

## TALKING TO BIRDS

*Lee W. Sang*

I had no choice but to put my faith in Amelia, so I sent her into Reny's Department Store to get supplies instead of me. The hair at the nape of her neck wasn't stringy from sweat like mine. When she removed her glasses and pulled down her braids, she looked like an entirely different kid than the one pictured in the media. She had drawn some grey freckles on her face with a pencil, the wrong color if you looked closely, but from a distance, it transformed her look completely. The news websites labeled Amelia as some poor special needs kid with limitations, but that was hogwash. This kid had no limitations. Amelia had a real knack for this sort of thing. But me, I was out of my depth.

I waited for her with the engine running and prayed my five o'clock shadow from the night before had progressed into full-fledged camouflage. The sun conure in the back had been imitating the sound of a squeaky door

hinge and flapping around its cage since Amelia left the van, which did little to soothe my nerves. At least the Amber alert had listed the wrong car. I had borrowed Preacher Will's van, and they hadn't connected him to me yet, so the world was still on the lookout for my Suburu Outback.

By the time Amelia headed back toward me with a victorious grin, my shirt was soaked with perspiration.

"Anyone bother you in there?" I said as she slid into the back seat.

"No, my Dad taught me to move like a ninja," she said.

She began to unpack her bag of purchases. Amelia had run out of her beloved origami paper, so she bought a pile of pastel Post-its to soothe her 11-year-old fingers. She also bought a warmer sweatshirt, a less distinct T-shirt, and a new pair of pants for her. For me, she found an old-fashioned paper map because we had turned off the GPS on my phone. Mirrored sunglasses, a green flannel shirt, a pair of binoculars, and a navy hat with a picture of a lobster that read, "Maine Est. 1820."

"I'm going incognito as a tourist?" I asked as I put it on my head.

She laughed, gave me a thumbs up, and used the new shirt to clean her glasses. As she scrubbed the last traces of dirt off her lenses, I noticed for the first time the resemblance to her mother. Amelia was my ex-girlfriend Nina's

daughter, yet I couldn't imagine how someone so cerebral could survive in Nina's house.

"You know I can take you home," I said.

"No. I need to go to where my dad died." She looked in the back of the van to check on the sun conure.

"We're all over the news now," I said.

"Don't worry. No one ever notices me." Amelia still rarely spoke, so when she did her words came out so shaky and soft I had to strain to hear it.

She grabbed my phone to read all about the search efforts. There were pictures of both of us—me in that ridiculous Hawaiian shirt my wife, Megan, had bought for me. I had only worn it once to the Bangor State Fair, just to prove to Megan that I loved her enough to wear it. Amelia in what looked to be a school picture, her fragile face against a faux sky background.

"Wow. You sound crazy," Amelia said as she scrolled through the news.

"Aren't we all?"

I read what they said about me in the news, and I didn't recognize the person they described. They spoke about me as if I were my mother, as if I pattered through life with the voice of Jesus whispering instructions in my sleep, but that was ridiculous. Jesus didn't tell me to take the girl. Up until the

week before, Jesus and I had little to do with each other. But my mother used to say that no one knows who they are until God chooses to test them. I just never believed her.

## §

God's test of me began last Tuesday afternoon when Amelia walked into our bird shop while I was there. When my mother passed away a year ago, Megan and I inherited the Bird Perch, one of the largest birding stores in the Northeast. It is nestled between two art galleries on Congress Street in Portland, Maine, and thanks to Megan's charm, Trip Advisor listed our store as number 74 of the top things to do in Portland. When our city explodes with tourists on summer weekends, sightseers from all over New England stop in to put two quarters in our bird feed dispenser and allow our birds to eat out of their hands. If I'm lucky, they tell me all about their great aunt who had a parakeet that danced to Elvis or crapped on their head. Very few of them ever buy a bird.

I had wanted to sell the whole thing, the upstairs apartment and all, but the love of birds was the one and only thing Megan had in common with my mother. Once Megan makes up her mind we're going to do something, we do it. Before the estate was even settled, Megan learned all there was to know

about domesticated birds, I got a job with a marine carpentry outfit in downtown Portland, and we moved into the very apartment I spent my childhood trying to leave.

I had given Megan a break the day of Amelia's visit. Since Megan was pregnant, I hated every moment she came in contact with the birds. We had 54 different varieties of bird, which meant 54 different varieties of feces. I imagined *Chlamyphila*, *Campylobacter*, and an unlimited combination of bacterium seeping under Megan's latex gloves, so whenever I could, I relieved her from her duties at the store and cleaned as many cages as I could.

I knew Amelia visited the store regularly, but I rarely saw her myself. Before my mother died, she fixated on Amelia. She believed with every fearful prayer in her heart that the girl was cursed. With Amelia's dead father and her difficulty speaking, my mother felt the Lord was punishing the girl for the sins of her mother. "You should see the way she folds those papers. Like she's doing it for reasons only God understands," my mother once said.

When Megan took over the store, she told me the birds were helping the kid. From what I understood, Amelia wasn't autistic or mute or anything. She simply didn't speak much since her father had died. That made sense to me

because in the years I spent with Amelia's mother, I didn't want to talk much either.

When Amelia came in with her nanny that day, she didn't look up when the screech of the African greys in the window warned me of her arrival. She didn't flinch when the blue and gold macaws opened their beaks as if they might swallow her whole. She kept her head down and focused on a piece of blue origami paper, which she was adeptly folding corner by corner into what appeared to be a dolphin.

Amelia paid no attention to me as I approached. She rushed past all the other birds and zeroed in on the sun conure that sat alone in one of the smaller cages—the bird my mother had kept as her own.

I knew I couldn't blame a girl for the things her mother did, yet something still happened to me at the sight of Amelia. My skin still stretched a little on the bone, my heart pulsed a little too hard, and I had to remind myself that my mother's curses weren't real.

“Do you want to feed the cockatiels?” I asked. I could always entertain kids by making the cockatiels whistle.

Amelia shook her head no.

“She thinks the bird is trying to tell her something,” her nanny said, pointing to the sun conure.

“How can you tell?”

“Amelia communicates in her own way.”

Amelia cooed at the bird. She put her head level with the bird’s eyes, just as my mother used to do.

“I can take try to take him out, but this one’s not always so friendly,” I said.

She nodded her head yes again and pointed to her right arm.

“He’s friendly to you?”

She nodded.

The bird crawled right onto her arm. Amelia laughed, and the bird let out a calm, controlled honk.

She started singing to it in soft melodic whispers I could barely hear.

“You know my mother believed that you could find out anything you wanted from a bird, particularly this one.”

Amelia flashed a dimple on her left cheek. I continued speaking even though Amelia didn’t answer. When a kid doesn’t use words, they use so many other things to convey their thoughts. Amelia was comfortable. I could tell.

The media, Megan, and Nina would later argue otherwise, but in that moment, Amelia found a little happiness there with me.

My wife rushed into the store a few minutes later. She must have realized it was Amelia's regular time to visit and didn't consider me grown up enough to maintain my manners. The sun conure started squawking as soon as Megan arrived. The bird never liked Megan very much, and I had always assumed my mother had trained it that way.

Megan made her way to Amelia, bent over to touch her hair, and apologized for not being in the store earlier. Out of nowhere, Megan blurted out that she was expecting a baby. At only 12 weeks, we hadn't even told Megan's parents yet, but Megan told Nina's girl. As if that weren't bad enough, Megan then did the unthinkable—she invited Amelia to touch her stomach.

It's a strange thing, inheriting my mother's life. Not only did I take possession of her birds, her bedroom, and her brick façade, but somehow her superstitions still traveled through the air vents, and her delusions lingered in every corner. So, when Amelia's allegedly cursed hand came so close to my unborn child, my mother's warnings reverberated in my head. I did what any father-to-be would do. I protected my child, just in case.



“Don’t touch it!” I lunged forward and knocked Amelia’s hand out of the way. I never intended it to be a violent strike, but my arm hit hers with more force than I thought possible. Still, I didn’t make it in time. Amelia’s hands touched Megan before I could stop her.

From the way the nanny and Megan gasped, you’d think I did some real damage. I’m not a small man, and perhaps the girth of my bones blocked Amelia’s thin frame so it looked like more of a smack and less like a light tap. Megan turned and threw her body in front of the kid, as if I were a dangerous sort.

Amelia, on the other hand, brought her hands to her mouth and looked my way, not with fear, but with acknowledgement. “I’m sorry,” she said, as loud as she could muster. It was the first time I’d heard Amelia speak a clear word, yet she didn’t say it to me. She didn’t say it to Megan. She said it to the sun conure.

## §

My mother had acquired this sun conure sixteen years ago, just a few months after my breakup with Nina. I had made the mistake of telling my mother that Nina had an abortion. In the months that followed, the bulk of my mother’s communication with both Jesus and the sun conure revolved around my need for redemption. She bombarded me with gibberish about my

aborted child's spirit being trapped in this sun conure. My mother spoke to this bird incessantly. She named it Nicholas after my grandfather. At least a few times a week, she would place the bird on my shoulder and tell me to make my amends, lest the whole lot of us would be cursed.

She had countless reasons to back up her theory. Signs from God that couldn't be denied, yet, somehow, I always managed to deny them.

"See how he still has olive green on his breast? Those are usually replaced by more vibrant feathers by now," my mother had said. "And he's more destructive than the other sun conures."

I never responded with more than an eye roll. I had learned long ago not to argue with my mother's notion of Jesus.

"He cocks his head like your Uncle Joe," she said. "And he has a call and response way of communicating as if he were a human being sitting in a pew."

All my mother's faith funneled into this six-inch bird. She believed it served as her direct line to the heavens. And boy, were her heavens angry at me.

I thought she had lost her mind, but now Amelia spoke to that very same bird.

The next day, when Megan's hand travelled to the left side of her pelvis and she found the first traces of blood in her underwear, I knew immediately what was happening. We had been down this road twice before. I didn't focus on the sound of Megan's fear or the OB/GYN barking instructions to us over the phone. Instead, I spoke to my mother. I know the media magnified this, but who among us hasn't had a conversation or two with a dead person in a time of crisis?

My mother's memory led me downstairs to the sun conure. I brought its cage upstairs to our apartment. As Megan's body went through the familiar process of shedding our baby, the sun conure did all the things my mother said it would do. It cocked its head like it understood me. It screamed as if the earth was crumbling below us and attacked the branches in its cage. The whites of its eyes didn't appear as round anymore, but rather oval-shaped, almost like Nina's eyes.

"What do you want from me?" I asked the bird.

It shrieked back.

"Is there something I can do?"

It squawked. Call and response, just as my mother claimed it did. I tried to understand the sun conure, but in all my years growing up around birds, I

had never conjured up any love for them. I tried to raise the tone of my voice as Amelia had done the day before. I tried to speak to the bird as if it were indeed my child, but the bird stopped responding. He didn't bob up and down for me or communicate the way he did with Amelia. We spoke an entirely different language.

The only one who understood me was Megan, who had stopped crying long enough to crawl out of the darkness of our bedroom, her eyes swollen and face ashen, and to watch me kneeling by the cage.

"I promise I'll fix this," I said, motioning to the bird. "I'll make things right."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Gabe." Megan said. "Sometimes a bird is just a bird."

### §

Now, the media was making a big deal of Megan's miscarriage, like it was my breaking point, but I knew every statistic and probability surrounding fetal survival in the first trimester. Still, the timing was suspicious. The girl touched Megan, the bird screamed, and my wife's cramps started the next day. Now I never claimed this was the direct result of Amelia's cursed hands on my wife. Nor did I say it was the bird's fault. But no one could deny that the sun conure squawked like a jealous child whenever Megan walked by. No one could deny

that both my life and Nina's life had been far from lucky. Megan couldn't hold a child in her uterus and Nina's husband—Amelia's father— had drowned at Birch Point Beach. It's tough to argue that a guy who grew up in a coastal town in central Maine would be stupid enough to drown at a serene pocket beach without God having a say in the matter. I never said that my mother had been right about her curse, but there was a boatload of evidence shouting at me that she may not have not been wrong.

### §

I called my mother's preacher, Will, the next day because I figured he'd know how to make the amends with God my mother had always begged me to make. He ran over to the bird store as soon as he heard the story. Will had been a couple of years older than me in school, and I used to get my weed from him back in the day. A few years after college, he walked into my mother's church with his head shaved smooth, his wiry beard tight to his face, and his clothes crisp. "I didn't want anything to stand between me and the Lord," he told me, rubbing his head.

Will chanted and whispered to the sun conure. At one point his torso jolted around, and I thought he might vomit on the cage.

"What the hell are you doing, man?" I asked.

“Sshhh,” Will said. “What was your kid’s name?”

I shrugged. “He never had a name. He was never born.”

“Well how’s a soul supposed to get some peace without a name?” Will said.

I had never thought about it like that. “So what do I do?”

Preacher Will muttered to the bird a little bit more before turning back to me. “I don’t know. It won’t talk to me,” he said. “You gotta ask the girl.”

### §

Amelia wasn’t hard to find. She lived with Nina in a nondescript yellow old Cape Cod in Rosemont Hill. As I approached the door, I braced myself for that feeling that washed over me when I saw Nina. I had grown accustomed to seeing her overly-processed hair popping up without notice in the farmer’s market, but I never had to endure the intimacy of entering her home. I never wished Nina harm, and I had sympathy for her with the dead husband and all. I simply wanted her happy without having to see her myself.

“I need to speak to Amelia,” I said, as Nina opened the door. Right away, I knew my approach was all wrong. I should have started with a greeting, perhaps a polite apology.

“You’re not coming near my daughter.” I could tell from her wide stance blocking the door that she knew about the incident at the bird store.

“I just need her to tell me what the bird wants.”

“How about you let me buy that damned bird from you so she doesn’t need to go in there anymore.” I could always gauge how angry Nina was by the depth of the wrinkle between her eyes.

“It’s not for sale.”

“It’s the only thing she speaks to, Gabe,” Nina said.

“It’s cursing us,” I said. “All of us.”

“You sound like your mother.”

“Is that so bad?”

Nina sighed. We had lived together for three years, and by the end of our relationship, all I heard was that sigh. Her face softened as she spoke to me in that annoying, controlled tone she used whenever we had a fight.

"It'll be good when you have a kid of your own so you can put this whole mess behind you," Nina said.

A mess. Like pencil shavings that overflow from the pencil sharpener.

“Megan lost the baby.”

Nina dropped her head a few inches. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Not much further along than ours would’ve been. It had little hands and all.”

“It’s been a lot of years, Gabe,” Nina said.

“I would have stepped up,” I said.

“You left,” she said. “You were gone.”

I did leave. For 22 days that I will pay for every day of my life. Three weeks and one day with my toes numb and my feet refusing to grip the floor under my feet. Nina told me she was pregnant, and the words pinned me down and banished me to my boyhood room. I only needed to get my head around it, to adjust to whatever life had in store for us, but I did come back. I would have married her. I would have spent my life with this woman who I had started to no longer love, even though she followed me around placing coasters under my beer bottles and conditioned her hair with olive oil and always smelled like the salad bar at Rosie’s Diner. I would have stayed with her, even though our bodies never fit together like they were supposed to and we bucked away from each other within half an hour of sleeping. I would have endured it all for my kid, but I was three weeks too late.

I don’t know how long Amelia stood on the stairs before she made a noise. Nina jumped back and leveled one arm in front of Amelia’s chest, making a clear barrier between Amelia and me. She forced me out the door with the other hand.



“I made you a frog,” Amelia said to me. Nina whipped her head around. Apparently, it wasn’t only the bird Amelia spoke to.

Amelia reached around her mother and held out the sweetest of origami frogs for me to take from her hands.

When I got outside, I examined the frog. It had a pointy nose and four uneven legs and a tail where a little blue ink had soaked through and caught my eye. I could see letters on it. I opened it up slowly, careful not to rip the paper.

*Meet me on the corner of Stephens and Crosby at 12:25 tomorrow. I know exactly what the bird wants.*

The media had it all wrong. The bird never told me to take the girl. Jesus never told me to take the girl. The girl told me to take the girl.

## §

I’ll never know why Amelia could speak to me when she couldn’t talk to others. I only know it was my own personal miracle. At first, it was just the niceties. She thanked me for helping her, thanked me for the clothing, and thanked me for understanding that she wouldn’t be free until we united the soul trapped in the sun conure with her father’s spirit. I never questioned what made her believe such a thing. She had a vision of where we were supposed to

go. My mother's angry heaven seemed to speak to Amelia too. All I could do was follow.

Amelia's sentences grew longer the more time we spent in the car. When I asked Amelia the reason, she said, "I don't know. Sometimes I can talk. Sometimes I can't."

"Do you want to be able to speak more?" I asked.

She shrugged. "At some point people stopped expecting me to answer them."

In that barely audible voice of hers, she told me stories of her father with the kind of exaggerated pride that only comes after a man's death. The dad she remembered could wrestle an alligator, leap over a tree, and belay up the side of Everest, if only he were alive. She reminisced about how he would pick her up and throw her four feet forward in the ocean. She thought he was joking around when he died, bobbing up and down with his hair in his eyes. She laughed at him in those final moments before his head slipped under the water.

"Do you think the bird can really talk to him?" I asked.

"I sure hope he can," she said. She continued to fold her papers while she spoke. The van slowly filled up with tiny paper animals: frogs, turtles, birds, dolphins, flowers, and a crane.

As soon as we exited Route 1, every driver we passed seemed to peer into the car and examine our faces. I pulled my hat down lower and told Amelia to crouch down in the car so no one could see her. When we reached that white wooden sign at the entrance to Birch Point Park and headed down the dirt road to the parking lot, Amelia returned to the comfort of her silence again.

Only one other car sat in the parking lot, a gold Dodge Dart. Luckily, I didn't see any other people around as I lifted the birdcage out of the back of the van. Amelia didn't say a word as we walked toward the shoreline. She had stopped folding her papers and crossed her arms against her chest to keep warm. The wind was starting to pick up, and the sky was starting to darken. In my rush to get the sun conure where Amelia felt it needed to be, I had never checked the weather.

I recognized the curve of the beach. This was the very view the newspapers had photographed at the time of Amelia's father's death. The beach was nothing like the crowded sandy beaches of southern Maine. The dark grey sand was grittier, the shoreline full of sharp rocks. Looking at the bay just then, with the shadows falling on the ocean and the white caps rushing toward the breakwater, I could easily imagine how a man could drown there. Perhaps

Amelia's father had a heart attack in the water or hit his head on a rock. Maybe that God of my mother's had nothing do with it after all.

I didn't object to Amelia's silence. It had to be hard for the kid to come back to this place, but the quiet didn't last. Amelia's shoulders started to shake at the same time I noticed a couple of grey-haired naturalists walking toward us, the kind who had probably walked that same shoreline every day for forty years. I tried to hide the sun conure, but there's no way to be discreet with a birdcage. The bird kept flapping around, and I attempted to shush it, as if the couple wouldn't see it if they couldn't hear it.

I asked Amelia to stand in front of me to block the birdcage, but once I broke the quiet, Amelia deteriorated into a full-fledged panic attack. Her breathing grew heavier with each inhale and a hollow noise escaped from deep in her chest. I thought to put my arm around her to soothe her, but decided against it. Could a grown man embrace a girl without crossing over the line to creepy?

Soon, Amelia stopped walking and collapsed cross-legged on the ground. Her tears broke loose with big mucous-filled snorts. I had no idea how to comfort her, so I put the birdcage down behind her and knelt next to her.

What we must have looked like as that older couple approached us. Amelia, shaking and scared. Me, unshaven and twitchy with nerves. My body always betrayed me in times when I needed it to cooperate the most. Even in the brisk, blowing air, I burned up from my forehead to the soft flesh of my arms. The woman obviously noticed. She studied both of us before anyone spoke. I was certain she could tell Amelia wasn't my daughter. Maybe it was the size of me next to Amelia's tiny frame, or perhaps she noticed the point on Amelia's nose never could have come from the round bubble on mine.

"Looks like a storm's brewing," I said. My voice came out a little too rapid.

"A good time to pack it in," the man said. The woman hadn't stopped examining us. Her eyes had zeroed in on Amelia.

I put my arm on Amelia's back. I thought it would make me look more fatherly, but Amelia flinched.

The woman bent in front of Amelia. "Are you all right, honey?"

"She's fine," I said. "Just a little argument in the car."

"I'm asking her," the woman said to me.

Turning back toward Amelia, the woman asked, "Do you need help?"

Amelia didn't answer. Sometimes she could speak. Sometimes she couldn't. She just sat there dumbfounded, her eyes darting back and forth between me and the birdcage.

My mother used to tell me when in doubt, act confident and polite. I stood up, reached for Amelia's hand, helped her off the ground, picked up the birdcage and began walking away. "Enjoy the rest of your day," I said.

Another man would have turned back, left the girl for the authorities to find, and taken off over the border to Canada. I couldn't do that. I led Amelia to the ocean.

"We don't have to do this," I said to Amelia, looking at the threatening sky.

"If we don't, we'll be cursed forever. Mrs. Van Sant told me so."

"My mother?"

"The lady who used to own the bird store," Amelia said.

"The bird never told you where he wanted to go?"

"Not in actual words. But Mrs. Van Sant could talk to him. She told me that a baby's soul lived in the bird. That it wanted a dad like I had."

All along, I had been following the workings of my mother. During that car ride up the coast, I asked Amelia what music she liked, what books she

read, but I never asked her how she knew where the sun conure needed to go. My mother's fingerprints were as plain as the storm heading in from the west. I looked down at the bird. Its head wasn't cocked. There was no call and response. Without the store's florescent lights, the olive-green feathers on its breast appeared far less olive and more green, well in the range of normal. The sun conure was nothing but a bird.

Amelia explained how her dad was a bird lover and had frequented the Bird Perch for years. When he died, my mother had tracked down Amelia to let her know there was a bird who could communicate with her dad. Amelia, being a kid, believed her. Children cling on to that sort of thing. No one knew that better than I did. The only curse put on Amelia was cast singlehandedly by my mother's words.

"You know my mother said things sometimes that weren't real."

Amelia's cheeks dropped. "Does that mean there's no way to break the curse?"

"Of course there is," I told her. I no longer believed that to be true, but it no longer mattered what I believed. It only mattered what Amelia believed.

I knew this was God's test of me. I was the only one who understood. As a kid, I'd hide in my closet through every storm because the smallest streak of

lightening signaled that the Lord was furious at me. If I got bullied, the fist that struck me was God's messenger. If I hit a foul ball, my mother would tell me I hadn't prayed enough the week before. Each pimple I had as a teenager was a sure sign of God's fury. There was no end to my shortcomings before God.

I led Amelia over to the rocks framing the north end of the beach and placed the sun conure's cage on a flat piece of gray slate. I opened the wire door and let the sun conure climb onto my fingers on my left hand, cupping my right hand over its blazing yellow wings so it didn't fly too soon.

"Do you want to say something?" I said.

"Tell Dad I love him," Amelia said. She got down on one knee and started to coo. The bird wiggled its tongue in a way it had never done for me.

"I hope you finally get some peace," I said to the bird.

When Amelia indicated she was ready with a nod of the head, I placed the bird on her right palm. She threw the bird into the air with both hands. At that moment, I had surge of hope that there actually was a soul trapped in a sun conure that would fly to the Maine sky. It would float between the two dark clouds and join Amelia's father in some magical heaven. I imagined that



Amelia and I would witness all the love of the universe and we'd return to a world where little girls could speak and wives could conceive.

Unfortunately, the science of birds is the science of birds and I'd been in the business long enough to know better. The bird rose into the sky and majestically flew out toward the rocks on the North side. It rose past the point where the rocky breakfront ended, flew over a single-mast sailboat, and drifted to the point where the water grew choppiest and the waves switched direction. At about 500 yards away, so small we could only see it through the binoculars, its wings slowed, tired out like a marathoner on their last mile. After all, the bird had been in captivity for 16 years, never allowed to roam past the confines of the storefront or my mother's bedroom. The wind picked up and the bird headed back toward us. It descended lower and lower over the ocean until it was flush with the water.

"Fly, please just fly," Amelia said, her voice shaky and weak.

But the bird didn't fly. It hovered over the top of a wave for a few seconds before collapsing into it like a kid going for a swim. When that wave petered out, another wave came and covered its tiny body. We didn't see it again.

Amelia bit her lip as her eyes began to fill up again. "Do you think they're together?" she asked.

After all of that, Amelia still believed.

“Yes, it’s with your dad.”

Amelia wiped the tears from her face and laughed while crying, in the way that only a child can pull off. We sat down on the rocks together, captivated by the surf that had swallowed her father and, now, the sun conure. The wind grew so deafening that I could barely hear the sirens growing louder in the background, but for that moment, Amelia let her head fall to my shoulder and together, we watched the last sliver of the island in front of us disappear into the fog.

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