

Aperture

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Aperture

by [carryokee](#)

Summary

Zach sees a photograph at a friend's art show that stirs up more than a few old memories.

Notes

So. This one sort of...got away from me. It started off as a kernel of an idea, then turned into something else when I started typing. And to be honest, I'm not sure I'm completely happy with it. But if I keep staring at it, I'll keep fucking with it, and then it will never get posted. So here I am, throwing it out into the world. There, done.

A few things:

1. Second person POV. I understand it's not for everyone.
2. The title is a photography term. An aperture is something that lets in light, the meaning of which I hope will become clearer when you read it.
3. In my headcanon, Jeanne finally got her shit together and decided to be a good mom to Cody. So that's where he is, in case you're wondering.
4. The archive warning gives away the game a bit, but it couldn't be helped. All of it happened off-screen and is not described.
5. The ending, ugh. There isn't one, really. Sorry about that.
6. It's fiction, guys. Don't hate me (or Brian), please.

You don't expect to see it, not here of all places, three thousand miles and two years removed from where it was taken. But here it is, in crisp black and white, and you feel your breath catch, stop, as you stare at it.

It's you. It's you with him. You can't see your faces – just the curve of his chin, the stretch of your neck – but you'd know those bodies – his body – anywhere.

You want my hand where?

He'd laughed when he said it, smiling against your cheek as he slid his hand over your crotch. His other arm was across your chest, fingers curled around your shoulder. You remember the way his thumb rubbed the side of your neck, how you mirrored his embrace without thinking, fingers sliding between his.

It was an outtake, or it was supposed to be. Something about the lighting or the angle that Mara didn't like. Obviously, she'd changed her mind.

"Oh my god, you made it!"

The voice drags you out of your reverie and you turn just in time to brace yourself against the impact of Mara's body slamming into yours, the tips of her purple hair just reaching to your chin.

"When you said you were going to be in town and might stop by, I didn't really believe you," she says, pressing her cheek to your chest. "I mean, that's what everyone says, right?" She squeezes you harder. "But here you are!" She presses her nose to your shirt and inhales. "You still smell good." She inhales again.

You chuckle, waiting her out. She's always been a hugger.

She finally lets you go, taking a step back and looking up at you. "Your hair is longer. I like it." She tilts her head, studying you. "Something else is different, too."

You resist the urge to squirm under her scrutiny. The only other things that have changed about you aren't visible to the naked eye, but you wouldn't put it past her to see them anyway. Having a good eye is what makes her such a great photographer.

"Zach," she says softly. "How are—"

You're saved from the rest of the question you're so very sick of hearing by a kiss on your cheek. "Sorry about that," Brian says, slipping his phone into his pocket. "I've put it on mute for the rest of the day, I promise."

He looks at Mara, holding out his hand. "Hi, I'm Brian."

Her smile doesn't falter as she shakes his hand, but you didn't miss the look of surprise that widened her eyes when Brian kissed you. "Mara," she says. "The *artiste*." She rolls her eyes when she says it.

“Zach told me a lot about you,” Brian says. “Probably too much.” He starts grinning, dimples appearing through his beard. “Something about a can of spray paint, a campus fountain, and a bottle of tequila?”

Mara laughs uproariously. It’s the same laugh you remember. “That was totally Zach’s fault!”

“Bullshit,” you protest, smiling. “You brought the tequila.”

“You brought the paint!”

“You can’t blame that on me. I always had paint with me,” you say.

“He still does,” Brian says. “One day he’s going to get arrested for vandalism and I’m going to have to defend him to the judge with an impassioned plea about how street artists are really doing a public service.”

Mara gapes at him. “You’re a lawyer?”

Brian smiles. “Try not to hold it against me.”

“He’s a real Charles Darwin,” you drawl.

Brian rolls his eyes. “Zach likes to pretend he’s completely uninterested in my job.” He smirks at you. “And it’s Clarence Darrow, Picasso.”

You knew that. You just like fucking with him.

He looks over towards the photograph and you find yourself watching him look at it, seeing the exact moment he recognizes your body. His blue eyes flit to you, then back again, less than a second, but the corners of his mouth purse slightly. Maybe you’re imagining it. It feels a little weird all of a sudden, and you’re not sure why at first. Then it hits you: it feels like a betrayal, though you’re not sure who you’re betraying. You find yourself holding your breath again.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Mara says softly next to you. “I probably should’ve asked before I chose it for the show. But you both said I could use whichever one I wanted and...” Her voice trails off and Zach knows it’s because of Brian, because she didn’t expect you to be standing here with your new boyfriend looking at a photo of you standing naked with your ex-boyfriend.

“It’s okay,” you tell her, trying to smile. You can feel the insistent thump of your pulse in your throat. “Really. I just didn’t think you liked this one.”

She shrugs. “I didn’t at first. But the more I looked at, the more it, I don’t know, spoke to me, I guess. It’s your hands, I think. The way they look together.”

Brian’s hand slips around your forearm. “It’s beautiful,” he says, squeezing your arm as he smiles at Mara. “And I see what you mean about their hands. For me, though, I think it’s the contrast between the shadows and the light. It’s very sensual.”

Sensual. Jesus. You still remember the rest of that afternoon after the photo shoot ended. How the sky had opened up a block from your apartment, the two of you running for the entrance, two sets of flip flops squelching up four flights of stairs. How you kissed him the second the door was closed and asked him to fuck you. How he had, more than once, before leaving you to nap as he worked on his book.

I like the idea of complete strangers seeing how much I love you. That was what he'd said a couple days later, when you were looking through the proofs.

"It doesn't have to be awkward," Brian is saying now, pulling you back to the present. He laughs. "I know Zach didn't just spring into existence, fully formed, on the day we met."

"And where was that?" Mara asks, grateful for the reprieve.

"The DMV," you tell her. "I had lost my license and was getting it replaced."

"And I yelled, 'Hey, Zoolander! Show us your Blue Steel!' right when they were snapping his photo," Brian finishes.

You snort. "Which is why I'll look like a constipated frog on my official ID for the next seven years."

Mara laughs.

"It's not that bad," Brian says to her.

"The TSA guy looked at me like I was on some sort of watch list."

"He was checking you out," Brian says. He looks at Mara. "People are always checking him out. He just doesn't notice."

Mara grins. "There was a time when I harbored a secret fantasy involving me, Zach, and a darkroom." She sighs dramatically. "Sadly, the only time I ever had Zach alone in a darkroom was when I was developing his picture."

You're now officially uncomfortable. "Can we please change the subject?"

Brian lowers his voice, stage whispering to Mara, "Zach's always embarrassed to learn that other people find him attractive."

"Right now I'm embarrassed that I ever let either one of you see me naked," you say. You meet Brian's eyes. "There's a strong possibility it may never happen again."

He laughs and leans in, brushing his lips against yours. Remembering where you're standing, what you're standing in front of, you make a conscious effort to kiss him back and not pull away. You immediately feel stupid. He's not here, he can't see you. And even if he was, well. He's not. End of story.

Mara gets pulled away by another friend, waving her apologies as she disappears into the crowd, and suddenly you're alone with Brian and this memory from your life before you met

him. You wish it didn't make you feel like this, shaky and uncertain. You wish it didn't curl up behind your sternum and sit there like a bubble, blocking your breath.

You wish you could be anywhere but here.

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You meet Mara for drinks later and when Brian goes to get another round, she swoops in, seizing your hand and blurting out what you can only imagine has been burning a hole in her tongue since you saw her at the gallery.

"Fuck, Zach! Why didn't you tell me you had a new boyfriend?"

You're not sure how to respond. Your initial reaction is annoyance, to be honest. What the fuck? you want to say to her. I didn't realize I was supposed to mass text my entire contact list whenever something changed in my life.

"I mean, *jeez*. If I had known you were bringing a new guy, I wouldn't have displayed that photo. I mean, I love it to pieces and I don't know how many people have asked me about it because you two together like that are just *that* gorgeous to look at, but I would've used a different one. For you, I would've."

You don't realize your eyes are closed until she squeezes your hand and asks in a small voice, "Zach?"

She's staring at you. Her eyes are green. You'd forgotten that.

"I'm okay," you say to her unspoken question. She keeps staring. "I swear."

She smirks like she doesn't believe you, but she doesn't press. "How long—"

"Fifteen months next week," you say, cutting her off. Then it dawns on you that you may have just answered a question she wasn't going to ask. You can't believe you just blurted it out like that. You thought you'd finally stopped marking time so precisely, stopped categorizing your life into Before and After.

She eyes you again quietly, and you're reminded of that time at CalArts when the two of you celebrated the end of midterms by drinking Kamikaze shots and betting who could go longer without blinking.

"Your show was amazing, Mar," you say to her now. "I'm so proud of you."

She holds your gaze a few seconds longer, then releases your hand and sits back. "Thank you," she says. "Not bad for a chick who used to take polaroids of expired parking meters as some sort of obscure political statement." She laughs at herself. "What was I trying to say with those again?"

You smile. "Something profoundly existential, I'm sure."

She laughs again. "Probably more like a giant fuck you for all those parking tickets."

Brian returns, walking carefully to avoid spilling any of the contents of the three glasses he holds between his hands. He sets them down on the table and distributes them, sliding a beer in front of you as he reclaims his seat beside you. You like the warm press of him against your body and lean against him a little.

“What did I miss?” he asks, looking back and forth between you.

“Zach here was just begging me to go to bed with him,” Mara says, and you groan, letting your head fall back.

“Is that so?” Brian says, nudging you with his elbow before leaning over and pressing his mouth to your ear. “Can I watch?”

Mara’s laughter tinkles brightly and you turn your head to look at him. He’s looking back at you warmly, his hand on your knee, and it dawns on you, not for the first time, that he deserves better than you. You should tell him that right now, but the words won’t come.

You grin crookedly at him instead. “Sure.”

He tilts his head to match the angle of yours and leans in to kiss you. Your eyes fall closed at the touch of his lips and you let yourself enjoy it for a moment before kissing him back slowly. He’s a good kisser. It took you a while to get used to his beard, but you’ve grown to like the scratch of it against your skin. You touch your fingertips to it, feel him hum against your lips at the touch.

“I hate you both so much right now,” Mara says.

You’re both laughing when you break the kiss, turning your eyes to look at her. She’s smirking at you over her drink, crunching an ice cube between her molars. Her eyes dart back and forth between both of you before settling on Brian.

“I’m going home,” she says, taking one last sip from her drink before sliding from the booth. “I promised Nigel a blowjob tonight and the clock is ticking.” She winks.

That startles a laugh from Brian. “Please tell me Nigel is your boyfriend.”

“He wishes,” she says, grinning. She brushes her lips against Brian’s cheek, then tucks her nose behind his ear and inhales deeply.

Brian leans away from her and the look he gives you makes you laugh. You just shrug. “She’s a sniffer,” you tell him.

She leans across Brian and you meet her halfway. “He smells awesome,” she whispers and kisses your cheek. “You should keep him.”

“I know,” you say, kissing her cheek in return. She meets your eyes for a long, silent moment before turning and walking away.

She remembers him. Remembers you with him. The first time she ever met him, she said he smelled like sex.

He'd laughed at that. *There's a good reason for that*, he'd told her, meeting your eyes over the top of her head.

Brian shifts beside you. His glass is empty, but yours is still full. You're not sure how long you were gone. "Want to get out of here?" he asks.

You meet his eyes. "Yes," you say.

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You like that Brian's hairy, like the crisp silk of his body hair against your chest, under your palms, the texture of it rough against your tongue as you lick his nipples.

He moans and arches up, pressing against your mouth, his fingers in your hair. He's the reason you've let it grow, because he likes to run his fingers through it. The scratch of his fingernails against your scalp arouses you.

You could make him come like this, with your mouth on his skin and your hand on his cock. You've done it before. You could watch him fall apart beneath your hands, watch his orgasm shake out of him. You like the smell, the sound, the taste of his release. He'd return the favor with his mouth on your dick, a finger or two up your ass, rubbing slowly until you came all over yourself. Then you'd watch him lick a stripe through the slick on your belly before pulling him in for a kiss because you like the way you taste in his mouth.

But not tonight. Tonight you want him inside you. You've never done it this way with him before. He prefers to bottom and you've always been happy to oblige. It'll be 15 months next week since you let anyone fuck you. But you need this. There's an itch underneath your skin tonight, an ache at the very center of you, and you need something more. Something different. Something to remind you that it's okay to give yourself to someone else like this, that it doesn't mean that everything that came before no longer matters.

You ask him for what you need. He meets your eyes, looking for something. You don't blink, don't look away. He opens his mouth – maybe to ask you why now, why tonight – but just touches your cheek and nods instead. You watch his hands as he readies you, readies himself. They're steady. Yours are trembling.

You realize you're breathing with him, and his eyes are bright when he looks at you.

You realize how much you've taken from him, how little you've given back. But he's still here. He's right here, with you.

You realize you don't deserve him, but you want to.

When he's inside you, you don't close your eyes.

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You're sitting on the balcony in your boxer shorts, your bare feet pressed against the concrete. It's gritty with sand and cold in that way it only gets at the beach. Brian had

laughed when you chose the beach for a vacation. After all, you live in LA. But when he asked where you wanted to go, this is where you chose.

And you know why you chose this place: Because it's where you came with his family all those summers ago. He hadn't been there, he'd had his own life, and it had been years before the summer you fell in love with him. You hadn't even known then that that could ever be a possibility. But this place reminded you of him anyway, in ways you couldn't explain if you tried. You'd been a part of his family before he was ever a part of you. Coming back here feels like full circle somehow.

The glass door slides open. "There you are," Brian says, his voice low in the darkness. You can feel his gaze on the side of your face. "Everything okay?"

You don't answer him, just look up and meet his eyes. "Sit with me? Please."

He hesitates a moment, then nods. "Be right back." He ducks inside, emerging a few seconds later with the duvet from the bed. He pushes the other chair close to yours and wraps it around you both, smiling when he sees your smirk. He grew up in Pennsylvania. You've seen pictures of him wearing shorts in the snow.

"I know, I know," he says. "But I'm cold. Sue me."

It's funny, you see, because he's a lawyer.

You share a comfortable silence, drawing your knees up and pulling the duvet closer around you. He reaches over, resting his hand on your thigh, his fingers pressing in lightly. He rubs his thumb across your skin and you feel it all the way to your toes. You're so conscious of him right now, hyperaware of the warmth of his body next to you. The sound of his quiet voice startles you.

"What is it?"

You look away, out towards the water. It's too dark to make out the horizon, but you know it's there, and that somewhere beyond it is home. Where you lived with him. Where he meant everything to you. Where Brian asked you out in the parking lot of the DMV and you decided for once to take another chance.

"Shaun." You push his name out into the breeze.

It's the first time you've said his name out loud in over a year. You're not sure why, really, except you kept feeling like you'd been allotted only so many times to say it and you didn't want to waste them. So you hoarded them like treasure, saving them for a time when there was no one else left to say his name for you.

Brian squeezes your leg and shifts next to you, his shoulder brushing yours. You look over at him. His hair's still a little mussed from your hands and the pillow and you like that he left it that way. You like that you can smell him on you, that if you leaned in a little closer, you could smell yourself on him.

“He’s the one in the photograph.” He’s not asking.

“Yes.” When Mara had first broached the subject of posing for her, you had been the reluctant one. Shaun had been the one to convince you.

“How long were you guys together?”

You smile. “That depends on which one of us you asked.”

He meets your eyes. “I’m asking you.”

“Three years, eight months, 15 days.”

The precision of your answer takes him aback a little, and he sits back in his seat, his hand sliding away from you to curl around the arm of the chair. You already miss the contact. He nods. “And if I asked him?”

You swallow involuntarily at that because here’s the thing: he can’t ask him.

“Add another 11 days to what I just told you,” you say roughly. Because here’s another thing: Shaun never stopped counting. All those days you spent apart that first summer because you couldn’t get the fuck out of your own way – he always counted those, too.

We’ve been together since the moment you kissed me on my parents’ doorstep. That was what he always said. And he was right. Those lost days had just been white noise.

Brian doesn’t say anything, just looks out at the water. It feels like he’s retreating, pulling farther away from you with each crashing wave, sliding through your fingers like water. You don’t want him to go, but you don’t know how to stop him.

“I loved him,” you say. You feel tears start to rise and grind your teeth against them. “I loved him every fucking day.” You look down at your lap and close your eyes, curling your fingers tighter in the duvet. “And then he died, and I—” You can’t say anymore because your throat is closing up, and you don’t have the words anyway. This is why you haven’t said his name.

You press your face to your knees and try to breathe, your eyes squeezed shut against the hot sting of tears. You don’t want to cry, not now. You never really cried about it before. Crying wouldn’t bring him back. It won’t bring him back now, either, but here you are with tears on your face, clogging your throat. You’re shaking with it. Fuck, you think. *Fuck.*

There’s a hand pressed against the back of your neck and fingers in your hair.

“I knew you were broken when I met you,” he says. The words are close. You can feel them against your skin. When you turn your face towards him, you can see he’s turned in his chair so he’s facing you. His mouth curves up a little at the corners. “It was your smile,” he adds. “It never seemed to reach your eyes.” He traces his thumb along the shell of your ear. “I took a chance and asked you out anyway, thinking you’d turn me down.” He smiles a little. “But you said yes. I couldn’t believe it.”

You wipe your tears on the duvet and rest the side of your face on your knees, looking at him. "If it makes you feel any better, I immediately regretted it." You give him a small smile.

He laughs. "I thought as much."

"I wanted to take it back, but a voice in my head said, 'Don't be an asshole.'"

"Whose voice?" he asks, grinning. "I'd like to thank them."

You smile wider. "Gabe's."

Brian groans, rolling his eyes. "On second thought, never mind. I'd never hear the end of it."

A beat passes. "Shaun was his brother," you say quietly. Saying it like that now, you can't believe you never told him. You've never told him a lot of things.

He just looks at you, pulling his hand away to wrap his arms around his knees. He leans forward until his lips just touch your skin, closing his eyes. "Oh, Zach," he breathes, kissing you softly.

"Do I still look broken to you?" you ask him after a moment. You always thought you were hiding it well.

He lifts his head. "Right now, or in general?" You can tell he's trying not to smile.

You sit up, meeting his gaze with a smirk. "I can't believe you're fucking with me right now."

He gives in and smiles, shaking his head. He reaches for you, pulling you close with a hand on the back of your neck. You don't resist, breathing out when your forehead touches his. "I think you're beautiful," he whispers. "I think you're brave." He pulls back, tilting your face up to meet his eyes. "I think – no, I *know* – I love you."

It's the first time he's said those words to you. You hope it's not the last.

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The first time you flew anywhere with Shaun was during a trip to Seattle. You'd wanted to drive, enticing him with promises of snacks and car sex.

I do love snacks, he'd deadpanned. *But no*.

So you'd flown instead, spending nearly the entire flight holding the baby daughter of the woman sitting next to you because the only time she seemed to stop crying was when she was in your arms.

I gotta say, Shaun had whispered into your ear, *I totally get where she's coming from. I'm pretty happy when I'm in your arms, too*.

You'd blushed so hard, you worried the sudden flush of heat would wake the baby.

Now you're waiting at the gate for your boarding group to be called. Brian's beside you, checking his email on his phone, periodically making derisive noises at whatever he's reading.

"Problems?" you ask.

"Tell me," he says, looking up from his phone. "Do you think I'm qualified to be anything besides a lawyer?"

You give him a careful once over. "Hand model?"

He flips you off, smirking.

You grab his hand, inspecting it closely. "Very nice," you say. "I think you have a bright future ahead of you." Then you lick the pad of his finger.

He yanks his hand back, wiping his finger on his jeans. "Gross," he says, and you laugh. It's never ceased to amuse you that he has no problem putting his fingers *inside* you, but saliva grosses him out.

He goes back to his phone and you spend the rest of your time people watching. Shaun told you once that he got most of his character ideas from watching other people and dreaming up backstories for them. You decide to try it for yourself.

You nudge Brian. "You see that guy over there?"

He follows where you're discreetly pointing. "The one in the cowboy hat?"

"The one next to him. The one who keeps biting his nails." He's tall and slim, with torn board shorts, a Mickey Mouse t-shirt, and a man bun. He keeps fidgeting, his eyes darting back and forth from the window to the guy in the cowboy hat.

Brian side-eyes you. "What about him?"

"I think he's undercover."

He snorts. "Under the influence, maybe."

"No, no," you say, meeting his eyes. "The fidgetiness is part of his cover. He's DEA. And he's trailing the guy in the cowboy hat because he's a suspected drug dealer from Texas and Man Bun thinks he's smuggling smack in his suitcase."

He doesn't say anything for a long moment, his blue eyes scanning your face. Then a slow smile curves across his lips. "And Cowboy Hat doesn't suspect a thing, because who the hell would ever think a guy with a man bun would work for the DEA?"

You grin back at him. "Exactly. But little does he know, Man Bun knows seventeen different kinds of martial arts, including that Israeli kung fu."

"Israeli kung fu?" Brian's eyes are laughing at you. "You mean Krav Maga?"

“Whatever,” you say. “Dude’s lethal, is what I’m saying.”

He laughs out loud now. “Can he shoot lasers from his eyes like Scott Summers?”

You roll your eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. Do you see him wearing sunglasses?” You give him an exasperated look.

He leans in and kisses you. “You’re kind of insane, you know that?” He puts his lips to your ear. “It’s kind of hot.”

Turns out Man Bun is in the same boarding group as you, and the two of you end up in line behind him.

You inhale deeply and stifle a laugh. Brian bumps your shoulder and when you look over at him, you can tell by the look on his face that he smells it, too. Man Bun is a pothead, apparently. And the irony of a secret undercover DEA agent smelling like weed is just too much. You both burst out laughing.

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You’re in the window seat, futzing around on your phone before the flight attendant tells you to turn it off. Brian’s in the aisle helping an old woman stow her bag in the overhead compartment. You’re flipping through your photo albums, trying to find the one with the photo you want to show Brian, when your thumb accidentally taps open a different album. You haven’t opened it in months. Not since Brian, really.

Two dozen mini images of Shaun stare back at you.

It freezes you, panic clawing at the back of your throat. He looks different than you remember. The same, but different, and you’re suddenly afraid you’re forgetting him, that his details are becoming hazy.

Brian sinks into the seat beside you. You barely register the press of his shoulder against yours as your thumb hovers over the screen. Your pulse is thumping so high in your throat, you can almost taste it.

“...you think?”

You have no idea what Brian just asked you. You turn your head to look at him, and for a second you don’t see him. Then your eyes suddenly focus and you see that he’s gone very still. His eyes are on the phone in your hand.

You follow his gaze, tapping on the first photo with your thumb. The screen fills with a photo of Shaun at the beach, three days before you lost him. He’s wearing those mirrored aviator shades you hated because every photo you took when he wore them had two little yous reflected in them.

I only have eyes for you anyway, babe. How you’d rolled your eyes at that one.

You hold out the phone to Brian and your hand is only shaking a little. It's not the photo you meant to show him, of course, but it's time he saw it anyway.

"This is Shaun."

He looks up at you, then back at the phone. He wipes his hands on his jeans before taking it and the action surprises you a little. It never occurred to you that he might be as nervous to look at them as you are to share them.

He studies the photo until the screen goes black, then wakes it up again, tapping in your code – 2639 (CODY). You can't tell what he's thinking from his face – his lawyer face, you call it – and it worries you a little. He moves his thumb to swipe to the next photo, but stops, looking up to meet your eyes.

"Can I?" he asks.

You nod before you can change your mind.

He settles back in his seat flipping slowly through the photos. You watch him for the first few, reliving snapshots of your life with Shaun in reverse order, before you can't take it anymore and turn your face to the window.

You feel his hand grasp yours, his fingers slipping between your own, curling warmly around your knuckles. He squeezes it, holding the phone towards you.

"Tell me about this one."

When you look at the photo in question, you laugh in spite of yourself.

"It was Shaun's birthday," you say. "Gabe decided to surprise him by jumping out of a cake dressed like a stripper. A female stripper." You rub the palm of your free hand against your jeans to dry it. "It didn't go as planned." The memory of it makes you smile.

When you tear your eyes from the photo to meet Brian's gaze, you see he's smiling back.

The End

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