

HEADS in BEDS

JACOB
TOMSKY

A Reckless
Memoir
of Hotels,
Hustles, and
So-Called
Hospitality





JACOB TOMSKY

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{ A RECKLESS MEMOIR *of* HOTELS, HUSTLES,
and SO-CALLED HOSPITALITY }



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About the Author

To protect the guilty and the innocent alike, I have deconstructed all hotels and rebuilt them into personal properties, changed all names, and shredded all personalities and reattached them to shreds from other personalities, creating a book of amalgams that, working together, establish, essentially, a world of truth. I mean, *damn*, I even change my own name.

“WELCOME TO THE FRONT DESK: CHECKING IN?”

I've worked in hotels for more than a decade. I've checked you in, checked you out, oriented you to the property, served you a beverage, separated your white panties from the white bedsheets, parked your car, tasted your room service (before and, sadly, after), cleaned your toilet, denied you a late checkout, given you a wake-up call, eaten M&M's out of your minibar, laughed at your jokes, and taken your money. I have been on the front line and by that I mean the front desk, of upscale hotels for years, and I've seen it all firsthand.

How does one fall into the pit of hospitality? How is it that nearly every dollar I've ever earned came from a paycheck with a name of a hotel written on it somewhere (or of course in the form of cash from the hand of a generous hotel guest)? Call it an accident, like catching a train with the plan to go across town, but as the platforms smear by one after the other you come to realize you've broken city limits, the train is not stopping, and you're just going to have to ride this life until the doors open. Or until the conductor stops the train and throws you out on your ass.

After a certain amount of years in the hotel business (and I'll go ahead and mention this up front), you're just too useless and used up to do anything else.

I grew up military: navy mother, marine father. When I was a child, it was two years maximum in any given city, and then we'd be on the move again, changing schools, checking into a hotel in L.A., a hotel in Jacksonville, a hotel in Asheville, a hotel in San Pedro, looking for a new "permanent" residence. I grew up like a spun top, and, released into adulthood, continued spinning, moving, relocating.

Those two-year episodes of my childhood left me feeling rootless, lost in the world, perhaps that's why I stubbornly pursued a degree in philosophy. I cannot explain the idiocy behind my choice of major. Shit, if I had chosen business, I might be in business right now. Perhaps you'd think one main goal within the philosophy degree itself would be the ability to argue unequivocally why a philosophy degree is not a complete waste of time. I never learned that argument. Garbage. My degree was garbage stuffed inside a trash can of student loans.

So someone, some asshole, suggested I earn some money in hospitality. Hotels were willing to ignore my dubious degree and offer great starting pay, and I will say this: it's an ideal career for the traveler. I love travel in every way: new people, new sounds, new environments, the ability to pick up and disappear. (My top is, even now, spinning, and though it's digging a nice divot into Brooklyn, the balance is beginning to lean, and once the tip finds traction, it's going to rocket me off the continent.) Plus, hotels are everywhere: kidnap me, duct tape my face, drop me out of a plane, and I promise you I will land in a parking lot adjacent to a hotel and in less than a day I'll be wearing a suit, assisting guests, earning a nice check, and making friends at the local bar.

Hotels are methadone clinics for the travel addicted. Maybe the only way I can even *keep* home is to hold down a job surrounded by constant change. If I'm addicted to relocating, the how about I rest a minute, in a lobby echoing with eternal hellos and good-byes, and let the world move around me?

And that is exactly what I did. From New Orleans to New York, I played by hotel rules and in the process, learned every aspect of the industry. Due to the fact I just don't care anymore here is one of my objectives: I will offer easy and, up till now, never publicized tips and tricks. Want a late checkout? Want an upgrade? Guess what! There are simple ways (and *most* of them are legal ways!) to get what you need from a hotel without any hassle whatsoever. It's all in the details—in what you need done, whom you ask to do it, how you ask them, and how much you should tip them for doing it. Need to cancel the day of arrival with no penalty? No problem. Maybe you just want to be treated with care and respect? I understand dear guest. Come on, now, calm down, you fragile thing ... take my hand ... good ... okay ... now put some money in it ... *very* good ... thank you. Now, that's a proper hospitality business transaction.

And when all is said and done, you will understand the hotel life, what we do, and how we do it. Though why we *continue to do it* may be harder to grasp. All of this will be beneficial to you because the next time you check in with me (and believe me, I get around; I've probably checked you in a couple of times already), the next time we meet, a comforting, bright light of total understanding will be shining in your eyes, and I will help you and you will help me and reading this book will give you the knowledge you need to get the very best service from any hotel or property, from any business that makes its money from putting "heads in beds." Or, *at the very least*, it will keep me from taking your luggage into the camera-free back office and stomping the shit out of it.

As a hotelier, I am everywhere. I am nowhere. I am nameless ... except for the goddam name tag.

But first, let's talk about names. Let's talk about changing the names to protect the innocent. Let's talk about how innocent *I* am and how much *I* need protecting.

My name is Jacob Tomskey. But in the hotel world we are all registered with our last name first. Jacob Tomskey becomes Tomskey, Jacob. So, in the spirit of self-preservation, Tomskey, Jacob—for the purposes of this book—becomes Thomas Jacobs.

Good luck, little Tommy Jacobs.

I am standing on St. Charles Avenue, uptown New Orleans, a few months out of college and a few weeks into summer. It's already extremely hot in the full sun. Which is where I have to stand: in the sun. Next to the valet box. All day.

I took a valet-parking job at Copeland's restaurant to shake off my college-loan laziness, to climb out of the educational womb and stand on my own two feet as a moneymaking, career-pursuing adult. Educated in the useless and inapplicable field of philosophy, I quickly deduced that my degree looked slightly comical on my already light-on-the-work-experience résumé. Perhaps it was even *off-putting*. To a certain eye, hell, it probably made me look like a prick. But I had to start somewhere. So I started at the bottom.

This job is not good enough. Why not? First of all, I'm parking cars. Second, we have to turn in all our tips. I imagined I'd get off the first night with a pocketful of ones to take to the French Quarter, not that you need much money in New Orleans. As it turned out, however, attached to the valet box that houses the car keys, like a wooden tumor, is a separate slot for us to jimmy in our folded tips. All of them. Attached to *that* box, like a human tumor, is the shift boss, back in the shade at a vacant umbrella table, sipping a noontime drink that most definitely contains alcohol. It also has chipped ice and is sweating in his hand, sweating in a much different way than I am sweating.

A lunch customer hands me his ticket. I find his keys easily in the box and take off at an impressive run. His car is not easy to find: the valet company has not rented a nearby lot to service the restaurant, and so we, certainly unbeknownst to the clients, just drive around the area and try to parallel park the vehicles as close to Copeland's as possible. Once the vehicle has been parked, it's up to the valet to draw a silly treasure map on the back of the ticket so another valet can locate it. My co-worker Chip draws every treasure map like this: #*. Every single one. And finding the car is never easy. But I bring it back and slide up to the curb, holding the door open, the car's AC pouring like ice water on my feet, and receive a neatly folded bill from the customer.

"It's damn hot out here, son. This is for you running like that."

It's a twenty-dollar bill. Chip, now back and posted by the valet box, holds a salute against his brow, trying like hell to make out the bill. I walk up to the tip tumor and start to wiggle it in when Chip says, "No. *No!* What are you doing, Tommy? Don't you keep a dollar handy to swap it out with? Please don't put that twenty in there. Please. It's for you. That dude told you it was for you."

"Actually, it's for Copeland's Valet Parking Corporation," the human tumor says, setting his drink down wet on the valet box.

"Are you seriously drinking a mudslide?" Chip asks.

I use a car key from the box to vanish the bill completely and post up next to Chip. Back in the sun. The shift boss sinks back into the shade.

"I am *way* too old for this. Sharing tips? Forty percent to management leaves 60 percent of the tips to us, divided over twenty runners, on a check, with taxes taken out, and guess who

running the math, guess who's counting up the tips? A grown man drinking a goddam mudslide." He must have been talking to himself previously because now Chip turned to me. "You think he's gonna turn in that twenty? Or just keep it for himself? We *never* get good tips out here. You know what I heard? There's a new hotel opening up downtown. You heard that? It's supposed to be *luxury*." He said the word as if it were mystical and perhaps too good for his own tongue: "*luxury*." "And they're looking for parkers. Copeland's customers don't tip for shit."

Chip, with a wide smile, accepts a claim check from an emerging lunch customer and locates the keys in the box. "It's a fucking Mazda, dude," he says quietly to me. And then to the customer: "You won't be long in this heat, sir! I will run for your vehicle!" Then he takes off sprinting: it's almost vaudevillian how he tears ass around the corner, his body at full tilt.

Chip cruises the Mazda back in record time, gliding up to the curb. "AC running and class rock on low for you, sir."

The customer drops something into his cupped palm. Something that makes Chip's face contort.

Chip stands upright, essentially blocking the customer from entering his own vehicle, and spreads open his palm to let the two-quarter tip flash in the sun.

With a voice strained and tight, as if he were suffering intense physical pain, he says, "Why, thank you so very much, sir."

Then he pivots slightly and extends his hand, palm flat, quarters in the sun again.

Then he drop-kicks both coins. Kicks the shit out of them into the street.

They arc over the road and land on the rough grass of the neutral ground, settling in before a streetcar rocks by.

I can see the shock on the customer's face—the confusion, the horror. Chip just walks on with determination, crossing St. Charles and onto the neutral ground. After picking the quarters out of the grass, he crosses the tracks to the far side of the street and starts bearing down Napoleon Avenue, toward Mid-City: the job, the restaurant, the shift boss, me, all of it in his rearview mirror.

I finished my shift. Then I took his advice about the hotel job.

Whether I knew it yet or not, it was one hell of an important moment for me, watching Chip snap at what seemed like such a minor affront, seeing that much emotion applied to a single low-quality tip. And then watching him bend down, fish the quarters out of the dirt and take them with him. I didn't understand any of it. Not yet.

Here we go.

Hotel orientation. Human resources pretty much hired everyone. Everyone who passed the drug test.

I passed, thank you.

Chip did not.

The River Hotel, connected to a brand known for luxury, known for being out of almost everyone's price range, was being built right there on Chartres Street, in downtown New Orleans. It was three weeks from opening and still under construction. Yet they hired us and tailored our uniforms, and started paying us. A week ago I was *earning* money and *giving* it

an idiot who pounds mudslides. Now I wasn't even working, but I was collecting a check. good check. And no one had even said the word "valet" yet.

Not that our new managers weren't saying any words. Honestly, they couldn't *stop* saying some words: "Service." "Luxury." "Honesty." "Loyalty." "Opulence." And mid-length phrases such as "Customer Feedback" and "Anticipating Needs." And then longer, million-dollar phrases like "*Fifteen-Hundred-Thread-Count Egyptian Linen Duvet Covers.*"

Management ran classes every day on service, administered in the completed conference rooms, the tables draped with what we assumed to be Egyptian fabric and adorned with ice carafes of water, which we poured into crystal goblets to wash down the huge piles of pastries they fed us. They were hell-bent on teaching us how to identify something called "a guest's unmentioned needs."

"A man needs his car, he don't need to speak a word. Get that claim check out. Get the dollar out, feel me?"

That came from the back of class. I turned my head to get a look at who I assumed were to be my co-workers: three black guys not really adhering to the "business casual" mandate for these orientation classes.

"Tommy, can you give me an example of a guest's unmentioned need?"

I wasn't even wearing a name badge: these hospitality maniacs had actually learned everyone's name.

"Well, ma'am—"

"You can call me Trish. I'm the front office manager."

"Well, ah, *Trish* ..." That got a low laugh from the back of class. "Maybe they pull in a car that's dirty from the drive, and we could get it washed?"

"Perfect example."

"Wait up. You want I should drive the car back to my driveway in the Ninth Ward to wash it? Or bring in quarters from home?"

"Perry; correct?"

"Yeah, Perry."

"Perry. You come to me anytime, and I'll give you hotel money to wash a car, change a tire, or buy them a CD you know they'd like for the drive home. Anything you think of, you can come to me."

"Well, goddamn."

The day before the grand opening the hotel closed off a block of Chartres Street (pronounced "*Chart-ers*," by the way, completely disregarding the obvious Frenchness of the word; we also pronounce the street Calliope like "Cal-e-ope"; Burgundy comes out not like the color but "Ber-GUN-dy," and just try to stutter out Tchoupitoulas Street or Natchitoches even close to correctly). We were collected into parade groups, our new managers holding up large, well-made signs indicating our departments. Front desk. Valet. Laundry. Sales and marketing. Bellmen. Doormen. Food and beverage. And housekeeping of course, by far the largest group, about 150 black ladies dressed as if they were going to a club. The valets huddled together in a small clot, not saying much to each other, looking up at the finished, renovated hotel.

The vibe was celebratory and overwhelmingly positive. We were let in, one department after the other, and we hustled up a stairwell lined with managers clapping and cheering as if we were the goddamn New Orleans Saints. They threw confetti, smacked us on the back, and screamed in an orgy of goodwill and excitement. By the time we crested the third floor and poured into the grand banquet hall, every single one of us had huge, marvelously sincere smiles stuck hard on our faces. And we held those smiles as we took turns shaking the general manager's hand, who, no shit, wore a crown of laurel leaves. As a joke, I suppose.

"I'm Charles Daniels. Please, call me Chuck."

"All right, then, Chuck," Perry said in front of me and waited while Mr. Daniels located the gold-plated name tag that read "Perry" from the banquet table beside him.

Mr. Daniels didn't go so far as to *pin on* the name tag, *anoint us*, as it were. But we were in such a rapturous state during the event I believe we would have readily kneeled before him and let him pin it to our naked flesh.

And then there was an *open bar*. Not sure where they shipped in this opening team from, they certainly weren't locals. Neither was I, but I'd spent my young life traveling, moving, and often I'd learned the skill (and believe me it is an incredibly useful skill) of assimilating into any new culture, whatever that culture may be. I am a shape-shifter in that way. And as I approached my four-year anniversary in Louisiana, just about my longest stretch anywhere, New Orleans had already become the closest thing to a home I'd ever had. And the open bar was a nod to this town, a town that runs on alcohol, and much appreciated. This is a city where you can find drink specials on Christmas morning. Not that you could find me on Bourbon Street Christmas morning; I didn't drink at the time. I stayed sober all through college while pursuing my degree and hadn't had a drop since I was fifteen and used to take shots of Jack Daniel's in my basement during school lunch. But an open bar in New Orleans? People got *tore up*. Housekeeping got *tore up*.

Now that it was revealed which department we fell into, we tended to group up for the party, getting to know each other.

"Dig this general manager. He look like a slave owner with that headpiece," Walter said.

"Nah," Perry said. "Chuck a cool motherfucker. You just enjoy that free drink you got and then he took a long finishing pull from his own bottle of Heineken."

Everyone was smiling. Everyone was friendly. Everyone had a name tag on. It was like a big crazy family, and we opened tomorrow. We were all in this together, and everyone in that banquet hall, after two weeks of service training, two full paychecks for *nothing*, couldn't wait to unleash their skills on a real guest. The managers had whipped us into such a frenzy that if any actual guests had wandered into that party, we would have serviced them to death, mauled them, like ravenous service jackals.

Already the hotel had created the possibility of a home for me, a future. It seemed so glamorous, all the linens and chandeliers and sticky pastries. The hotel was beautiful, and I was honored to be a member of the opening team. It was at this very point I realized my life of constant relocation had led me to this nexus of relocation, this palace of the temporary where I could now stand still, the world moving around me, and, conversely, feel grounded. I studied Mr. Daniels as he circulated the party, all conversation politely cutting off when he unobtrusively joined a group. That was the position I wanted. That was a life I could own. And I distinctly felt, because this is exactly what they told us during orientation, that if

performed with dedication and dignity, took the tenets of luxury service to heart, hospitality would open herself up to me and I could find my life within the industry. I wanted to be king. It was *possible* to be king. I swore that day I'd be the general manager of my very own property.

This excitement carried over and crashed like a wave on the following day, the day the hotel opened. But before we were able to molest our first guest, we had to sit through the opening ceremony.

One thing about hotels: once they open, they never close.

I don't mean they never go out of business; certainly they do. But the fact that a hotel could fail to be profitable astounds me. Why? The average cost to turn over a room, keep operational per day, is between thirty and forty dollars. If you're paying less than thirty dollars a night at a hotel/motel, I'd wager the cost to flip *that* room runs close to five dollars. Which makes me want to take a shower. At home. That forty-dollar turnover cost includes cleaning supplies, electricity, and hourly wage for housekeepers, minibar attendants, front desk agents (and all other employees needed to operate a room), as well as the cost of laundering the sheets. Everything. Compare that with an average room rate, and you can see why it's a profitable business, one with a long history, going back to Mary and Joseph running up against a sold-out situation at the inn, forcing him to bed his pregnant wife in a dirty-ass manger.

The word "hotel" itself was appropriated from the French around 1765. Across the ocean, hotel, or *hôtel*, referred not to public lodging but instead to a large government building, the house of a nobleman, or any such place where people gathered but no nightly accommodations was offered. America, at the time, was filled with grimy little inns and taverns, which provided beds for travelers and also functioned as a town's shitty dive bar. Having a monopoly on the alcohol game was a boon, one given to tavern keepers in gratitude for putting up travelers, something no one wanted any part of. It wasn't until George Washington decided to embark on the first presidential tour of his new kingdom that spotlights began to shine on these public houses of grossness. In order to present himself as a man of the people, he turned down offers to stay with associates and wealthy friends, instead lodging himself in tavern after tavern, sniffing at room after room, frowning at bed after bed. For the first time in American history, townships were *ashamed* of their manner of accommodating travelers. The country was unified and expanding. Something had to be done about our system of lodging.

So, in 1794, someone, some asshole, built the very first "hotel" in New York City: a 13-room job on Broadway, right there in lower Manhattan. It was the first structure built with the intention of being a "hotel," a word that was quickly replacing the terms "inn" and "tavern," even if it only meant that swarthy innkeepers were painting the word "Hotel" on their crappy signs but still sloshing out the booze and making travelers sleep right next to each other in bug-ridden squalor. The first big hotels failed monetarily or burned to the ground or both. It wasn't until railroad lines were getting stitched across America's expanding fabric that hotels, big and small, began to prosper and offer people like me jobs.

So, profitability aside, what I am referring to here is not the fact that once a hotel opens it will never close (or be burned to the ground!) but that once we cut the ribbon on the hotel, once we opened the lobby doors, they never closed again. In fact, they unchained the

because they were built without locks, as almost all hotel lobby doors are. Three o'clock the morning—open. Christmas Eve, 3:00 a.m.—open. Blackout—open. World War Whatever—open (with a price hike).

The mayor was kind enough to attend the opening ceremony, going down the line of shareholders dressed employees and shaking hands (or giving elaborate daps, depending on ethnicity). And then in came the public, and there we stood, smiling, proud, ready. The locals poured into the Bistro Lounge, strolled through the lobby as if it were a museum of classical art, put their handprints on fresh glass doors, and began to scuff, mark, and mar the pristine landscape by putting their asses in chairs, creasing and bending the leather, scraping and marking the cutlery as they bit down hard on steak-tipped forks.

For a long while at the valet stand, well, we didn't have shit to do. We stood those first few hours, feet spread and planted at shoulder width, arms behind our backs with our hands clasped, as we were taught to stand. Then we began to shift on our feet. Then we began to talk quietly out of the sides of our mouths. Then to turn our heads and talk openly at normal volume. Then to go to the back office to check our cell phones. Not Perry, though: he remained at his post, and the most he did was shake his head when everyone started to get restless.

"We ain't making no damn money," Keith said, swinging his fists at his sides, directing the comment at Perry, who had somehow become the de facto leader: not simply because Perry was older, though he had a good five years over everyone else on the line, but because of something in his calmness, the way he held his lean body still, the way his eyes were so white and his face so black and all of him so goddamn calm and cool.

"This *day-one* shit, Keith. Relax yourself."

"Shit, I needs money. We got that full wage last two weeks, but now we on that hourly wage adjusted for tips, ya heard me? I mean, we ain't even seen a car and—"

"Y'all tighten up. Chuck coming through."

And we did. But not just for Perry. Mr. Daniels had an absolutely presidential charisma. *wanted* to work for him. We all did. He came out through the lobby doors into the porte cochere ("fancy word for covered driveway, shit") and walked down the line, rattling off each of our names like an old friend. But then he stopped, as if he'd forgotten something, and walked back to stand before us on the tiled driveway, the soft rush of the marble water fountain pulsing behind him in the cavern of the porte cochere.

"A bit overstaffed, it seems? Gentlemen, I hate to say it, but when a property opens especially one as illustrious as ours, known for service, well, we have to overstaff for the first few weeks. You see, people come here, and they want to *see* the service. They actually want to *see* a bunch of employees standing around doing nothing. It's sad but true, believe me. And that's all well and good for the front desk, collecting a full wage regardless, but much harder on people who depend on proper staffing and tips, such as yourselves. Men, I'll be honest. It's going to take some time for our occupancy to build. However, we already have some meetings and parties booked, transient business, some that'll bring 150 cars in and out on the same night. So we can look forward to those. In the meantime, I'll have accounting up your wages to non-tipped status until business starts booming. Which it will, believe me. How does that sound? Also, we will be selecting a valet captain at the end of the month for those who are interested and worthy. Perks include an hourly wage bump and the best shifts. Hang

there, gentlemen. Coincidentally, you look fantastic.” He slapped Keith on the arm and walked off into the garage.

“That’s my *boy* right there,” Perry said, relocking his hands behind his back and smiling at the fountain across the driveway.

Perry was elected valet captain, zero resistance.

After a month, all of Mr. Daniels’s predictions played out: occupancy picked up, filling the garage with luxury vehicles and our pockets with ones. The elite New Orleans social scene also played a role, holding banquets, balls, and charity affairs in our meeting spaces, causing tremendous, short-spurt traffic influxes, then again a flurry of tickets coming out at the party’s end. When it came to the social scene, a man we named the General quickly became our favorite guest. His chauffeur would pull him up in a canary-yellow Bentley, impossible to miss. Whichever valet was at the head of the line would stand off to the side of the Bentley as the doorman opened the door. The General, poor of hearing, poor of sight, his seersucker suit riddled and blotched with military medals (hence the name), would tilt up his chin and peer through his cataracts, looking for anyone willing to assist him with anything. His live-spotted hand always held a stack of fresh, sticky two-dollar bills. The valet would post up beside his vehicle, as if intending to park it (even though the chauffeur would rather let us piss on his shoes than let us touch the interior of the Bentley), and the General would peer hard at the parker, mumble something militaristic, and rip off a two-dollar bill for him. All we had to do was *insinuate* we were helping, and we’d get tipped. Press an elevator button, hold a door. Shit, perform a sweeping hand motion as if to usher him along the way, and there was a two-dollar bill coming. Not to mention his vision was so bad you could follow him, executing multiple amped-up, essentially useless functions, and come back to the valet line with ten or more fresh, sticky bills.

Not that we needed bigger pockets to fit all the money. I learned something indisputable about any valet-parking position: the job kind of blows.

Imagine a dark, stuffy, sweltering ten-floor parking garage with no elevator, New Orleans summer heat licking at your neck with a fat wet tongue as you run up ten flights, walk along Level 10 holding the keys up above your head, sweat dripping down your arm, mashing the lock button so the car yelps, helping you locate it. Slip in wet, learn the vehicle, lights on, A on, throw it in reverse, flop that wet arm over the leather passenger side headrest, and back up, AC only blowing heat on your sweating face, reversing quickly before—SHIT, BRAKE—Keith tears by in a Porsche going goddamn ninety, the tires screaming, hip-hop from a local station shaking the whole garage level. Now you’re sweating even more from *fear*, from almost smashing together two seventy-five-thousand-dollar vehicles, but the AC is beginning to work, and, who knows, this is a Mercedes-Benz S500, get it down safe, and all this sweat and fear might be worth it. Now *my* tires are screaming because I’m taking the turns like a maniac, flying down the level ramps so fast my stomach drops (and so does the front end right into the concrete, but who cares—that’s internal and nonvisual damage), gunning it on the straightaways, turning up the Vivaldi loud because it makes my reckless driving seem beautiful, and scraping the front end again coming down a ramp (Level 7, something about Level 7, the shit always bottoms out), but I don’t hear the scrape, just feel it, because Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* is *blasting*, and then—FUCK, BRAKE—there I am bumper to bumper with my Benzo just about underneath a mammoth black Escalade, its headlights burning my eyes.

like the end of a white tunnel I almost died inside, Perry perched in the driver's seat laughing, pointing his long finger at me, so I reverse hard, bringing the back end of the Benz right up against the wall, maybe some contact there, but nothing that'll be discovered before leaving the hotel. Perry pulls up alongside and lowers the automatic window. "Used to have me one of these big bastards. Back when I moved bricks. Get on down there, Tommy, the Zulu Krewe is wrapping up their ball, and Keith and Walter are stealing all the tickets. The shithead Walter be pulling three tickets at a time. He playing with the wrong motherfucker. And then I pull forward, our two vehicles an inch apart, his side mirror going right over the top of my Benz, and then I gas the fuck out of it, tires screaming, taking it down the ramp going thirty and then braking it down to five, rolling out of the dark garage ever so slowly, with such care and attention that I have time to make eye contact with my customer, his face crunched with concern for his vehicle.

"Here you are, sir. Enjoy your evening."

"Hm," he says and pushes past me, no intention of tipping, but I smile and close the door softly for him, my eyes already on the valet counter for my next ticket. There it is: another goddamn tenth-floor ticket. Not only is Walter tripling up on tickets; he's handpicking them by floor to minimize running. Another Mercedes-Benz S500. Time to run.

Okay, listen up. We are getting complaints, gentlemen. No more tire squealing. I understand y'all are trying to do your job quickly, but that garage is like an amplifier, and when you burn tire on 10, we hear it down here. How do you think that makes our guests feel listening to crazy peel outs while waiting for their cars to come down? No more burns. Take it slow. Number two: do not change the radio station. We're getting complaints that when our guests leave and turn on the radio, it's blasting Hot 93. These guests have no interest in listening to Cash Money Millionaires." We all took a second to laugh there. "*Do not touch the radio. Do not change the seat alignment.* Easy, right? Big night tonight, mayor's having another charity dinner, two hundred in and out by 10:00 p.m. ALSO, if you get a hotel overnight valet ticket coming in, park it on 10, DON'T BE LAZY AND PARK IT ON 2. All that means is you have to be running up to 10 all night for these transient party guests. You see an overnight ticket coming in, park it all the way up. Because it ain't coming back down tonight. Keith, you hear me? Don't think I don't know what's going on down here, you guys."

That was John, the assistant front office manager. Bellmen, doormen, front desk, and valet parking all fall under the front office. John had recently been assigned to us to crack down on all the bullshit. Without a doubt, bullshit was getting ubiquitous down here.

In our back office, where we kept the car keys filed by number in fat yellow packets, we also had a small CD player to motivate ourselves. Our CD collection kept growing and growing. Down comes a Lexus, the guest slips a folded dollar to Walter, and he struts into the back office, pulling a jewel case from his underwear.

"Check this shit out, brah. Now we got some Beethoven up in this bitch. Classical, ya dig? Crackers make mad money listening to shit like this."

And we all knew Keith was stealing pocket money from the vehicles. We'd see him counting up big piles of change in the back office during his shift. Also, he made too much noise when he ran.

Unfortunately, once your vehicle rounds that corner into the cavern of the garage or takes a right at the light, any manner of terrible things may happen at the hand of a valet parker. What's the best way to ensure your vehicle isn't taken advantage of? Well, sorry, not much can be done. When your daughter goes on *this* date, you just have to pray she comes home before midnight and unmolested. However, performing a walk around before your car goes speeding off never hurts. On the valet ticket is a sketch of a vehicle that the parker or doorman uses to mark any already present scars. That way, later, should a guest assume he or she has discovered a new scratch, the valet can quickly prove the scratch was preexisting and already marked on the initial ticket before the vehicle was ever moved (even though the valet might have clipped a pole while parking it later and, you know, marked it then). So performing your own walk around and familiarizing yourself with any present flaws might pay off later. Should something happen, this little bit of surety will come in handy, and if the valet happens to watch you checking your vehicle, he might be more careful not to add anything fresh. If you do see the actual valet getting into your vehicle, it wouldn't hurt to drop a few dollars at the outset, so you are on his mind as he pulls it off. Then again, even if you manage to establish initial contact with the parking valet, the valet who retrieves it later will have no connection to you and all the alone time he needs with your car. If you cannot stand *anyone* having private time with your baby, then you can always leave it in direct charge of the doorman. The driveway is the doorman's domain, and he can, and will, allow certain vehicles to remain parked for hours in his direct line of sight and conveniently ready for departure. How can you secure a coveted spot right out front? Give him a nice crisp twenty-dollar bill. He'll be more than happy to help. Doormen love twenties. They love even more if your car is luxury and makes their driveway look expensive. If you have a busted-looking Chevy, you might as well give it to Keith and let him steal all your change.

"Dude taking nickels and pennies. That's some low-down poor shit," Perry said. "Listen Tommy, you know you my boy. Come up in my office to talk some business."

His office was the house car, a black BMW 7 Series, owned by the hotel to facilitate short trips for VIPs around the city and the occasional airport pickup or drop-off, which Perry was throwing me a lot of recently and I appreciated. Airport trips got you off the line for about an hour, the hotel paid you twenty in cash for the time, and the guests would often tip twenty on top of that. Plus, either there or back you're alone and get to recline the seat, slide open the sunroof, and listen to whatever you want as you pimp through New Orleans in a black BMW 7 Series. The hotel gave one airport gig to Walter, *one*; a drop-off, and he came back five hours later. Said he washed the car. But it was clearly still dirty.

Perry put the key in the ignition of the BMW so we could put the radio on low and recline the seats.

"Tommy, you know Trish, right?"

"Front office manager?"

"Right, the FOM. She's looking for someone to bring up there and was asking me about everyone. I told her you're good with the guests. That's why I been putting you on those airport gigs heavy, because you good with the guests. I've told everyone about the position but she might have her eye on you. Play cool for a time down here. A few more weeks and maybe Trish will bring you upstairs. Inside the hotel proper. What you think?"

"What do I know about front desk? But I guess I want to advance." A sparkling vision of

being a GM flashed quick in my mind. Just a few months on the line had already laid dust on my dream. I'd begun to see the hotel for what it really was and gotten an idea of just how many rungs were on the ladder. "And I like it down here, working with you. Why should I leave?"

"Money. Career. It's the right thing to do. Listen, I'd do anything for my baby girls, and that's why I nailed down this captain gig. I know you ain't got no family, but do it for your girls. And do it now. A man should always want the best for himself. It's goddamn hot out here. Get up inside that air-conditioning, ya heard?"

"I'll think about it."

"See that you do. Now get out. Imma get our baby here detailed from my boy uptown."

Definitive fact concerning cutthroats in any tipping business: nothing makes turn-jumping, gig-stealing, tip-snatching hustlers angrier than having it done unto them.

I don't know who was up for the ticket, Walter or Keith. I was last in line and had just received a generous ten-dollar tip from (if you can believe it) a Honda enthusiast. Walter grabbed a set of keys from the ticket pouch and walked off calmly toward the garage. Keith said, "HEY," nice and loud so that it reverberated through the porte cochere, drawing the attention of Sanford the doorman and Perry, as well as the group of five or so guests sitting on the marble benches, waiting for their vehicles. "I'M UP, MOTHERFUCKER," Keith ripped out, now taking off in stiff-legged strides toward Walter, who was still strolling calmly, just as before.

I think Perry knew what was about to happen. I believe he deliberately *let* it happen.

About a foot behind Walter, who had not turned his head an inch, Keith raised his arms and wrapped his hands around Walter's throat from behind. He was, in full view of everyone, choking him from behind. Walter twisted under his grip, spinning quickly, and planted his own thumbs on Keith's throat. Perry started to say, "Whoa, whoa," but still had not moved from behind the key dispatch counter. They brought each other to the ground, hands crushing each other's windpipes, rolling around on the tile floor, squeezing, cursing, the guests standing now, mouths gaped in pure shock.

New Orleans Times-Picayune want ad: Two Valet Positions Available at New Luxury Hotel Downtown. Drug-Free Workplace. Competitive Hourly Wage + Tips. Please Fax Résumé. Psychopaths Tolerated. Up to a Point.

Two new valets started the following week. One looked like Eddie Munster and couldn't drive a stick shift. Pretty damn crucial. He would run all the way up the stairs and then walk all the way back down, keys hanging sadly from his hand, shaking his head. "I couldn't get the car to move, you guys."

"Damn, Perry. He's jamming everything up."

"At least he ain't *choking out co-workers*, ya heard me? But, yeah. Listen, keep an eye on him for a stick-shift overnight ticket. Something grimy, not too nice. Take him up to the top of the stretch, and learn him on it, dig?"

And that's what I did. We burned the life out of a guest's clutch teaching Eddie to drive. It smelled like a metal-and-oil barbecue up there.

Turns out that was just the beginning of Eddie's problems. Now that he could *dri*

everything, he could efficiently *wreck* everything. He scraped five front bumpers taking tight turns in the garage. He put a scratch down the side of our house car, nice and long. I saw the stress in Perry's face when his BMW was damaged. It was all he could do to avoid reverting to his old ways and pistol-whipping Eddie into a coma. Perry was doing a seven-year bid in Orleans Parish Prison while I was attending seventh-grade social studies.

"This dude is a moron. My man, I almost miss Walter and Keith. Least they was men. Look at this head-hanging, little-boy shithead."

Then Eddie managed to do it right. He set a record, I would wager, still unmatched in the garage. While trying to pull it out of a tight spot, he artfully embedded a Porsche's front end *deep* into a deluxe van's automatic side doors. The vehicles had more than ten thousand dollars in damage. Each. ("Oh, shit, Lord Jesus Christ.")

But even that wasn't the end for him. It was a busy Friday afternoon, plenty of guests arriving for the weekend, pulling in to the driveway to unload luggage and drop off their vehicles. The situation called for a little extra hustle. So Eddie jumped into the driver's seat of a car and threw it in reverse, hoping to slip it out of the line and get it up into the garage. But he failed to check the rearview mirror. Had he thrown it a glance, he might have seen the rear window obstructed by the trunk, which was still popped. He might have then intuited that someone might be digging around inside that trunk for the last of his or her luggage. But Eddie failed to look and jammed his tiny foot down hard on the gas, backed up the vehicle, and, to the shock and terror of every single human being in the porte cochere, scooped up the guest who was, in fact, removing the last of his luggage from the trunk. The guest screamed as the back bumper lifted him off the ground by his knees, and that scream became muffled once the guest, still at the mercy of Eddie's backward momentum, was face-planted into his own trunk, into his own goddamn luggage.

It wasn't until *that* scene Eddie left his valet position.

Management promoted him.

They had to take that boy's tiny foot off the pedal. So they put a phone receiver in his baby hand, taking valet dispatch calls and lining up the tickets for us to bring down.

They took my foot off the pedal, too. My dedication, positive attitude, and lack of thievery, violence, and drugs had made a favorable impression on the executive committee. Trish came down one pleasant autumn afternoon, into the coolness of the porte cochere, and asked me if I might be interested in a front desk position.

I said yes.

A promotion to be proud of. Tennis shoes to dress shoes. "From ashy to classy," Perry said to me my last night on the line. He put his hand around my arm, smiling so proudly, as if I were his son. Then he let his hand fall back to his side, took a hard look at me, his eyes focused, and said, "Don't forget where you came from, Tommy."

I never have. Valet 4 Life, motherfuckers.

I attended the Monday morning 7:00 a.m. meeting, held in the offices behind the front desk. I stood in a circle with my new co-workers, looking like an idiot in my valet uniform and dusty black tennis shoes. Everyone seemed to be looking down at my sneakers. Less than a week ago I'd been running for a ticket and kicked what I thought was a shoe in the middle of the Level 8 straightaway. But when I followed the projectile, brown and certainly *shoe-like*, it rolled over heavily a few times and then righted itself, assuming its natural *rat-like* posture and waddled off, wounded, to the far corner of the garage. I looked down at my shoe, shivering again at the meaty memory of that rodent slammed against my black K-Swiss.

"I would like to introduce you to Tommy," Trish said. "His uniform suit is being tailored so today he will stay back here, in the heart of the house, and train on the system. Please assist him with any questions he may have." That was the first time I heard the term "heart of the house," which refers to the back offices and hallways, the storage closets and freight elevators, the white-painted rooms filled with dirty off-white sheets to be cleaned, as opposed to "the front of the house," meaning the polished marble foyers, vacuumed Oriental rugs, gold-plated railings shined to perfection, and the lobby's center table sagging with fresh-cut flowers that cost the hotel thousands of dollars a week. Trish then continued the meeting, reading off the meeting sheet, something I would grow very familiar with, containing a list of events for the day, hotel occupancy broken down by check-in/checkout, as well as a health and safety dose of company service training, very similar to the two weeks of classes we'd received prior to opening. That whole "party line" fell apart in the garage, but up here they were still pounding the Kool-Aid. And I was taking my first sip.

One member of the staff had just finished reading a service story off the meeting sheet from a sister property in Florida: something about an employee buying a chew toy for a guest's puppy and the guest cried from joy or whatever. "Ladies and gentlemen, have a wonderful day. Start the show," Trish said, and with that the crew dispersed, some pushing through the door to the front desk and lobby to relieve the solitary overnight agent, others down the hallway to man PBX, or the operator stations. Trish told me to head to the general manager's office for a brief meeting with Mr. Daniels.

"Take a seat," he said to me and indicated a plush coffee-colored leather chair in front of his desk, the same type that populated the Wine Bar in the lobby. "Welcome to the hotel, proper, my boy. You handled yourself wonderfully down there in the garage. I heard you witnessed 'the choking.' Things can get pretty fucked down there, right?"

"Yes, sir." I appreciated the profanity, the deformalization of the situation. This man knew exactly what he was doing.

"Now you are truly in the hotel business. Front desk. The brain center of the hotel. You will learn how a hotel operates, son, from check-in to checkout: billing, room features, upgrades, taxes, cash handling, amenities, VIPs. Lots to learn. You excited?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. I started at front desk myself. Should an employee have his heart set on m

position right here, GM, and believe me, this gig is fantastic, front desk is half the battle. The other half is housekeeping. If you know how to get a guest into the right room and know everything about what it takes to make sure that room is spotlessly cleaned, then you can run a hotel, end of story. But you can't run a luxury hotel. Luxury is more than chandeliers and horrible oil paintings of horses. Obviously, it's about service. And that is what I want you to learn, Tommy. Take care of our guests. They will love you for it. I will love you for it. Do you know you heard that lie we told you that every employee, every day, has a large available budget to service our guests in creative ways? It's actually true. Use it. We will support you in your decisions. Now get your ass out of that leather chair and embrace our property management system. Learn the system so you can rule the world. Go get 'em. I'm very proud of you."

Chuck a cool motherfucker.

I walked back down through the lobby and pushed open the door to the heart of the house, determined to prove myself, ready to execute my vision.

"I hope your brain isn't as dusty as your shoes, homey."

And with that, Andy, who was waiting for me in the back office, began training me on the property management system (or, uh, PMS for short). A strange thing to see a hotel translated into a program, every room and floor represented, every guest assigned a profile, rate, and requests. A portion of the work involved learning the room codes: NT = No Turn-down, NC = No Closet. SB = Small Bathroom. And here is a great one: NE = Near Elevator. C = another guest favorite: NV = No View.

Andy set me up on the test system, the exact program (different color screen!) running for some reason on an arbitrary date in 1983, and there I could create reservations, assign room numbers, check guests into one room and then move them to another, check them out, post and remove charges, and generally screw things up nice for all the fake 1980s guests.

"Okay, okay," Andy said, "you've got this." I think he was disappointed. Maybe he had planned to close the door to Trish's office, assume a relaxed seated position that indicated they were close, friendly, almost equals, and say, "Listen, this new kid, the valet? Ain't got the brain for it, Trish," and then brush some dirt off his crossed knee, a disappointed frown on his face. It never turned out that way for him.

So Andy led me down the hall to PBX, or the operator department, explaining this portion of our job on the way. "So, at most hotels, the front desk agents are just agents, and the phone operators are just operators. But here, they are smarter about it. FDAs operate the phone system. Now, why do you think that's a smart move?"

"Well, I suppose if the guest dials zero and needs something from the front desk, the operator doesn't have to transfer the call? They can take care of everything from the first point of contact?"

"Where did you learn that term, 'point of contact'?"

"That's not really a hotel term, is it? And I learned it in college."

"Oh, college. You went to college," he said and nodded at me, actually frustrated.

Andy, apparently, was an elitist prick. Which is exactly why he was picked as front desk trainer, because it takes a superior prick like that to really *get off* on telling you everything you need to know. It's sad, but he got his rocks off knowing more than a new hire, who knows nothing. Which actually makes him an effective choice: I was getting thorough.

trained.

“And make sure that red light is on before you talk some shit because otherwise the guests can hear you, and you don’t want that, so keep an eye on the red mute light here in PBX, and also no one knows why it’s even called PBX, but some people say it’s phone booth exchange because—”

“Actually,” Trish said from the doorway, looking pretty, leaning casually, “it stands for private branch exchange, going back to when the systems were operated by hand. Not that was around back then, of course.”

“Of course not, Trish. You weren’t at all,” Andy stuttered out.

“Anyone know what’s wrong with this moron?” I asked rhetorically, but, you know, internally, making sure my red light was on and all that.

“Suit’s ready, Tommy. Let’s wipe the valet off you.”

As soon as they had a suit on me, they escorted me out to the desk and stood me in front of my very first front desk terminal.

Oh, Mr. Anderson. The very first guest I ever checked in. I remember you.

That’s a lie. I don’t. It was a blur, a simple check-in that bled into the five million other check-ins I would come to perform in my life.

I was nervous, though; *that* I remember. Andy posted up behind me while I prepared myself, staring down at the system, room codes and F-key shortcuts racing through my head, my check-in verbiage piled up in a heap that I hoped to extract and hand over phrase by phrase in the appropriate order, all while smiling and not sweating.

Sanford the doorman came around the corner, pulling a gold bell cart behind him stacked with luggage. He was my favorite doorman. As big as a bear, when he grabbed your hand in greeting and pulled you to his chest for the half hug, he’d rip you forward, and you’d bounce off him. Apparently, he spent almost all of his tip money at Foot Locker. “Tommy, I got over five hundred pairs of tennies. My son, he got about fifty pairs. I got a shoe problem, me.”

Now he caught sight of me posted up behind the front desk. “Look *here*. All in a tie and a suit! Tommy! You look sharp, son.”

“Thanks, Sanford,” I said, and we shook hands over the desk. “Waiting on my first check-in.”

“I got your boy right *chere*,” he said, looking down at a luggage tag. Andy flinched behind me, hearing garage language used in his lobby. “Anderson. Man, I gots to tell Perry. Have him come up here and scope you out. We all proud of you. Believe that. Here come this dude now.”

Sanford began superfluously adjusting luggage on the cart until the guest approached the desk. “Mr. Anderson, this is Tommy for your check-in. I’m going back downstairs, sir.”

“Fine. I’m checking in. Anderson.”

I didn’t even see Sanford slip off without a tip. I was busy pulling up the reservation, swiping the credit card, and issuing phrases one after the other, voice a bit shaky, fingertips a bit wet, but functional nonetheless.

Done. He walked off ahead of his luggage, a bellman falling in behind. Just like that. Done. Baby’s first check-in. That one was for Chuck Daniels.

The next check-in I dedicated to me. The one after that for Perry. The one after that for Trish. After that for Chip and all those who never made it. After that for the human tumor

fuck it. After that for me again. After that for Louis Armstrong, why not? After that for And
I guess. After that for posterity.

And every check-in after that?

For the paycheck, son.

I'm getting ahead of myself with that last line. Never for one minute in New Orleans did
work for my paycheck. I worked for my company, my GM. And I had a tremendous talent for
it.

The front desk really is the brain center of the hotel. After a few months I saw the hotel
itself as a puzzle: king-bed pieces, bathtub pieces, views-of-the-Mississippi-River pieces. And
then there's the predatory, demanding horde of 350 checking-in guests who all want king
beds with bathtubs overlooking the Mississippi River. I wanted to make them all happy, but
in the puzzle of a hotel not everyone can be an edge piece, not everyone gets a corner suite.

Service is not about being up-front and honest. Service is about minimizing negatives and
creating the illusion of perfection. Here's how it's done: Lie. Smile. Finesse. Barter. Convince.
Lie again. Smile again.

I learned mind control, how to persuade guests they want something other than what they
booked. You demand a king bed? But are you sure you don't want double beds (BARTER)?
I can only offer because double-bed rooms are larger, more square footage (LIE), and you can use
the second bed to spread out your clothes (FINESSE) or use it to relax on and still have a
fresh bed to crawl into (CONVINCE). I'm glad I have a double-bed room for you too, son
(SMILE). It was absolutely my pleasure (LIE AGAIN). Enjoy your stay (SMILE AGAIN). The
guest leaves happy, and that makes *me* happy.

I came to learn the system by heart, how to utilize every single feature. Within a PM
perhaps the trickiest yet most helpful representation of the hotel is the matrix or tape chart.
Basically, every room is listed vertically on the left with a horizontal row extended to the right
representing that room on future dates. A currently checked-in reservation for a specific room
is usually represented as a long red bar, which, let's say, takes up three nights, then after that
a hole for two nights, and then an upcoming res pre-blocked in that same room, usually
represented as a green bar: and that lets me see the hotel as a whole, allowing me to draw
reservations from this room to that, filling in holes so as not to leave one-night vacancies
cannot fill unless I have a one-night guest. In those first months I was actually naive enough
to ask guests if they would like to stay in one room for tonight and move to another room
tomorrow for the rest of their stay. They sure as hell would not.

I also learned how to fully operate the phone system, which was simple. Days assigned to
the PBX station were days of spinning around in the chairs, wearing a headset, talking idly to
co-workers, balling up printer paper and throwing it at the mailbox slots, throwing it at each
other. The calls come down the line in order, one agent after the next, so, should there be
four agents working, after you take your call—which could be as simple as “What time
checkout?”—the next three calls were up to your colleagues, and it might not come back to
you for a good ten minutes, depending on the time of day and occupancy. I once used a
stopwatch to time my workload, starting the counter when I picked up a call and stopping it
the moment I disconnected. Then I would go back to throwing paper and spinning around in
the chair. After timing the entire day, I calculated my hourly wage based on actual time
worked, and it came to over \$200 an hour, which, taking the math further, would have given

me over \$400,000 a year.

Interestingly, though, operators were also in charge of the in-room movie systems, which were separate back then, so removing charges and canceling orders had to be done at a separate console.

“Good afternoon, thank you for calling the front office. This is Tommy, how may I assist you?” How many times has that phrase chunk come out of my mouth? If you wedged open my skull and pressed the point of a souvenir hotel pen into the right spot in my brain, I can guarantee that phone greeting will spurt out of my mouth on auto-repeat.

“Yeah, I’m in room 1205. I accidentally ordered a movie. Can you take it off the bill?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Over to the movie console to cancel *Asian Secretaries Rike It Rough*, two minutes and seven seconds into playback. I guess the opening credits were sufficient.

Worry not. The systems have changed, and we can no longer see the movie titles. I mean, we know the new releases cost \$12.95 and the sexual releases cost \$14.95. We just no longer have access to your specific fetishes. Not that we judge you (LIE).

These were my first glimpses into the lives of strangers, something I was coming to realize was a side effect of this business (or perk, depending on the predominance of your voyeuristic tendencies). Want to know what people are really like? What their strange habits are? How they treat people when no one they deem important is watching? Ask their desk agent. Basically, ask their servants: because that is what we are, an army of servants included with the price of the room.

I was having a lovely time, though, learning to navigate life through the eyes of someone who serves but is unseen. César Ritz, the “king of hoteliers and hotelier to kings” and founder of what would become the Ritz-Carlton empire, is quoted as saying, “People like to be served, but invisibly.” If a guest wanted to be gruff and shout out orders, I was accommodating, all stiff movements and sharp, quick head nods, handling his business efficiently. If a guest wanted to assume we were friends, call me by my first name, and tell me about a street performer he saw last night on Bourbon Street, I would lean on the desk with chin in hand, and listen, laughing at the same exact description I heard yesterday from another guest, about the same exact street performer.

I was infinite. All things to all people. Uniform impeccable. Providing exceptional service. Working overtime.

I learned how to defuse anger.

I learned how to take all the blame and smile.

We worked hard through the mild New Orleans winter, through the seasonal drop in occupancy, which allowed me to focus on each guest interaction and master the system. As spring took hold, the heady fragrance of flowers *almost* overcoming the debauched odor of the Quarter, we steadied ourselves for our first run through New Orleans’s premier tourism event: Mardi Gras.

Nothing is more universally misunderstood than Mardi Gras. The image associated with the event usually boils down to ... well, tits. Tits and beads. But that’s like saying the island of Manhattan boils down to popped-collar trust-fund date rapists, just because you’ve only been to the Upper East Side. Or the whole city is Chinese, just because you got off at the Canal Street N train stop. Breasts, without a doubt, are available for viewing, but only in a very

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