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## A Love Letter to My Little Girl

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## CHAPTER 1.

### A LOVE LETTER TO MY LITTLE GIRL

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MELISSA LEAYM-FERNANDEZ

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Love is a real power. It can be shown by family members who want you to succeed in healthy ways, instructors who are passionate for their work, and the care you give yourself—care for yourself during your graduate experiences.
- Creativity helps the brain to be healthy and strong. Enact creativity in your life by artistic expressions, art making, or—for the super intimidated—journaling your thoughts/ideas/feelings to strengthen your brain.
- Gratitude is a gift to be shared. Send a handwritten note to two folks who have shared their love and who care for you personally or who have shared a passion/professional love of their work with you to inspire your own research and education. In those notes, express how their care has impacted your life.
- Emotional content can be debilitating. Many people have inexplicable feelings or emotional content made raw during graduate learning experiences. Finding healthy ways to vent the emotions such as through working out, a wicked game of spoons, or uplifting social experiences is a factor of support as you work to complete your degree; don't ignore this support.

My dearest and most beloved,

October 2021

As I sit and write to you, I must admit, I have mixed emotions. I recall the days you explored the world, catching tadpoles in the overflow of the small lake near your home, climbing trees, drawing, and reading with such deep enthusiasm for life (Note to self:<sup>1</sup> read Christopher Uhl to understand the value of learning

1. *Note to self*: comments are placed throughout the paper inviting the reader to read resources dealing with various life experience, realities, and truths that may be unknown to them. The suggested readings all present opportunities to

as if life matters). You carried a joy of living that vibrantly touched everyone. Constantly inquisitive, you would slip away from supervising family members to hide and watch people, earning the nickname “Slippery” from your maternal grandmother, Veronica. You lived in poverty but were so unaware as I could see and feel the love that filled your life. Your mother was single, having only a high school education but carrying an awareness of how women were/are treated in life (Note to self: bell hooks explains how women and non-White, heterosexual, homogenous folks are treated by patriarchy<sup>2</sup>). Your father left her—as you have grey eyes and your mother hazel and your father brown, he believed you were not his child. You were born out of wedlock to a sexually promiscuous man who did not have familial permission to wed as a native Sri Lankan, and he used this weak excuse to spurn your mother, leaving her to raise you alone (Note to self: read Ming Fang He). Even though you only knew five things about him as a child, you flourished, bouncing about absorbing information and constantly being creative despite the heartache and pain you endured.

Throughout my letter to you, as I reminisce and encourage, I am going to suggest some texts that you may want to read, and these are seen as *Notes to self*. Some readings may not be accessible until you are quite a bit older, or when you are ready to embrace change, and others will change your life forever and you will need to read now. I encourage you to always look at the good in others and look at people with asset-based thinking, recognizing we all have problems and weaknesses, but we all have strengths and beauty within and to offer.

As a mix race female child living in poverty with a single parent, you unfortunately were to learn too early your body’s lack of value and the accentuation of feeling in-between at a very young age (Note to self: read *Caste* by Isabella Wilkerson). You were sexually abused multiple times by a babysitter (Note to self: Roxane Gay’s *Hunger* may help one process such experiences), not even understanding what he was doing to your little body. Later, you experienced a violent sexual assault by the “neighborhood pal,” the white hegemonic, privileged man who ended your childhood, acting as if he had a right to abuse your body (Note to self: Read Roxane Gay’s *Dispatches from Rape Culture*). Your life was thrust into immediate chaos, devastation, and severe pain at age eleven (Note to self: Bettina Love’s *We Want to do More Than Survive* will help you be a better graduate instructor too as you work to understand and enact educational freedoms). You would later find many who you thought were friends turn against you with their entire families. You would be at the mercy of teachers and principals who would ignore your needs and facilitate revictimization for years (Note to Self: Karen Keifer-Boyd’s *Including Difference* can share how educators ignore children as they learn, which may lead to diverse learners in higher educational settings). You would feel the rejection of your own brother who called you a *liar* and a *bitch* for disrupting the friendship he had with the assailant’s son (Note to self: Gina Siciliano illustrates that this patriarchal behavior is not new and is expected and accepted socially by boys and

gain further knowledge in graduate teaching experiences facilitating stronger understandings towards students and learning challenges.

2. Patriarchy is global, systemic enactments that sexually oppress and gender discriminate—feminisms work to “end sexism, sexist exploitations, and oppression” (hooks, 2015, p. xii) in all the locations.

men and those who support them). You would learn anger, loneliness, sorrow, pain, fear, distrust, and, as a human being, the lie of your own worthlessness.

I recall your struggle with academics and revictimization after the assault. You went from a bouncing, academically successful student with A's and B's to a student that could barely function in the classroom. The dysfunctionality was of course compounded by uninterested teachers and administrators and that awful sixth grade teacher from hell who used to throw chalk, textbooks, and tissue boxes at you. I recall the day you told me how she threw chalk at you, hitting your cheek, causing a stinging pain, blaming you for your lack of self-monitoring at age 12 (Note to self: Eli Clare's work brings deeper understanding regarding stolen and reclaimed bodies while discussing disability and queerness). I recall the beautiful spring day it rained in the early morning, a year or so after the assault, and earthworms covered the path to the bus. The perpetrator's children were your peers and so filled with anger and hate against you and your undeniable truths. They threw earthworms at you, covering your body and hair with over 36 earthworms. You later picked them all off, gently, one by one, returning them to the ground, understanding they were faultless in the enactments of hate and had their own value, place, and purpose in life (Note to self: Fields & Basso enrich ones thinking on space and place). You learned that your words were hollow to many but not to your mother or grandmother, who grabbed your words, hearing the truth. You started learning to shift, re-learning how to function in various settings and finding new places to survive and later thrive (Note to self: Read Wanda Knight's *Entangle Social Realities* to better grasp *shifting*). Your mother and maternal grandmother would become your strongest advocates and one day you would learn you were never alone (Note to self: Lizzie Skurnick's *Pretty Bitches* exemplifies the power of a word and their potentially negative uses in your life).

Though I must admit at the time of the assault you learned about spiritual things, too. The spiritual knowledge seems to counterbalance your pain in some ways. Though young, you still embraced the lie regarding your lack of value for many years. As you started to learn about eternal truths and individual values human beings hold, you began to understand your purpose on the earth. I also recall you clinging to music. Music was a haven of support and safety<sup>3</sup>. You found music with uplifting, cheery, and fun lyrics—not music fanatically religious or even in a single genre but music to which you could sing, dance, and emotionally soar. You appreciate sounds from all over the world. Music built your spirit and soul, giving you comfort during many lonely days of your life, producing new ways to learn and appreciate life and living. You avoided numbing music as you were already numb in many ways. I recall you gravitating towards music that told a story, music that inspired dance and motion, and/or music that calmed your fears and gave messages of courage and hope.

You developed your own creativity (Note to self: Sharon Loudon illustrates various ways creative folks

3. My absolute favorites in no particular order: Tears for Fears (everything!), BTS' *Wings* and *Map of The Soul* (and really everything!), *Classic Yo-Yo Ma*, Queen's *Greatest Hits I & II*, Adele's *19*, *21*, and *25*, Beyonce's *Lemonade*, The B-52's *The B-52's & Cosmic Thing*, Black Violin's *Classically Trained*, The Cure's *Greatest Hits*, Robert Johnson's *The Gold Collection*, *Saturday's Warrior* soundtrack, Foster the People's *Torches*, Death Cab for Cutie's *Narrow Canyon*, The Hu's *The Gereg*, Marvel's *Shang-Chi* both soundtracks, *Handel: Water Music*, Joji's *Nectar*, *It's Ok to be Not OK* soundtrack, Lizzo's *Cuz I Love You*, G-dragon's *Coup D'Etat* and Big Bang's *Made*, Muse's *The Resistance*, Boy's *offonoff*, The Piano Guys' *The Piano Guys*, Rain's *It's Raining*, RM's *Mono*, Shakira's *Oral Fixation*, Steve Aoki's *Neon Future III*, *Khoobsurat* soundtrack, Susan Boyles' *I Dreamed a Dream*, Taylor Swift's *1989* and *Reputation*, Trombone Shorty's *Backatown*, *The Bride of Habaek* soundtrack, *Memories of the Alhambra* soundtrack, *Blacklist* soundtrack, *Despicable II* soundtrack, and *Ladies & Gentlemen: The best of George Michael*, and Nelly Futado's *Loose*. Let good music sustain you.

make and live bringing self-edifications alive), finding solace in making at such a young age. Drawing, watercolor painting, doing trendy 70's prefab ceramics, macramé, decoupage, sewing, decorating your room, candle making, and woodworking would all become your creative outlets and strengths. You could see the power of making as a child, and I am so glad you clung to your talents and passion for making. You may not have had the words to explain outcomes of being creative, but you instinctively knew there was/is power in making.

Yet unbeknownst to you at the time, you were actively engaged in your own healing—building new synapses in your brain, engaging your body kinesthetically, and developing enactments of self-care that would lead to your deeper understanding of true self-love and self-valuation (Note to self: Vero Cazot's gorgeously illustrated graphic novel is a must read!). Your small undirected acts of creativity helped your brain to gain health too. You did not know, nor would you for decades, that when you were sexually assaulted, the brutal act changed your brain along with the rest of your life. These changes in your brain would impact not only your learning but your physical health and that of your children (Note to self: Samira Soleimanpour brings attention to brain changes that are lifelong, and graduate teachers need to understand how). I remember you suffering with undiagnosed hypothyroidism for over ten years and being ignored by doctors as you lost chunks of hair and tried to function in a perpetual state of exhaustion. Who would know that this illness was a result of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) resulting in hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal attenuation? You would learn the ACEs you survived would impact not only your daily health but your later pregnancies. Having six pregnancies and three children, you will live outcomes of trauma for years, not even aware of the insidious lifelong impacts to your body. You may even have a child that faces health challenges as the result of what happened to your little girl body so many years ago (Note to self: Jing Sun et al. explains further how intergenerational trauma can impact ones' development).

I thought your mother was such an incredible woman for just loving you. Even when you ran away from home to escape revictimizations in your community and at school over and over, your mother just loved you and tried her best to help you, even in her own helplessness. You just went deeper into art making. It was a blanket of comfort for you, wasn't it?

I recall your painting skills in high school. Do you remember the album cover a senior asked you to paint of the *Scorpions* so he could turn it in for a grade? And the advanced painting class you were in as a freshman? I am so glad that painting became your solace. All through high school you were making art but not socially connected to anyone—always guarded and guarding. With all the high school cliques you remained aloof. Not part of the jocks, the princesses, the cheerleaders, the theater, the band, the stoners, or the math folks—you just bounced in and out of these groups—talking and watching. You started to realize how fiscally poor your family was and were at the butt of jokes and harassments, not able to wear trendy clothes or buy the latest gadgets. Living in modest housing, you saw and noted what others had and what you did not. Your mother taught you knowledge is power. Though you graduated high school with a 1.97 GPA you were determined learn. If only to spite that abusive, evil sixth grade teacher who told you not to bother with college as you would “only be taking the seat from someone who deserves to be there,” the opportunity to go to college fell into your life.

As a first-generation college attendee, you started at the local community college, figuring out how to fill out applications, financial aid forms, selecting courses, and surviving all alone. You failed some classes, learned to study, and found your place in the art department. You learned American Sign

Language and worked in that community college to have “foreign” languages changed to “second” languages. You started to find your voice as an advocate. You served as the Asian American Student Organization president, even when most members did not recognize your Asian-ness because, as a tan, grey-eyed Indo-American girl, you did not fit their stereotype of straight black hair, single lidded, deep-set brown eyes, and pale skin. In their ignorance, they too ignored the over 48 countries *in* Asia. As an undergraduate now at the university, you painted your first oil painting—a peanut M&M’s wrapper in deep toned mustard yellows and started to learn how to thrive.

Yet you still did not understand your true power. Still believing the lie that you were of little-to-no worth, you married a childhood sweetheart. Finding the relationship to be abusive, demeaning, and not the way you wished to spend your life, you realized your experiences as a human did/does not need to be full of pain. You divorced. Waking up one day, clearly knowing your worth—worth your weight in gold. I saw you transition earlier from victim to survivor and now again as survivor to thriver. You graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art in painting. You then returned to get a second Bachelor of Science in art education. Taking care of yourself, learning to learn, and learning to work, you returned to get a master’s in art education.

Not opposed to the institution of marriage but understanding that equity—real equity—is the core element in any equitable, love-filled, healthy relationship, you made a list of uncompromising qualities for your protentional partner and turned the process over to your Heavenly Parents. If you were meant to marry, you would meet a wonderful person and if not, you would continue living your best life. You met him a few years later at a New Year’s Eve party over a wicked game of Spoons<sup>4</sup>. You told him you were not interested in dating but if he wanted to come over while you cleaned the house in sweats and no make-up, he was more than welcome to hangout. You married in May.

I recall your work as an educator in the K-12 and college settings. You met learners of all ages and varieties. At one time you worked with the leprosy-effected in India. I bet you never thought your creativity would take you so far from home, did you? And who knew that leprosy impacts over 11 million lives in India today? Do you recall the photo you took of the little street boy following his father and picking his nose? You learned that children are children and parents are parents, no matter their place, no matter their age. Sometimes ones’ nose itches and only a finger can solve the issue. Sometimes parents, regardless of their circumstances, just want a better life for their children.

I recall you settling in to married life with the man that would turn out to be your biggest cheerleader, advocate, and defender while also being your best friend, lover, and confident. You would have three children and develop sustaining happiness because you have chosen happiness and self-worth over the alternatives. Despite the job you had teaching in a violent urban school district that was 14 million dollars in debt and phenomenally dysfunctional, you chose to work to make a difference. You could see how your own creativity helped yourself and you wanted to bring the arts to other kids who were hurting (Note to self: read Bettina Love again because the hurt doesn’t dissipate upon adulthood, and you may have students that are still hurting and need the wisdom of Love’s work). You learned how to write grants to get quality art supplies, teaching your students they were worth having German hand-pressed watercolor paper and pens that actually worked. Such lesson were/are so powerful to

4. Everyone should play spoons! Give 40 minutes a month to play with your best friends to laugh, argue, win, and lose together. For directions see <https://bicyclecards.com/how-to-play/spoons/>

you and to your students as reminders of human value and potential. You tossed out all that you knew about art education curriculum encompassing the dead, white, western male and developed new curriculums with feminisms and asset-based thinking at the core, giving student many choices. You learned and taught with your students a new canon with Elizabeth Keckley (sewing), Jean-Michael Basquiat (painting and graffiti), Harriet Powers and Faith Ringgold (storytelling and sewing), Alma Thomas (being a later-in-life blooming painter is just fine), Elizabeth Catlitt (printmaking), Edmonia Lewis and Augusta Savage (sculpture), Morrie Turner, (cartoons), James van Der Zee (photography), Dox Thrash, (drawing), Kehinde Wiley (painting), Deborah Willis (mix media), Romare Beardon (painting), Jacob Lawrence (painting), Lorna Simpson (mix media), Dave, the Potter (ceramics as a slave), and Thomas Day (furniture maker).

You taught students to take ownership of their own learning and you found once again joys of living that vibrantly touched everyone you knew as you designed a space where they created their own projects in tandem with your guidance, capturing the spark of learning and community service while starting to value themselves more. I recall your students faced real world challenges being homeless or parentless, in and out of incarceration, dealing with behavioral, social, and academic challenges but you saw yourself in them. Students who went without subject certified teachers and packed into classes capped at 41 students, compounding the (re)victimization many felt in school. No room to work on art, let alone breath, you did your best, some days just managing behaviors and personalities. Even the year you and students were pepper-sprayed in the school three times, and you just wanted to walk away, you persevered. I recall you sharing with anyone thinking they were having a bad day at work, “you are not having a bad day at work unless you have been maced [pepper sprayed]” to teach a definition of a real ‘bad day’ much more clearly.

I remember when teaching in such an environment started to take an emotional and physical toll on your body and your partner suggested you get your PhD so you could teach at the university level. I recall your search to find a doctoral program with an art education focus in your state and the disappointment you had when no strong programs could be found. Your partner suggested you make your search circle a bit bigger, and you were led to the number one program in the country. You applied and was accepted. You made the move to live on campus without your family as your partner knew that you had never been able to have the undergraduate experience living at home as commuter student. I am amazed at his ongoing supportive not only as you get your doctoral degree but in life. The choice to live on campus and to enter your program was one discussed over and over, and finally made by all the family members, not just one. Your first year was a bit brutal as I recall, you were alone, friendless and in a strange new space. The comforts of home and studio were long gone. But you found that your lived experiences had power and wisdom and you learned to write! (Note to self: Graff & Birkenstein is a great aide to improve one’s research writing and thus self-expression as a doctoral student).

These are the lessons I perceive you are learning as reinforcement toward old and new knowledges as you complete your doctoral degree. I am so glad that you know all people—young, old, trans, straight, gay, skinny, fat, kind, mean, bossy, instructive, princesses, down to earth folks, qualitative thinkers, and quantitative thinkers, those with light brown, dark brown or golden skin—*all of them* have *value and worth*. You and I may have days that we still do not clearly understand their worth, (I mean, who really likes hate-filled mean or bossy people, right?) but their worthiness remains,

nonetheless. Our job is to find and learn about our/their differences and our/their worth without hate, judgement, or scorn as we work to destroy patriarchal binaries of “us and them.” Our job is to seek understanding of people around the globe—understanding that maybe perceived as alien, painful, or difficult to comprehend (Note to self: Leta Hong Fincher’s *Betraying Big Brother* is a must read!). But one’s consciousness raising must be done in kind, gentle, and respectful methods or one needs to leave people the hell alone! Always do your own consciousness raising, never ask the token brown or black girl/boy/non-binary person in your classes—but *honestly learn for yourself on your own time*. If you don’t understand then you need to “use the Google” or call the local librarian and learn for yourself from 3-5 peer reviewed sources on any given topic that interest you. I know you have actively engaged with learning over the years, but many folks do not, and they expect everything to be hand-fed to their academic mouths and minds like bad little baby birds crying for food about race, class, and gender issues.

I am so glad that you no longer live in fear. This is a potent, healthy choice and I love this about you! Setting limitations for the work you do, the research you engage with, and your social time is healthy. If you are paid a stipend to work 20 hours, document each moment and work the 20 hours, not one moment more! You are not slave-like laborists, though as a grad student you may feel this way, underfed, exhausted, underpaid, and work-never-ending. But remember, you are not. The challenges of completing a doctoral degree are unlike anything you have ever experienced, and you must leave fear at the door...or in a box far away and forget about it. Remember, “*Fear is the mind killer*” (Note to self: Frank Herbert’s work remains a reminder and escapist body of work that is classic, deep, and extraordinary) let your fear pass through you, as Paul Atreides cites in *Dune*. You were chosen to be in your program because you have demonstrated you hold what is needed to complete your degree. Own the experiences you are having but leave fear out of the equation. Imposter syndrome is a real thing! Learn about it so you have data-based fuel to fight your fear (Note to self: read Shanna Slank’s work when you feel like you don’t deserve the academic opportunities you have). You may have days that you wonder, “what the hell am I doing here!? What have I done to myself?!” and I think this is very normal and there is a reason there is less than 2% of the world’s population that hold doctoral degrees. Doctoral programs have a severely high learning curve, right? Like straight up! But you have what you need to be successful, so leave fear at the door and move forward in self-trust and faith, believing in the unseen truths all around you.

I find that you are making time for fun and love. Not a drug-saturated-drunken-sexed-up-weekend(s) of blurred memories but fun and love that allows you to have deep, diaphragmic laughter. A laughter that soothes the soul and recharges friendships is healthy. If you are not, can I again suggest 40-minute game of Spoons with at least 7 pals you know? It’s a great brain break and who knows? You may find research solutions, find elusive answers and/or find a better mental place to accomplish your work. I know you like to run, bike, do yoga, walk, and weightlift—all are simple activities that recharge the brain, releasing endorphins and encouraging brain wellness. Talk to those you love and laugh together. Make and take time and to have micro-sustaining moments of love in your life. If that means just talking on the phone to hear his voice, to cry, to listen, to share, to love—do it! Talk to you lover every day. But remember, love is not sex, though sex is fine, great, and well, in the right time and place, bear in mind (and I know you will!) sex is the icing of life, not the cake. Deepen or sustain those relationships that require the development of true love. Love has more places and roles beyond that of the romantic and sexual, though both are fun. Find these roles, embrace these roles. I know you won’t



have a lot of time to develop these roles as you work on this degree, but moments count in our lives, use them.

I love that you are making time to be creative daily (Note to self: you will develop a website, [www.elephantworkstudio.com](http://www.elephantworkstudio.com) and page, *elephantpainter5*, on Instagram) through art making or writing, you create constantly. Some may not believe in the power of creativity. Feeling that any creative genes held at birth were beat out of them as children. But simple acts of creativity strengthen the brain, calm the soul, and act as a simple diversion. Even if you are only doodling in a blank page book, keep making your own marks and color them in later. It's amazing you are able to paint, draw, sew, and wood burn in that tiny space on campus. I love that you share your talents, giving away painted rocks or the small canvases you make. Giving of yourself is your secret superpower. Just as when you cry, tears are your superpower too.

I like that you have emotional outlets, crying or laughing as needed. Holding in emotional content is stupid. Big boys should cry and be strong like women! Why is there a stereotype that demeans, shames, and sees as weak those that cry? I have never seen more male actors cry than when watching South Korean television. Watching a great emotionally charged show like the South Korean series, *초콜릿*, written by Lee Kyung-hee, and opening to emotional vulnerability in the safety of our living rooms to have a good cry can build empathy and be cathartic. Encouraging not only yourself and your students to develop healthy emotional expression is not only critical to our lives as graduate students but our lifelong empowerments. Sometimes when I share my life experiences I cry. I used to apologize but now know I live in an unruly body (Note to self: read Roxane Gay again!) and my body cries when it wants to, a uncontrollable bodily response to the trauma experienced, why the hell should I apologize? What stops us from releasing the stress through tears? Why is it we fear the liberation of emotion? Oh, do you recall that series of sculptures you made as an undergraduate? You collected a variety of chipped fine china and secondhand tableware and learned to shatter them, hammering them over and over till you had the shapes you wanted. Then you reassembled them into those sharp, dangerous, intricately constructed forms. Those pieces were so violent and interesting—I recall the deep cut on your finger and the scar afterwards from placing a final piece in the teapot and how excited you were to have finished the series. I think this was such a cathartic process for you. Find ways to continue release pent up emotions to keep healthy.

I love that you are a late bloomer in life. You always said you wanted to be like Alma Thomas who had her first solo exhibition at The Whitney Museum of American Art at age 81<sup>5</sup>. I hope you can find fame for your art before you turn 80 if you still seek that type of success. You could complete your doctoral degree in your 50s and look like you are in your 40s while acting like you are in your 30s—whatever that means to you. I love that you live with such vibrance and hope. I love the passion you hold for your life and your research passion shines through and positively impacts the lives of others. I think it's great when your students thank you for making a class interesting, teaching a new skill that has real world applications, and/or share their appreciation of your excitement to teach. Age really is just a number. Let it sit in that far away box with fear.

5. My idol, Thomas, underrecognized African American woman artist was the first graduate of Howard University's art department in 1924 and the first Black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of Art in 1972 and a middle school art teacher for over 35 years, writes "through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man (*and I would add girls, boys, women and every other gender*)" (Gregory, 2020, parenthesis added). I love her connections between nature and her colors on her canvas. I will be like her when I grow up.

Remember, you are worth your weight in gold. You have all you need to finish your degree, but always keep in mind the value of people, kick fear out of your life, constantly raise your own consciousness, set your limits for wellness, be creative in some methods daily, and find and use healthy emotional outlets with regularity. Find joy, making the choice to be happy, and be passionate about your work and research. If you feel you are not a teacher, maybe you are not...yet. But you must grasp this truth, learning how to teach is important and skills can be developed. I, of course, know you are a great teacher as bell hooks is your idol and you know and practice feminist pedagogies resisting patriarchy in your classrooms—making all welcome, appreciating all forms of diversity.

You only have a short time left to complete your degree, work hard, play hard, and do your best to learn how to be the best instructor possible because before you know it you will be in the next season of your life and other priorities may encroach your life.

All my love,

M

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