the poo pond.

During hot days the shit heats up and particles attach to the dust. That's why you can taste it." Sailor leads me down the maze-like streets of the base, where twelve-foot concrete barriers offer a little shade. On top of each, coils of barbed wire scrawl like signatures. In fact, all I can see is concrete barriers and kill-wire, the world's largest rat maze. Not some lifeless anti-oasis: there are troops everywhere with assault rifles. I snicker at a dead bird getting torn apart by ants like a bitch.

He's right about the dust, goddamnit. Fucking everywhere. Within minutes of trudging through it, I could taste the poo pond and feel stones form in my nose. Next there's this wicked-loud sound from behind—European police sirens wailing or how the fuck should I know? Sailor grabs my shoulder with a beefy mitt and we're both face down in the ass-dust. "Rockets," he hisses. The alarm eases into a snobby British voice of God going, ROCKET ATTACK, ROCKET ATTACK. Holy fuck, man. I'm not going to say I'm scared or anything—last summer after Phase Three of infantry training (HUA) I got jumped by four bikers and broke their faces with a pool cue, fearless. Still, having someone shoot missiles at my ass made my palms a little sweaty, ya know? But then there's this huge WOOF except the dog is loud as six dragons. Gravel rains all over us. Alright, fine—now I'm scared shitless. Meanwhile, Sailor has hauled me on top of the friendly Afghan cactus, whose hook-like barbs itch for human skin. "Wait another minute, and then we move to that bunker," Sailor rumbles, pointing with his never-blinking eyes to a concrete structure across the street.

"How am I gonna wank with my hands full of thorns?" Pretty sure I sounded tough despite my little squeak at the end. Sailor doesn't say shit anyway—we hustle toward the bunker. I've got that feeling another rocket's gonna burst before we get there and fill my guts with shrapnel. WOOF WOOF WOOF go the dragons.

Sailor flops against the concrete. "We'll wait here until the

siren sounds again, New Guy.” I’m not a big fan of taking orders from some cumguzzler—Sailor doesn’t give a fuck about my murder-gaze, and he seems to not get that I’m infantry, and Army, and therefore better. Sitting in the dirt, he rests his feet on the opposite wall and shuts his eyes. Sailor doesn’t look scared, but man, he’s about as tired as a Dad with forty-eight kids. I’m feeling safer since the bunker’s got these thick-ass walls—we’re talking three-foot-thick concrete. Almost underground except you can still see some sky through slits. Cloudless. Piercing. Blue.

Sailor catches my eye. “The Taliban pay locals to launch cheap rockets bought from the Russians. Fuck-all for accuracy, but as the base is big, there’s a chance that someone will hit the death-lottery and blow up a mess hall.” Dry laugh. “I don’t even blame them. The locals, I mean. Someone offers you more money than you make in a year to fire a few rockets at foreign devils? I’d take that deal too.” Sailor trails off and stares at that little patch of sky and the silence stretches. I’m thinking, fuck this guy.

“Sailor, you got a perverted way of looking at the Enemy. We’re talking terrorists and suicide bombers, right? Osama Bin Ladens? Fanatics who want to make an orphanage for your kids? I’m supposed to feel bad for psychos just because they’re poor? Listen, Navy, someone shoots a rocket at me they deserve to bleed out slow.” Sailor snorts. He looks like he’s gonna say something and maybe he’ll confirm that I’m the shit or maybe I’ll need to buttstroke the fucker, but that siren blares again and the British asshole is saying ALL CLEAR.

We pile from the bunker and start heading toward the mess. Sailor says, “When we get to work later I’ll introduce you to a friend of mine. He’s called the Fisherman.” He stares through me again. Oh great. This Fisherman sounds like another goddamn Navy guy, another silverback pillow-biter dreaming of ways to touch my junk.

The mess is colored with the same shit-paint as every other building. Sailor flourishes his ID to a raghead behind a counter. It's like other messes I've been in back in Canada except there's a hundred people here and no laughter. Sailor wanders to a depleted salad bar and scoops cucumbers. No wonder he's grumpy—no fucking protein. I order the meatloaf, like a man, from a wizened dude behind a counter. Gandalf arches an eyebrow suspiciously, arms himself with a plastic glove, and tenderly places the loaf on the plate like it might explode. Not gonna lie, I've eaten some humble loaves in my day but that one could have moonlighted as the lung from the cigarette package. In the Army you choke down some weird shit and keep it down. I sit with Sailor and hack the rubbery mass with my plastic knife until it breaks at the hilt and Sailor hands me a spare. Finally get a chunk to my mouth. Never French kissed a corpse before but now I don't need to: "Just add Tabasco," I say, smiling.

After the meal we trudge down a street with big fuck-off tanks and trucks driving past. Tanks look different back home. These ones have sharp angles on the bottom and the turrets are belted with rebar. Distracted from the bubbles frothing up from the poo pond, and imagining what a swim would feel like on my naked skin, I lose situational awareness and follow Sailor blindly. Not that I'd ever admit it to him. I gotta get me a map of this place, man. There's no fucking street signs or anything. I could get lost as balls and end up devoured by ants.

Pretty soon we reach a twenty-foot-tall gate with razor wire looping along the top. Sailor teaches me the door code and we enter the Canadian compound. I plug a nostril and fire a rock out of the other, and it ricochets off a second door with a separate combo. Inside, air conditioning. "Welcome to the Operations Centre, New Guy." Sailor gestures at the room as if he's pulling the curtain off a shitty masterpiece.

But what a fucking dump, man! There's a couple of long tables

covered with computers and wires which have a dozen grim-eyed dudes plugging away. At the far end of the room two large screens have words scrolling down them. Facebook chat for murder. There's also a big television showing the news. Everything's made out of knotty plywood, the cheap shit, except the computers and a well-stained coffee pot. "Time to meet the Fisherman," Sailor says, guiding me to one of the screens at the front. No one looks up. "One of the things we do here is use drones to fire missiles at people putting bombs in the road. We watch them through our many screens, and when we catch them in a hostile act, we strike."

"That's what I'm talking about!" I say. "No fucking hidin' in a bunker for me—reach out and destroy the Enemy." I've heard about these videos: drone porn. This righteousness has spread all over the internet—assholes getting blown to bits. Sailor nods to someone and the video starts to play.

The screen shimmers into place over a dusty dirt road, lined with little ditches cracked with crotch rot. There's this towelhead on the road, wearing pyjamas. He's maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. The screen is gritty and the resolution sucks balls. Still, no cars, no humans, not even a fucking sheep, and the asshole is digging, no matter the afternoon sun.

"You killed this prick, right?" I ask Sailor.

He looks at me and for a second he's a big fuckoff owl and I'm a mouse. He says, "We'd been tracking The Fisherman for a while, trying to make sure he was actually planting a bomb instead of working on the *wadis*. But here you can see a spool of wire and he's connecting the wire to something in the hole he's dug. We had the drones on site."

As I'm watching the towelhead working on his bomb, the screen lights up in this flash. "Take that, you fucking raghead!" I cackle. There's a big cloud of dust where the missile struck

next to the dude. I'm surprised more people aren't cheering. Killing towelheads gives me righteous wood, you know?

I figured he'd be evaporated, pink mist—get the mop—but no. When the dust clears the towelhead is on his knees and his turban is bobbing up and down like he's praying. Wouldn't it be a shame if the raghead pulled through? Maybe the missile missed? As the drone circles, the camera angle changes. I start thinking maybe he's not praying after all. From the side, he looks like he's fishing for something. Like he's reeling in a bigass fish and he's working his balls off to get that sucker in the boat.

I'm still trying to figure out what's happening when Sailor says, "Praying and fishing, New Guy. Praying and fishing. My parents were born in Newfoundland in a little coastal village. Praying and fishing were all they had." I see that the Fisherman's not reeling in a fishing line at all. He's got his guts smashed open, man. He's got guts snaked out all over the fucking place. He's just trying to piece himself together, grabbing handfuls of intestines and cramming them back inside. I can't hear anything since we're watching through a drone but the Fisherman's got his mouth open in this noiseless scream. The meatloaf backflips in my stomach.

"New Guy, this is a Battle Damage Assessment, or BDA. We conduct a BDA after every strike to watch for a mob forming, to make sure the dropped weapons aren't reclaimed, and to make sure the dead are truly dead." The Fisherman writhes. He's attracted a big swarm of flies, glittering grey pixels, trying to lay eggs inside him. He's still cramming in his guts, but he's losing speed. There's so much fucking dirt and dust on his insides that there's no way he's gonna make it. "Normally when we strike and the victim is this injured we'd send a helicopter and get him to a hospital. But some zones are too dangerous, protected by RPG."

We watch in silence. The Fisherman is still going. He's

getting slower and weaker, but he's hanging in there. I get this awful feeling. My chest is made of cloth and it's tearing. Some fabric I didn't know I had, ripping apart slowly. You don't know you have it until it tears.

Fuck this, man. Just gotta find the numb place. Just gotta get warm and comfortable and numb. I look over at Sailor and his face is as hard and cold and lonely as a mountain. I guess after a year of this shit, there ain't no fabric left. Just rubble.

I don't want to admit watching a towelhead snuff it bothers me, but after fifteen minutes I blurt, "Alright, Sailor, thanks. I fucking get it. It's awful, alright? How long are we gonna watch this guy die, you sick asshole?"

Sailor fixes me with a stare. "This isn't a television program where you can just change the channel. You talked shit earlier about how the Enemy deserves to be killed, and how the Enemy doesn't deserve our sympathy. Well here's something you don't learn in your training. The skin colour is different but the guts are the same, aren't they?" Now that Sailor has mentioned the guts I'm taking a closer look and they do look grey and slimy, even through the drone feed. The Fisherman is still twitching and I'm begging, actually begging in my head, *Die, man. Just die already, alright?*

I'm sure he only has a few twitches left when Sailor goes on, "Lot of people back home will want to know what Afghanistan is all about but you can't explain the Fisherman to anybody. You just carry him wherever you go." And as Sailor says this a dozen human shapes scurry down the road—I'm sure they're scorching in those burkas. As they come closer I pick up details, you know? Like a few are wringing the shit out of their hands, a few have baskets and they're collecting parts. One woman gets right next to the Fisherman and takes his hand and you can see her wailing wailing wailing. I think of my own mother back home and how she'd feel watching me die like this

and that cloth in my chest tears from shoulder to waist.

Sailor's voice is soft. "When you strike, you don't just wound a person. You wound a whole community. Just because your job is to drop bombs on people doesn't mean you have to be a monster." He goes quiet and I see his eyes shut down and he's a mountain again.

Fuck this shit, man. Killing from an office? Killing with compassion? I didn't train for this—I trained to be a warrior. Give me a C7 rifle and send me out past the barbed wire. I wanna be in the shit, with the other killers. I wanna sleep on a big pile of dead Afghans at night...

Movement on the screen: the Fisherman is still alive. He's sprawled all over the grass with blood bubbles popping out. His lips are moving like he's whispering to his mother. I catch myself leaning towards the screen, trying to listen, hoping he'll say whatever he's gotta say and then he'll finally slump down dead.

But the Fisherman will live forever.

New Nonfiction from Tom Keating: "The Lobby"



I am careful with the coffee tray. It holds four coffees and one tea for my guys in the VA hospital lobby.

Everyone who comes to the VA hospital spends time sitting in the lobby, waiting for a meeting with a doctor, or a blood draw, whatever they need. All of us are in the lobby because

our bodies paid the price for our service.

It is a large lobby, with many comfortable upholstered chairs placed in the center of the lobby floor. VA clerks sit behind the long counter on the left, and the Eye and Ear clinic is on the right. Flags for all the services; Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and the new Space Force hang from the high ceiling. A large US flag hangs opposite the service flags. The doctor's offices and labs are behind the elevator cluster near the information desk. Occasionally a nurse in blue scrubs would appear from the doctor's offices and shout out the name of a patient for their appointment.

Everybody wears baseball caps proclaiming their branch of service or places where they served: Desert Storm, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam. Vietnam Vets are the oldest guys now.

My group calls itself the Orange Brigade. You can tell by our baseball caps that we are all Vietnam War vets. We suffer from exposure to Agent Orange, the defoliant, hence the name of our group. We meet on Mondays as we wait for our appointments. The group started after we all met in the lobby one Monday for our appointments. We pulled together some chairs into a corner of the lobby and shared our Vietnam stories. We would wait for our name to be called and talk about the Red Sox, or the Bruins, and the state of the country. We started with ten in our group, but there are five of us now.

The brigade includes Gerry, a former Marine with Parkinsons, Jim, a six-foot five ex-paratrooper with cancer, Charlie, an Air Force vet with raging diabetes, and Shirley, a former Army nurse who has severe migraines. I'm an Army vet, too, the youngest in the group at sixty-seven with an ischemic heart. I make the coffee run to the café just off the lobby.

I bring the tray over to the group. Gerry's hand trembles when he reaches for his coffee, which is half-filled, so he doesn't spill.

"Thanks, Tim," he says. Gerry had to cut his law practice down to almost nothing when he became ill.

I give Jim his large black coffee and a chocolate-dipped donut.

"Mama's milk," he jokes. "Thanks, brother." Jim played pro football before the Army drafted him, now he is thin and frail. When he came home, it was difficult for him to adjust. His career in law enforcement was cut short by his difficulties, including lots of brawls and drinking. Two marriages went bust as well.

Charlie grabs his large mocha coffee, and a honey glazed. He uses a wheelchair because his legs can't support his obese body. Shirley nurses her tea and shakes her head at Charlie's gorging.

"You want to go into a diabetic coma?" says Shirley.

Charlie shrugs at Shirley's comment. "Hell, I'm dead already. The Air Force killed me. I flew in the planes that sprayed Agent Orange." He took a bite of the donut. "When the VA diagnosed me, I was shocked. I had to take insulin shots. I couldn't eat what I wanted, or drink what I wanted. That's no way to live. Fuck it, I'm doing what I want."

I sip my decaf and Splenda and say nothing. Everyone makes their own choices. When I returned from the war, I had it made. My fiancée had her Dad get me work at his advertising agency, and we married, raised two children, and were happy till my first heart attack at fifty.

Shirley nurses her tea and shakes her head. When she first joined the group, she spoke of her time in the war. "So many boys, so much hurt," She left nursing after the war. She had a lengthy career in retail, and the success helped ease her pain.

A nurse comes out of the clinic office and shouts, "Wentworth, Gerald!" Gerry shouts "here!" and grabs his walker to stand up.

"Carry on, folks! See you guys next week." Gerry straightens up, turns smartly with his walker and shaky legs over to the nurse.

Jim shakes his head and says, "Man, Jerry will be lucky to be here with us next week. He's getting worse." Charlie laughs, Shirley just sips her tea. It worried me that Gerry was worse, and in spite of his bravado, he knows it too.

Another nurse appears and shouts, "Brackett, Charles!"

Charlie nods to us, says, "See you guys' next week," and wheels off. He is slowly eating and drinking himself to death. Jim says aloud what we all were thinking,

"I bet Charlie aint gonna make to next week." Shirley nods in agreement. We are quiet for a minute or two, then I ask Jim how he is doing, and he says,

"Middlin, boy, middlin. My belly hurts all the time, and they wanna cut out my intestines and put me on a bag. I don't wanna do that, but I guess I have to."

Shirley says, "do it, Jim. You can live longer with the bag."

Before he could reply, the nurse comes out again, "Kearney, Timothy!" Raising my hand for the nurse, then offering it to Jim, I tell him.

"I WILL see you two next week!" I smile.

"For sure, brother, take care," he says. We shake hands. I bump fists with Shirley who smiles up at me.

Walking toward the nurse I look back at our corner of the lobby. Jim, wincing at the pain in his stomach, is slumped in

his chair. Shirley tries to comfort him. I stare at the two empty chairs, Charlie, and Jerry. The Orange Brigade body count is rising. I take a deep breath and follow the nurse.

New Poetry by David Dixon: “Last Night, I Dreamed of the Korengal”; “Look at This Thing We’ve Made”; and “War Poetry”

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New Poetry by Cheney Crow: “The Grey Phone”

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