

For the first time in a week, the sun shines. Two weeks ago, Nakuru District was all dust and death. As far as a person could see, trees, plants and grass were all frozen into stark sculptures, thorny, blackened and waiting to be watered to life. The rain came, and drew a curtain over everything. Today, the veil has peeled away, leaving wobbly, silvery dew and a revolution of green.

Milka's skin is covered with goosebumps: nice-feeling, and teetering on the edge beyond which they will itch. She is only slightly chilly, as she sits by the window of the car, waiting for the shadow of trees to pass and squirming with pleasure, as mobile tattoos of sunlight caress her legs, and arms, and face. She shivers. The big fever tree next to the Hospital is coated with a spider-webby gloss. Its bark is usually an avocado colour. Today, the green is gold. The flowers of the fever tree are dots of yellow light on the dark umbrella canopy, shedding flashes of powder on the grass. As if irresistibly driven by the stinging urgings of impatient bees, all kinds of flowers have burst open from their buds. The bees drink and shoot off, weaving around in a drunken celebration.

Milka thinks that if she were to roll on the grass and rub herself with the yellow dust from the fever tree, and nibble the green shoots now, while they were still unworldly, her goose bumps will burst into bloom.

She only remembers mum is sitting next to her, on the driver's seat when they get into town. Mainly because town today is a hooting, muddy intrusion into her bliss.

"Milka! I don't know what's bothering you today! You've been day dreaming the whole morning. I hope you are not sulking again because I told you that you have to go to the salon first! You can't go to Liza's without doing your hair! That Liza is always so pretty and well groomed. Heh! Sweet-milk! I worry about you sometimes!"

"I like how I look Mum. I'm not Liza!"

Mum parks the car outside the hair-salon, **"I'll come back for you at twelve. You be good Sweet-Milk! We can stop for ice-cream later."**

Milka walks into the salon and sits down. They are used to her solemn silences, and spend only a moment in greeting, before resuming with today's domestic editorials. She sits down on the swinging seat and twirls it around for a bit, noticing that her feet are now almost long enough to touch the ground. There was a time when she had to be carried onto the chair. There is a new picture on the wall, between two mirrors: a black man, dressed

in a creaseless suit, with immaculately cut and parted hair. There is a caption: One of Motown's Best Dressed Men. The whole thing baffles her. He wears no sequins, no fur-lined jacket, he has no Afro. He isn't even wearing satin bell-bottoms like *The Jacksons*. He is dressed just like her father. How can One Of Detroit's Best Dressed Men be wearing something her father wears?

She can hear music from the record shop next door: Superfly! – the come-do-dirty voice moaning "Gat to get over, gat to get over now, gat to gerrover..."

A lady sits next to her, she has skin as brown and matt as Cadbury's Cocoa. Long, long hair; and wide, mobile lips, varnished with red lipstick. Milka flinches away from the sight of the lips. They look like the turgid tumours of naked pink buttock she's seen on baboons in Lake Nakuru National Park. Inviting a thorn to burst them open.

Mavis, one of the hairdressers, lights the gas flame, and lets the comb sit on it for a while. The smell of burning hair and oil fills the room. Nobody notices the smell.

The hot-comb glides through the Cocoa lady's hair, like those

push-push lawn mowers they use in school: this is why Milka refuses to let her mother have her hair straightened – how do you compete with hair like that lady's? Milka's hair is like the scenery on the drive to Gilgil: scattered and stunted bush.

The baboon-bottom lady has a lot of make-up on, and is carrying on like her parents do

when they have visitors. When Baba opens the drinks cabinet, lights his pipe, and then plays slurring saxy Jazz on the record player, and a few hours later, sitting in her room she can hear adults burst into noise, like the kids in school do when the bell rings.

The Cocoa lady is talking loudly now, as if she is talking to the whole room, **"He! So they left Oyster Shell, and went to Amigos. I met them there; five minutes didn't pass, and they were fighting again. Some American guy stopped them. He! The guy could box like Muhammed Ali. Muhammed Muhammed Ali, he floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee! So, me I decided to go with one of the American's: bwana, he was light, like an Arab! Even his eyes were green like a mzungu's: he had an afro just like Shaft's. Haal -bwana, and the muscles! I was just thinking, haki, me I can let him toboa me wide open - shaft me - just for a baby that looks like him. But ei you**

HELL IS IN BED WITH MRS. PEPRAH

1979, Nakuru, Kenya

know Kenyans? The way they talk nice-nicely when you are there, meanwhile, they are cutting your blouse behind your back? Smiling at you, saying - you look so nice in your new blouse sist-ay? Eh! Anyway, there was this ka-silly Nigerian woman, that new Professor at the University. She kept talking with the American. Ma-intellectual things, as if those can catch a man, eh? And anywaaay, who wants a woman so black? So me, I started to Rhumba, you know, like a Ugandan, shaking iiiiiiit! Ai! Him he forgot that Black Professor. So we went. The Americans had comboa-ed a room upstairs. The man, he funua-ed a bottle of Johnny Walker. Ha! Then he started! You haven't heard siasa like that! Ati 'Black Power'; ati 'black is beautiful'; ati -we are in a revalooshen! Me, I just wanted to tell him Mau Mau is over, and anywaaay, who is he to talk about Black power, the way he looks just like a half-caste? So I washa-ed some lingala music, you know, so we could groove a little. He starts to say this African music is beautiful ba-aby. Ati-Lingala! Ati-beautiful! It's like he wanted to be us, and the way us we always just dream of being an Afro-American!"

Milka is getting impatient. The Cadbury Cocoa skinned lady's last sentence lies undigested in her mind. She is too wired with waiting to give it enough attention, but it has that ah-so-that's-it truth about it. The sort of truth that your forgotten mind swallows immediately; the sort of truth that the normal, day-to-day mind struggles to find use for.

Sometimes, Milka thinks, your normal mind throws the truth away in irritation. Maybe this truth sits on a highway in her mind, and just gets tossed right out by fast moving thoughts, like a soccer-player's thoughts, which must be very fast and busy, but hardly deep. She giggles to herself, she has been thinking about thoughts, and the thought she tried to remember has escaped from her memory. She can't retrieve it.

Then one day, some soccer player breathing hard, and covered in a sheen of muscle-gloss (that she would just die to touch). He'll trot up to the sidelines, and ask the open air around him, but why is such-and-such the way it is? And Milka's smug deep-inside mind will take over. She'll breathe in, and smell the man in him without her legs turning into porridge. She'll turn to him, a smile on her face, a sort-of I-can-take-you-or-leave-you smile; not a stammer or a doubt in her, she will tell him the answer, then think, hey! When did I get so clever?

The Cocoa lady is still talking, as they put rollers into her hair. **"Argh! But to be black! Then I pay all this money for curls, and it rains, and I have to come back. Bwana, I wish I had hair like Donna Summer...do you think it is a wig? He! Gold, and brown and you can throw it back so**

men can start to shake-shake! And then when I'm dancing rhumba, I don't have to worry that curls will just stick to my head, and the oil will drip. Ahh! I wish I had hair like Donna Summer!"

Mavis laughs and says, **"Lakini you! Si you buy a wig and shut up! There are young people here -eh?"**

Milka is getting irritated. Argh! Where are they? They haven't even started undoing her raffia plaits! If they keep this up, her Mum will say there isn't time for ice cream before going to Liza's, or the shops will have closed. The music from the shop next door is not helping things. Superfly has been replaced by loud, loud, Lingala music. Lingala scares her: no tranquillity, just this arrangement of sounds that seem to have no direction. Demands! Like reggae, asking things in fresh, raw places in her that she doesn't like. So she holds guard over her self, the same way she does when she feels a fluttering in her stomach and a wet rush in her panties.

But people who listen to that kind of music always seem to belong to a place with no simple tune to hang onto, embracing their frailties: babies with strange men, exam failures; and letting themselves grow in wild, unmannerly directions, like a Kei Apple hedge that is never trimmed.

Ah! But they can dance. They dance so she sees them in shapes and stretches that move as if held by the same fabric, but fluent in endless individual possibilities: boundaries that sometimes seem to be tailor-made for everybody.

Sometimes she gets caught unawares, a song like *Sitaki Uniambie*, begins so beautifully. It so gently slides her into a field of butterflies, then it becomes too much, sinking her into somewhere with an agitation that leaves her queasy with rancid pleasure. But that first part of the song, oh! It always makes her want to fly away to a dance-space that would shock even people who go to Amigo's Discotheque.

She and Liza often laugh, watching people dancing to Lingala on television.

"look at that chic, she has such a biig bum!"

"the guy is drooling! Yuk! That's disgusting!"

A sharp inhale, and a blush of delight/shock - she hasn't got a bra!

The Cocoa powder-face lady looks at herself in the mirror, her hair is now being twisted into the rollers, and she sighs loudly, squirms on her seat, seeking a stretching pleasure.

"He is coming to take me to Lake Nakuru today. Wait till he sees my hair! Heh! And those fools at the lodge will not stare at me like I'm a prostitute -eh? Not with an American. Ai! Those waiters - new from the rural areas - they think ati-lipetio is the mark of Jezebel -eh? In nineteen seventy

nine? Bwana - those Americans also they are just mad. Ati- noow he was telling me on the phone that they are going to see Idi Amin - they want to move to 'the Motherland.' Nooooo - how did The Motherland become Uganda - me I thought they came from ma-Nigeria or Ghana those places? Sooo, ati now Amin will give them passports because he is their African brother - Amin! Ai-they are silly!"

Nancy finishes unwinding the raffia on her head. Milka looks again in the mirror. She prefers matutas to anything. It seems to her that her hair looks best with those little plaits of scrub all over her head. But, her mother would not approve.

"It just isn't ladylike! Matuta's are for maids dear!"

Corncrows, running to the back of her head are the next best option, but her hair is too short to hold them for a week. The black-wool hair-twists are okay, but they pull her scalp too much, so, as usual she has to settle for a raffia-weave. Last week's twists are spread all over the floor, and her naked hair is all grungy, coiled into the shape the raffia held, resembling furry caterpillars.

She peers at her face: she likes to see it before the shampoo. The large, rebellious lips that she likes to keep pursed seem to look right with her hair simple and scruffy. It is as if she doesn't have to look for cuteness in the mirror. She looks at her face, all of it this time, not the bits Mavis has been working on. She releases her lips, and for a moment she sees beauty: lips as lush and soft as the base of a blade of new grass - a meadow of the thickest Kikuyu grass resting between two imposing cheekbones. A frisson of sheer, cat-stroking pleasure climbs all over her. Then it is gone, and her lips seem clumsy and rubbery again, a regular taunt from school rises to the surface of her mind: ugly.

She purses them.

She knows that after a few hours, when the raffia has been twisted into plaits, and her scalp has been oiled; and the plaits shaped into steeples, turrets, and verandas. After the final balcony looms over her forehead, her face will disappear, as if it has been sucked up into her hair. If she peers hard at it, it will reveal itself as foreign, pulled into a surprised blandness that everybody calls 'cute' - when she has her lips pursed.

Her mother adores her like this; and is always at her most friendly when Milka is in fresh, new raffia twists. Often, they share Mum's dressing-table, flirting with the mirror, in a cloud of giggles and possibilities: surrounded by pots, and colours and smells, and wigs and masks of so many possible people. People who belong just to her and Mum. Always, as if it is a new idea, Mum discovers the ribbons Milka hates that will look just right on her hair: yellow and pink, which she ties into a bloom. Then, later, when Milka is alone, she finds she can't stop the surging, burning demon that, she is sure, will vomit out of her in church one Sunday.

Something must be wrong with her, she thinks. Life the way Mummy advertises it is so simple, everything is so smooth, perfumed and lubricated. What makes me want the other things?

"Milka! You sweet gel!"

For Professor Peprah, Milka smiles without restraint, the smile that looks like a quartered watermelon. She likes Professor Peprah, who seems to have swum herself, against the tide, into a beauty: glittery gold stars dot her black, black skin - making it seem as smooth and bottomless as night. Oh, and the purple lipstick! And the psychedelic caftans! Even her hair is eccentric; with strands as thick as wire, and streaked with lightning bolts of grey.

Auntie Peprah doesn't squeeze Milka into a tube, like toothpaste makers must do; or like Auntie Wambui, who balances a cup of tea on one knee, while sitting upright, knees together, with her big bum clenching to hold onto the chair while her mouth snaps up and down, like garden-shears that prune a many-tendriled hedge into one square and obedient truth.

According to Milka, there are two types of truth: feel-right truth, and I'm-telling-you-truth: Auntie Wambui is full of I'm-telling-you-truth.

Everybody laughs when Auntie Peprah sings in church, her voice is a loud, mirror-threatening echo. When it hits bottom, it can be a quite un-Catholic scraping of gravel. She likes to write letters to people when she is unhappy with some aspect of the sermon; or like when she wanted the blond Jesus picture removed from the church! People were so annoyed! They looked at each other, eyes appalled to wideness at the idea of a Peprah-black Jesus with dreadlocks. Jesus a Mau Mau! Or a Rasta! Auntie Peprah just laughed and called them 'neo-somethings', and said that Jesus was a... that turning upside-down word ... rev-olutionary!

Milka's Dad hates Auntie Peprah: women must be demure, decent - not loud, and Oh! Bwana she is ugleeee! Once she overheard him say,

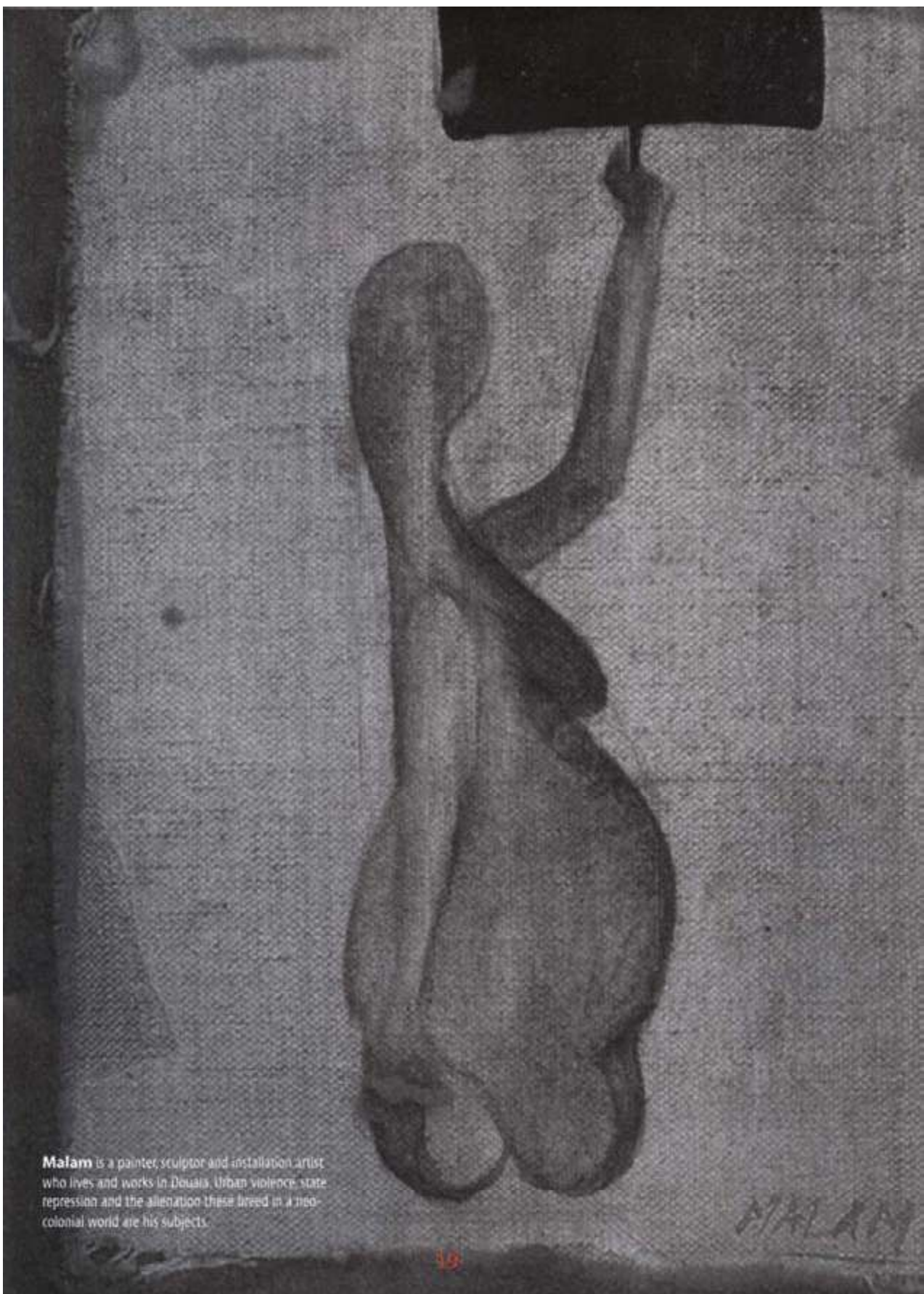
"Ai! Hell is a man in bed with Professor Peprah."

So Mum and Auntie Peprah meet in the hair-salon. Mum's fair skin, and dimpled face always seems indistinct next to Auntie Peprah. But Mum is the most beautiful woman in Nakuru. Everybody says that she looks like that woman in *Shaft in Africa*.

Mum peels away, and wakes up another person. They talk about poems, and books and dreams. It is as if Mum is now out of the world where she is spun into a sum of everybody else's needs.

Auntie Peprah starts,

"Where is dat silly gel! How long have you waited sweetheart? Can't you people start wid da chile first - eh? Hmmm! It smells here, too muoh burnt hair! Where is Ciku? I want lines! Now you don't go be pullin' my hair! Ha!



Malam is a painter, sculptor and installation artist who lives and works in Douala. Urban violence, state repression and the alienation these lived in a neo-colonial world are his subjects.

I should go to Accra every week to do my hair. You Kenyans you jus' like white tings. Mzungu Mzungu. Don't you worry gel. If you miss ice-cream at Zoom Zoom, I'll take you in my VW Koombi to Tipsy!"

The Cocoa-face lady looks sullen, stares at this stand-alone woman she cannot understand,

"But you Mama, why can't you get a husband. Eh? Always angry. Always, this, always that. Ah! Even trying to steal my man in Amigos. Do you think he can take you just because you talk ati-sistah, ati-brother? Ati-ma oppression, ati-ma slavery. Ai, those things are gone!"

Prof Peprah laughs,

"My gel, my sweet woman. Who are you outside your short skirts, and buttocks dat shake up and down, never sitting, always callin' a man? If you need a man to make you feel beautiful dat is your problem. Me, I just need a mirror."

The whole salon cracks up, and the Cocoa lady stands, shaking so much that two rollers fall from her hair,

"Ai! Ai! My dear - what mirror, and your face, which sucks up all light! You need ambi skin cream, and then you can talk to me. Where is your PHD when your breasts are aching for a man? All men they become so stupid when I rhumba that I need no PHD!"

Prof. Peprah eyes gleam,

"Sweet little gel, I need no PHD to see you live your life like an itch dat is needin' to be scratched. Us Ga women, our men like us strong, and intelligent, en' we fight in bed, en' we love in bed. How are you different from a cat? Being called, pussy, pussy - and saying nothing but porrrr."

Milka is all hot and bothered. This explosion of grown-up things is disturbing, and the Cocoa lady is now wielding the hot comb, and her curls unravelling in her anger. Mavis comes between them, and Mama chooses just now to come in.

On their way out, Milka laughs and tells Aunt Peprah,

"He! You really got her there Auntie!"

Mama looks fireworks at her.

In a few minutes they are in Aunt Peprah's Koombi going to buy ice cream, and Milka is silent, and Auntie huffs and puffs, and Mum calms her down.

"But Prof, why do you bother to talk to these low class girls - eh? She is beneath you! Why did you go to Amigos alone anyway? Dr. Kamau was really wanted to take you. He called, and called. He loved your poems - even the one about - you know those things."

Prof Peprah laughs, "Ha! Maybe that is why he wanted to meet me in Amigos? To find out

about my grasping mouth / between my legs/ ruling me?"

Mum gasps, "Davinia Efua Peprah!"

Auntie Peprah just laughs, turns to Milka and says, "Hal You gels should not see such things, but you are now a woman eh? I can see those breasts. Ha! Women, we just fight and fight, and never become sisters."

Milka does not reply. She is thinking, thank God we've left with my hair like this, so Mum can plait me matutas tonight, and I'll look just like I want this week. And Mum now doesn't know what to say to me, so she'll do what I say. And, Mrs. Peprah, maybe she was just like me when she was young. Not one of the pretty ones, that's why she got so angry. Maybe she made herself beautiful, you know, for her. Is she really called Daninia?

Lately, it is as if she has been sliding in oil. That's it! Sliding in a smooth cylindrical tunnel coated with oil. Other tunnels branch out of it, other options she often stumbles into and has to hold the edge tight, or she'll slide down the chute into a person she cannot control. The Cocoa lady is one tunnel, free to purr and question nothing. Then there is Mrs. Peprah, bristling at every touch, using her mind to blast all opposition.

As they are about to take the turn into the supermarket, Milka looks at her mother in the front seat, laughing like tinkling glasses in a film. A thought freezes in her mind, as shocking and shrill as glass breaking.

She could never be her mother.

Never have all those degrees, more than Daddy, and be so bound in what the Nuns taught her in school, so lost in other people's aspirations, so bound by being beautiful.

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