1 Secrecy in Adoption

We come to adoption today convinced that the more we know about our children's birth family, the better we will be able to support and guide them. We work hard at finding ways to support membership in their first family while firmly establishing them in our adoptive family. We see secrecy as somehow dishonest—and the children also see it that way, as the teens I interviewed told me.[1] They couldn't understand why their adoptive parents, chiefly their mothers, didn't tell them that they were adopted. It seemed a betrayal of their relationship. This is unlikely to happen now, but it used to be common. If your birth is hidden, then it must be shameful.

By trying to maintain secrecy, adoptive families can perpetrate denial and false narratives. We don't plan it that way; and we don't necessarily want it that way, but because of social agency practices and state and provincial laws, we can find ourselves telling awkward family stories that are fictional. We are real families and we deserve real stories.

Pre-1900s

It was not always possible to hide the act of adoption. In Native cultures, adoption by relatives was obvious and continues to be so today in many tribal communities.

"He's my cousin," an Inuit teen told me. "Actually, he's my brother but my aunt and uncle adopted him, so he's my cousin."

It was clear to her and to him. Nothing complicated there.

My own family, which is tribal and prolific (I have sixty first cousins), came from Scotland and has an ancient history of adoption. The head of our clan in the fourteenth century was an adopted son called "Young Mackinnon." He inherited a castle and a great amount of land in the Hebrides which, unfortunately for me and my cousins, was lost and is now a pile of rubble on a promontory. Adoption was part of clan life. In tribal societies, there was no secret about who the child was and where he or she had come from. There was a practical connection between mother and child. Someone had to breastfeed the child, so secrecy was unlikely.

If we had retained the clan system, adopted children would likely know who their birth parents were and how they came to be in their adoptive family. But the British legal system, which forms the basis of our North American law, did not recognize children's needs as important—they did, after all, send eight-year-olds into the mines. Both adopted and biological children had few rights. Children were often used as labour and beaten with impunity. Violence toward children was simply considered discipline.

For many years there was no legal adoption system, so "inconvenient" children landed in neighbouring homes, the families of relatives, or orphanages. The system of informal adoption (sometimes called "custom" adoption) occurs in some societies today and, while often practical, can be unnerving for adoptive families who fear birth parents might exert a legal right and "reclaim" the child. If enough social pressure is in place in a tribe or clan this will not happen, but the threat alone can be daunting.

In 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his book *Emile, or On Education*. Ironically, Rousseau placed all five of his children in orphanages where, in the conditions of those times, they surely died; he never raised any of them. He was one of the world's worst

hypocrites, but he was such a compelling writer that he became an expert in children's education. He professed that children were born "good"—a revolutionary idea contrary to the church's teaching that all were born "wicked."[2] As a result of his writings, people began to consider children, particularly orphans, as vulnerable members of society and in need of rescue.[3]

Some English philanthropic societies organized "care," the kind they thought appropriate, which would get orphans from the towns and lift the burden on the parish to feed and house them. The first documented boatload of orphans was sent from England to the New World of Richmond, Virginia, in 1618. Over the following 350 years, 150,000 children were transported to the colonies.[4] They were not always orphans; their parents had not always given consent; and they were not all adopted. Many were spirited away and used as servants and labourers.[5] Even when laws permitted it, few of these children were adopted. Their best interests were not served, and their origins were considered irrelevant.[6]

This was not true in all cases, and some adopted children were considered important members of society. Legal contracts were drawn up between biological and adoptive parents. Jane Austen's brother Edward, for example, was adopted at the age of fifteen by his wealthy aunt and uncle who had no heir and who seemed motivated by love and affection for the whole family.[7] His adoption secured him a position he would not have had otherwise in late-eighteenth century society; his birth parents were well-known and socially accepted—just not rich. His adoption would have been publically acknowledged. In Edward's case, wealth was added to respectability.

The poor were another matter. Canada was created in 1867 by a confederation of French, English, and Indigenous peoples in

part to prevent annexation by the US. It was a land of opportunity, especially for those from the British Isles. In the mid-nineteenth century, Maria Rye (English) and Annie McPherson (Scottish) set up a business transporting British orphans to Canada[8] and successfully ran a child-transportation business that netted them a tidy profit. When an inspector from the British government investigated their business in 1874, he found that while Rye and McPherson were motivated by Christian charity, they were also naïve. The children were often mistreated and, once placed, were abandoned by Rye and McPherson, who did not check up on them.

Collective public attitudes of philanthropy and care were often countered by individual tolerance of child abuse and maltreatment. Children were, generally, not considered socially valuable. Between 1870 and 1925, approximately twenty-five British organizations sent children to Canada. The background of those children, while not a secret, was not considered important or even documented. A child's history was whatever he or she remembered from the past.

Charles Loring Brace, a Protestant minister, was also in the business of transporting children, but he was apparently motivated by philanthropy. He helped to establish The Children's Aid Society of New York to improve life for children of the poor.[9] Between 1854 and 1929, The Children's Aid Society moved over 100,000 children—called orphans, but not necessarily so—from the streets of New York City to homes across the US. Some of the children were adopted into families, but many were simply used as child labour. The question was not whether to adopt but how hard they could work. There was no attempt to perpetuate secrecy about the child's beginnings, just the attitude that their original families were best forgotten. And since neither their first families nor The Children's Aid Society checked on them, some were mistreated.[10]

I have tried to imagine what the societal attitude toward

children must have been to allow cruelties to be condoned on such a scale. Tolerance of physical abuse was systemic. I can remember a time in my own early childhood when teachers, neighbours, and total strangers could smack a child without repercussions; children were considered half-savage and in need of discipline. There are still people who think hitting children is justified by the anger, frustration, or need for power felt by the adult. The difference is that today we aren't quite so willing to accept that behaviour as normal—or legal.

The British child migrant system took 500,000 children to Australia from the 1940s until the 1990s.[11] The horror stories these children told later of abuse at the hands of the religious Brothers and the adoptive families were sickening, and the Australian government issued a public apology to them in 2009.[12] The United Kingdom apologized to former child migrants and their families in 2010.[13] Canada refused to apologize,[14] although documented accounts of abuse of children from the migrant programs are public knowledge and a public shame.

Not everyone was a monster, of course. Many people were philanthropic and well-intentioned. In England, there were organizations such as the National Child Adoption Association, founded in 1917, that worked to provide the best homes for children and supported regulatory adoption laws. In the US the first such laws were passed in Massachusetts in 1851.[15] Slow to follow suit, Canada passed its first adoption law in Ontario in 1921,[16] and England passed its initial adoption law in 1926.[17] The laws varied in the rights and responsibilities they outlined, but by the 1930s most western countries were committed to legal and regulated placement of children and to keeping their origins a secret. The notion that a child's past and heredity were best forgotten meant that non-identifying information was passed on to both parties,

but it could be and sometimes was (as I found out in my research with teens) fictitious.

The Twentieth Century

1900–30

The use of infant formula became more available. Until the 1920s, the adoption of infants was not practical unless the family could find and afford a wet nurse. After the development of formula that was more nutritious, infants could be placed at birth into a family, and the family could pretend the child was born to them. The substitute child arrived in the family as if born to it, and the secrecy around the birth of an adopted child wormed its way into government and adoption agency policies.

Adoptive families sometimes pretended that the child was born to the parents. The mother discreetly retired to a "spa" for a few months and returned with a baby. Or the family did not discuss the child's origins at all, and consequently, others kept quiet about it. Secrecy around adoption came with the firmly held notion that the families of origin were of a lesser social class than adoptive families. Popular opinion held that illegitimate children were born only to the lower classes. Adoption implied illegitimacy, which meant lower-class, despite evidence to the contrary. People conveniently ignored the "early" babies and private adoptions of relatives in their own class. The strictures on early twentieth-century women to remain virgins until married required that illegitimate births be hidden to protect the mother's social standing. In order to hide "illegitimacy," the children had to be seen as both nameless and without family at birth. Secrecy and its accompanying emotional scarring became entrenched in the adoption process

The notion that an adopted child was either of a lower class

or tainted in some way by illegitimacy was strong enough to sway intelligent people and support social policy. In England, and to some extent in Commonwealth countries, social class was inherited and only legitimate blood children had a right to their class. As if raising pedigreed horses, society had to know the blood lines. To adopt a child from a lower class meant risking all the problems of the lower class, a view which has persisted with surprising tenacity to the present time. "Bad blood"—that is, the blood of the poor—seemed to carry moral weaknesses, so adoption needed to be hidden, particularly if the adoptee was not a relative.

In the US, the land of opportunity, where "every child can become President," that attitude should have been ridiculed as it was not consistent with the notion of equality. But American society did not repudiate it, and accepted the notion that adopted children were "lower class" for many years.

The purpose of adoption laws during the early part of the century was not simply to give adopted children the right to inherit and adoptive parents the right to give property to their adopted children, but also to provide a good home to the children. Permanent homes were necessary for a child's and adoptive family's sense of security. Adoption laws protected children from being picked up by biological families like pets that are boarded for a time. Because adoption was often a secret, adoptive parents looked for children who looked like them. Agencies in North America sought out children to "match" the adoptive parents; the needs of the adoptive parents were paramount.

The ongoing secrecy

By the 1930s and '40s in North America, identifying information about birth parents and adoptive parents was screened by governmental bureaucracy. Social workers became powerful gatekeepers.

The original notion of privacy and confidentiality around adoption served the idea that the child should be protected from being branded as illegitimate—a social stigma that was real and disenfranchising at the time. As well, confidentiality laws protected adoptive parents from being harassed or blackmailed by unscrupulous birth parents. There were very likely a few instances of this, but all birth parents were blocked from knowing where their children were placed. Psychologists, social workers, and others believed it was in the best interests of the children and adoptive parents to deny a child's birth parents, family, and situation in order to create a new life for the child. The birth mother was without rights. While the child's sense of a secure home was part of the rationalization for this, an amazing amount of hubris, a belief in the superiority of the adoptive family, went into this attitude. A friend of mine who was born in 1942 told me she was well into her forties before she learned that the woman she thought of as her sister was biologically her cousin, the daughter of her mother's sister.

During and immediately after World War II, many more babies became available for adoption. Brief encounters, the desperate intimacy of the war years, and the difficulty of accessing birth control or abortion had produced many babies without families to care for them.

The 1950s

During the 1950s, while an increasing number of babies were being placed for adoption, Jean Paton wrote a book, *The Adopted Break Silence*,[18] in which she related her own experience as an adopted child and put forward the notion that adopted children should know who their birth parents were and thereby know their connection to humanity. She established a reunion organization

called Orphan Voyage and began a movement that advocated the right of adopted children to find their biological families. It is now hard to imagine how restricted and stymied an adoptee in the pre-Internet era could be when looking for information about their family of origin. There were many gatekeepers: doctors, hospital staff, social workers, and adoptive parents and their relatives. Most people in those days did not believe that the adoptee had a right to the information. Babies were seen as a blank slate, with no emotional lives before they were born. Adoptees should be convinced that their adoptive parents were their only familial bond. Therefore there was no need, in the eyes of the gatekeepers, for the adoptees to be informed about their origins. It took many years before those gatekeepers recognized the validity of the adoptees' search. Adoptees tried many tactics to find their birth families. I imagine others might have developed the talent of one of the teens I interviewed. She could furtively read the official papers on the social worker's desk upside down, without the social worker knowing. Pregnant, young unmarried women were often sent away from home to live with relatives or in religious institutions to have their babies. The babies were taken from them, sometimes against their wishes, and placed for adoption. A markedly dreadful institution of this kind was the Ideal Maternity Home in Nova Scotia, the infamous "Butterbox" institution, where healthy babies were sold to adoptive homes, but sick ones were allowed to die and then buried in the butter boxes from the local dairy.[19]

The civil rights movement of the 1950s in the US increased awareness of racial inequality, chiefly for black people, and the swell of indignation against that inequality influenced adoption policies. The notion that "all are equal" promoted transrracial adoptions, although the "custom" adoption in Native groups and within the black communities of the US were not recognized

by law. Until now, white communities had been willing to let non-white communities adopt their own children. Now, with increased awareness of equality, all children began to be eligible for adoption, particularly by white families. Both American and Canadian adoption agencies increased the number of placements of Native children and other children of colour with white families. Some US states removed laws that had prohibited transracial adoptions.[20] Coincidentally, with the availability of birth control, fewer white babies were available for adoption. So, with practical, altruistic, and sometimes shameful motives, the "Sixties Scoop" of Native children and an increased placement of black children in non-black homes began.[21]

The 1960s

The resistance in black communities

Prior to the 1950s, black children were not often placed in white homes, but by 1967 there was a concerted effort by adoption agencies to change this practice, and an increasing number of Asian, black, and Native children were placed with white families.[22] The children were often denied affiliation with their family of origin. In 1972, acting as representatives of black communities in the US, the National Association of Black Social Workers objected to the placement of black children in white homes for much the same reasons as Aboriginal people did.[23] They cited difficult psychological adjustments and asserted that children of colour placed in white families had trouble establishing their identity. The children did not know who they were. As a consequence of these efforts, most adoption agencies now try to place children in a family of their own race, though children are still placed transracially. This does not mean racially diverse families are second-rate, but it does mean adoptive parents must be more aware of the importance

of race. Parents today realize race plays an important part in a child's life, more intensely during the teen and young adult years.

When he was six, I escorted my son through the Royal British Columbia Museum, conscientiously pointing out the many Tsimshian artifacts—masks, bowls, cloaks. This was when we thought he was Tsimshian.

He studied the displays and turned to me. "How come there's so much of us here, Mom?"

I was stunned speechless for a moment. He identified with being Tsimshian, but in his six-year-old mind, that meant I was Tsimshian too. What could I say that would support his identity as a Tsimshian boy without alienating him from me?

I said, "We were good artists." I'd straighten it out when he was twelve.

Adopted children accepted by their adoptive families may not understand the significance of race in their lives until they are well into their teen years when they hit the prejudices of the larger social world—though some are aware of it very early, especially if their adoptive parents point it out. Establishing identity is difficult in a family where the adopted children look different from their parents or siblings. Not impossible, but difficult.

The sixties scoop

In Canada and the US, poverty, prejudice, and disenfranchisement resulted in difficult lives for the children of the poor, particularly the poor on Native reserves and reservations. The social agencies of these countries responded by ignoring custom adoption processes and rounding up the children, displacing them by the carload—and sometimes by the busload—from their home communities to adoptive or foster homes across the country and into other countries. Britain received planeloads of Aboriginal children from

Canada in the 1960s, and many Aboriginal children were taken from Canada between 1958 and 1967 by the Indian Adoption Project of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Child Welfare League of America in the US.[24] The parents of these children, assumed to be uncaring, were often coerced into giving their children away. At times, the children were taken by the agencies when their parents were sick in hospital or away gathering supplies. There are many stories of social workers telling the parents that they were taking the children "for now, while you are sick" and never returning them.[25] This was part of an inexplicable assumption of the superiority of the white race, in spite of the protests of Native people and the tenets of the civil rights movement. The adoption workers held an unexamined belief that the children would have better lives away from their families.

To be fair, placement of Native children in non-Native homes meant, in many instances, that the children grew up in loving adoptive families.[26] Some birth mothers voluntarily placed their children in non-Native families, but many did not. Individual success stories do not negate the devastation these social policies conferred on many Native children.

Unstated was the notion that Native people would be assimilated into white society and eventually their culture would disappear. The parents often did not give consent, or they were tricked into signing consent forms. According to stories in Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey's book *Stolen from Our Embrace*, some social workers driving the "Sixties Scoop" enthusiastically stripped entire villages of most of the children, separated them, and sent them into foster care. "Abduction of Aboriginal children has persisted long past that decade [the sixties]," write Fournier and Crey. "By the late 1970s, one in four status Indian children could expect to be separated from his or her parents for all or part of

childhood."[27] Decades of systematic child abductions have created horrendous cultural problems, and Aboriginal children continue to be overrepresented in apprehension statistics. Adoptive parents often did not know the particulars of the apprehension. Social workers created an acceptable story, and adoptive parents believed it. It was only years later that many adoptive parents realized they had participated in the Scoop.

Residential Schools for Native Children

In Canada, church-run residential schools, which thousands of Native children were forced to attend in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, robbed Natives of the experience of being in a family and left many incapable of parenting because they had lived only in institutional environments, with no models of how to parent. Instead of addressing their need to learn parenting skills, social agencies removed the children of those who'd been raised in residential schools; this perpetuated the problem by separating these children from their families and culture. It has taken fifty years to reveal the effects of this practice, and the consequences are likely to challenge generations to come.

The resistance to transracial adoption

In British Columbia between 1961 and 1971, agencies placed many more Native children in non-Native homes than they had before. Protest grew in Aboriginal communities. In 1973, in response to pressure from Aboriginal communities and organizations, the British Columbia provincial government put a moratorium on the adoption of Native children by non-Native families. Aboriginal people feared a continuation of the "Sixties Scoop."

This was a personal disaster for my family. There we were, with our Aboriginal son, a delightful and loving guy, with a moratorium

on his adoption. I felt like a she-bear defending her cub. I didn't care about politics and societal attitudes. I wanted him protected by law. My family had asked for a baby, and the social welfare agency had placed him with us, asking if it was okay if he was Native. We said, "Sure." We didn't have much awareness or do much planning around the fact that he was a Native boy in a white family, but he had taken over our hearts. We *were* a family. I stormed off to the offices of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs and had a heart-to-heart with the representative there. He calmed me down. I had no idea we were part of the "Sixties Scoop." He understood that and explained that the Aboriginal bands in my province had no intention of pulling the children from their current homes and planned to leave them with their adoptive parents, but they wanted to prevent other similar adoptions. This moratorium forced a change in attitude around the placement of Native children. At three, my son's adoption went through. I began to understand his affiliation with Aboriginal communities, my unwitting participation in the Scoop, and his place in our family. It was and continues to be complicated.

Increasing demands for "Indian homes for Indian children" were made by the Adoption Resource Exchange of North America at the same time adoption agencies were sending Native children out of the area and even out of the country.[28] In 1979, 339 children, many of whom were Native, were sent from Canada to the US for adoption because Native children could move across the border without legal hindrance (under the Jay Treaty).[29] This situation was astounding and horrifying to Native peoples. Because adoption processes during the 1950s to '70s were essentially secretive or closed, the Native children lost their sense of belonging to their own tribe or clan.

A child's history given to the adoptive parents may be wrong.

Many times, the birth story the social worker provided to the adoptive families was a fantasy. We were told my son belonged to the Tsimshian Nation. Not true. After twenty years, we found he was actually a member of the Gitxsan Nation—a neighbouring nation, but different. It was like being told he was Apache and finding out he was Hopi, or being told he was Scottish and finding out he was English. Definitely not the same thing. It seemed disrespectful on the part of the social workers, and it angered me when I discovered we had all been lied to. I threw things.

"Hey, Mom," my son said. "It's not such a big deal." But it was, and I knew it was.

Accuracy in the adoptee's history wasn't important then to social agencies. It wasn't until much later that children's right to know their origins became vital. Certainly there was little attempt by social agencies to support the adoptive parents' attempts to foster affiliations with the child's culture.

Most Native communities in the US and Canada are clusters of family constellations that have endured for centuries. Every child has a place and is valued as a member of a family cluster. Adopting the child out does not change this; that place remains his or hers. Children are valued because they are members of families. Losing the children to non-Native homes, especially in such great numbers, caused not only emotional pain for those involved, but huge problems for those seeking family reunification and tribal affiliations. In an effort to reverse this drain of children away from their home communities, Aboriginal associations demanded—and are still demanding—Native homes for Native children. The system isn't perfect. There are many Native children who cannot find Native homes, but the social agencies of the tribal communities are increasingly more efficient and effective and do grant exceptions so some children can be placed in non-Native

families.

Matching children to parents

By the mid-1970s, the number of babies available for adoption in Western countries had been reduced substantially due to increasingly effective birth control, career women waiting longer to have children, the legalization of abortion, and a reduction of the stigma of illegitimacy, so more single mothers kept their babies. The philosophy and practice moved from placing children in order to meet the needs of adoptive families to selecting families to meet the needs of the adoptable children—a paradigm shift that affected adoptive parents drastically. When the scarcity of adoptable children became obvious, families who wanted to adopt included couples who were infertile, couples who were fertile but chose to adopt, those who already had biological children, single men and women, and LGBTQ singles and couples. There was a greater diversity of adoptive families or at least a greater frankness about that diversity. Because infants were difficult to find, these families began to look across national borders for children. People who had previously not considered children of other races and "special" children, those with physical and psychological needs, were now more open to adopting them. The fantasy of the "matched" family began to fracture when more and more families now looked different, not just in hair colour and physical features, but in skin colour. Such an obvious difference advertised adoption, and adoptive families began to find the concept of secrecy somewhat absurd.

The right to know

With this new attitude toward frankness within the family, parents were advised to tell their children at a very early age that they had

been adopted. When children were *not* told and discovered as teens they were adopted (and somehow they did discover this), they felt betrayed and lied to by their birth parents, principally by their birth mothers.[30] The lie was considered to be more detrimental to the children's mental health than the fact of adoption.

"How could she lie to me?" a teen I interviewed told me. "She was supposed to be my mother. What kind of mother lies to her daughter?"

It was hard for me to answer except to say her adoptive mother hadn't had good advice. As the children who had been adopted in the age of closed adoptions grew up, they began to vigorously protest against the former secrecy and organize advocacy groups, agitating for their right to know their heritage. In response, many institutions—not without protest from threatened adoptive parents—began to demand the laws be changed to accommodate the adoptees' demands. Established in Britain and then in North America, the changes in legislation gradually made it easier for adoptees to find their birth parents. As well, biological fathers began to demand rights they hadn't had in the past so they could look for their lost children. This can still be difficult, but is more possible than in the past.[31] Adoptees could register at a central agency and find birth parents. The need to know one's biological roots began to seem legitimate, especially when it was expressed by adopted adults who had very strong ties with their adoptive families and who appeared to have rational and valid reasons for searching. Looking for birth families was not only for the abused, the disturbed, and the unstable; it was a genuine and common need.

The "need to know" became the "right to know" and shaped the idea of open adoption, which meant all parties—birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees—could know of each other. So

we circle back to the ways of our ancestors when children were placed in homes where they could be cared for and everyone knew where the child was—and who he or she was. There is now choice at the time of adoption about how much knowledge and contact both sets of parents expect and what options they want for this child. Records are much more accessible. Permission to contact is often moot because the Internet makes investigating ancestry available to anyone who knows how to click and search. Biological parents can become Facebook friends.

The Twenty-first Century

The Internet makes it possible for children to search for their birth parents without the permission or knowledge of their adoptive parents. It's a huge step forward for many and the source of fear for some adoptive parents. There is some justification for their fears. Adoptees may search before they are ready to deal with rejection, because rejection by birth parents is a possibility. Since birth parents can also search for their children, adoptive parents may worry a birth parent will contact their child before that child is ready to handle the relationship. Not all birth parents or all adoptive parents are ideal.

Adoptive parents are forced to be frank with their children, more responsive to their needs, and to cooperative with birth parents. Secrecy seems impossible today, and the challenges of such open adoptions need to be discussed within the families.

It is now possible to find like-minded adoptees on the Internet. Finding fellow adoptees was much harder before the web revolutionized our world. Adoptees can read books such as *The Primal Wound* and *Attachment Disorders* and realize the problems discussed in these books are common to adoptees and are not a result of a personally haywired brain. It's some comfort. Most adoptees

must deal with these issues. The lucky ones find insight, therapy, or coping skills that allow them to regulate that first emotional and physiological upheaval successfully, but many are overwhelmed by long-term effects.

The Internet allows adoptees to join with others to work at understanding and eventually dealing with their early trauma. Teen and adult adoptee groups encourage discussion. Adoptive parents can find others who are dealing with the same problems and receive advice and support. Organizations such as the Adoptive Families Association of British Columbia offer educational sessions, including webinars which allow parents to learn about some of the latest and most useful ideas around raising adopted kids. We are a long way from the lonely blundering we adoptive parents were forced to do in the days before what I call "enlightenment." Adoptive parenting is not the solitary and blindly intuitive process it was in the past. We tried to be honest, loving, and responsive to our kids without the knowledge and skills that present-day adoptive parents have. Today, adoptive parents are more able to get professional advice and help. Of course, it's not always easy.

The Importance of Love

Love is not mentioned in the adoption history books. You'd think the whole adoption process in the past was motivated solely by convenience, need, and duty. There must have been love, but you can't tell from the records. It would seem that a whole section on love in the adoption story of the past is missing. You will bump into my comments on love at the end of the chapters. Love does matter.

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