DRAKE AND VOSS PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

# The Other Half

*a 321Lumina.com book*


by Blurt Snodgrass

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*A Drake & Voss Novella*

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321Lumina.com

# Chapter One

She arrived on a Wednesday morning in April carrying nothing.

No bag. No phone visible. No folder, no hat, no props of any kind. Just herself, in a good coat the color of deep water, and the quality of someone who had been thinking carefully about this visit and had decided that what she needed to bring was only herself.

She was thirty-four. Nigerian-American, the third generation — you could see all three generations in her face if you knew how to look, the grandparents' bone structure and the parents' particular way of holding themselves and the American-born quality of someone who was entirely at home in a city because they had never been anything other than here. She was precise in the way of someone whose precision was a character trait rather than a professional habit — the way she sat, the way she looked at the cork board, the quality of her attention.

She read the cork board.

All twenty-three things.

She read them in order, from the Farallon Islands above the door down to the letter in the envelope at the bottom, and she took her time with each one, and when she was finished she said: "My grandmother sent me."

Flora said: "Who is your grandmother?"

"Her name is Mireille," Precious said. "Mireille Okafor. She said you found her son Cliff for her four years ago. She said: if you ever need someone to help you find something you can't find yourself, go to Drake and Voss. She said it twice, at different times, which is how I knew she meant it."

Flora looked at her.

Nancy came in, hung her coat, wrote the name. Wrote the time.

She looked at the name.

She read it again.

She wrote, in the margin, very small: *Mireille's granddaughter.*

Good.

"How is she?" Flora said.

Precious almost smiled. "She called Cliff last year on his birthday," she said. "They had dinner. It went well. She's making something from a blue silk she brought back from a trip somewhere — she won't say where she got it or what she's making. She says we'll see when it's done."

"Good," Flora said.

"And Cliff," Flora said. "Your father. He's well?"

"He's well," Precious said. "He's still in Daly City. He still manages the warehouse. He calls my grandmother every two weeks now." She paused. "I think it helps them both. They're still learning each other. But they're learning."

"Good," Flora said again.

She looked at Precious.

"Tell me what you need," she said.

Precious looked at the cork board again — specifically at the case note in Marion Voss's handwriting. *Find the before.* She looked at it for a moment.

"I want to find my grandfather," she said. "Francis Okafor. He died in 2019. I never met him. I want to know who he was."

"Your grandmother's story," Flora said carefully. "You know it."

"I know the outline of it," Precious said. "I know my grandmother loved him and he left her. I know he left when my father was a baby. I know he had another family. I know he died in 2019." She paused. "I know what he did. I want to know who he was." She looked at Flora. "There's a difference."

"Yes," Flora said. "There is."

"I'm thirty-four years old," Precious said. "I am half of someone I have never known anything about. My father's father. My blood, my history, whatever I carry from him without knowing I carry it." She paused. "I'm not doing this for my grandmother. She made her peace with it — or she's

making it, with Cliff, with the blue silk, with whatever she's building now. I'm not doing this to reopen anything for her." She looked at Flora. "I'm doing it for myself. I want to know what the other half is."

Flora looked at her.

She thought about Cecile Morrow the geologist, who said: I spend my life reading the record of what was there before. I need to read this record.

She thought about Pauline Sark the architect, who said: I think about what comes before a building. The ground shapes what you put on it.

She thought about a woman in a care facility in Marin singing a song in a language her daughter didn't recognize, the song surfacing when the recent past had gone and the old past was what remained.

"What do you know about him?" Flora said. "Specifically. What do you actually know."

Precious sat forward slightly.

"His name was Francis Okafor," she said. "He was born in Lagos in 1948. He came to San Francisco in the early 1970s — I think 1972 or 1973, I'm not certain. He met my grandmother in 1974 — that much she told Cliff, who told me. He left my grandmother when my father was eighteen months old, which would be 1981." She paused. "He married a woman named Pauline Carroll in 1990. They had three children — James, Aoife, Daniel. He worked as an engineer, I know that much, I found his obituary online. He died in November 2019 from a cardiac event." She paused. "That's the public record. That's everything I've been able to find on my own."

"You found the obituary," Flora said.

"Yes. The St. Brendan's parish newsletter in Daly City. It was brief."

"Did you contact the family?" Flora said. "The other family. Pauline, or the children."

"No," Precious said. "I don't know — I don't know what I would say. I don't know if they know about my father. I don't know if knowing about me would be welcome or unwelcome." She paused. "I don't want to arrive without understanding what I'm arriving into."

Flora looked at her.

She thought about Robert Bautista, the urban planner, who had lived four blocks from his birth mother for four years before Elena Park came to

the office and offered him a door.

She thought about Gabriel Vetch in Fresno, who had organized his entire professional geography around a building he hadn't yet knocked on.

"You want to understand the ground before you stand on it," Flora said.

"Yes," Precious said. "Exactly."

"All right," Flora said. "Tell me about your father. What does Cliff know about Francis?"

Precious paused.

"Not much," she said. "He left when my father was eighteen months old. My father has no memory of him. My grandmother didn't talk about him." She paused. "My father met him once. When he was twenty-two. He went looking — he was angry then, twenty-two and angry, and he found him. Francis was already married to Pauline by then, the children were young. My father knocked on the door. Francis came out. They stood on the pavement outside the house in Daly City." She paused. "My father said: you left us. Francis said: yes. My father said: why. Francis looked at him for a long time and then he said: I was afraid. That's all he said. He said: I was afraid." She paused. "My father drove home and he never tried again."

The office was quiet.

The April morning outside the window, the first genuinely warm morning of the year, Clement Street doing its spring thing.

"I was afraid," Flora said.

"Yes," Precious said.

"That's not enough," Flora said. "As an explanation."

"No," Precious said. "But it's what he gave." She paused. "My father thinks it was the truest thing Francis ever said to him. He said: at least it was honest. He could have said anything. He said the thing that was actually true." She paused. "I've thought about that a lot. A man who has a twenty-two-year-old son arrive on his doorstep and he says: I was afraid. It's inadequate and it's honest and it's both at once."

Flora looked at the cork board.

*Find the before.*

"I want to find who he was before 1981," she said. "Before he left. Before he became the man who said I was afraid on a doorstep in Daly City." She paused. "That's the work."

"Yes," Precious said. "That's exactly the work."

# Chapter Two

They started with what was findable.

Francis Okafor, born Lagos 1948, arrived San Francisco approximately 1972. Engineering. The obituary listed his employer as a civil engineering firm in San Mateo — he had worked there for thirty years, retiring in 2010.

Nancy found the firm still existed.

She found, through the firm's HR records as far as accessible and through a quiet inquiry with the office manager who had been there since 1995, that Francis Okafor had worked there from 1974 to 2010, thirty-six years, rising from junior engineer to senior project manager. He had been, by all accounts, a careful and reliable professional. The office manager, who had known him in the last fifteen years of his tenure, described him as quiet, thorough, the kind of person who solved problems methodically and didn't create new ones, who was always on time and always prepared.

"Was he liked?" Nancy said.

A pause. Then: "He was respected. Liked is a different thing. He kept to himself. He was courteous, he was professional, he wasn't — he didn't make friends at work the way some people do. He ate lunch alone mostly." A pause. "He wasn't unfriendly. Just private."

"Did he talk about his family?"

"His wife came to the Christmas party sometimes. His children occasionally. He talked about them the way — he was proud of them. He talked about the children when they did well at school, when they graduated. He was proud." A pause. "There was a son. James. He worked in finance, I think. Francis mentioned him the most."

Nancy wrote this down.

She called the Daly City parish, St. Brendan's.

The priest who answered was not the priest who would have known Francis — he had come to the parish in 2021, after Francis's death. But he found a parishioner who had known him, an older woman who had been at St. Brendan's since the 1980s and who remembered Francis Okafor with the warm precision of someone who had sat near a person in church for thirty years.

"He came every Sunday," she said. "Without fail. Rain or shine, he was there. He sat in the same pew — third from the front on the left side. He sang. He had a good voice, he wasn't showy about it, but you could hear him." She paused. "After his wife died in 2018 he came alone. He sat in the same pew. He sang." She paused. "He died the following year. November 2019. He was at mass the Sunday before. I spoke to him. He said: how are you, Mrs. Keogh. I said: getting on. He said: aren't we all." She was quiet for a moment. "That was the last time I spoke to him."

Nancy thanked her.

She called Flora from her desk across the room.

"He was a Sunday mass man," Nancy said. "Same pew, thirty years. He sang."

Flora looked up.

"He was Catholic?" she said.

"St. Brendan's parish," Nancy said. "Which is an Irish Catholic parish. He was a Nigerian man in an Irish Catholic parish in Daly City for thirty years." She paused. "He married an Irish Catholic woman. Pauline Carroll." She paused. "There's something in that. I don't know what yet."

"Keep looking," Flora said.

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She found it by looking at Lagos.

It took Flora five days, working through the Nigerian diaspora archives online, through a history of Catholic mission schools in Lagos in the 1950s and 1960s, through the particular history of a specific school — St. Gregory's College, Lagos, a Catholic secondary school, founded by Irish missionaries, one of the most prestigious secondary schools in Nigeria for most of the twentieth century.

Francis Okafor was in the alumni records of St. Gregory's College. Class of 1966.

Educated by Irish missionaries. Formed in an Irish Catholic institution. Came to San Francisco in the early 1970s and found his way to an Irish Catholic parish in Daly City and sat in the same pew for thirty years and sang.

Flora looked at this.

She thought about the before.

About what the before shaped.

She called Precious.

She told her about St. Gregory's College, Lagos. About the Irish missionaries. About St. Brendan's parish and the same pew and the singing.

Precious was quiet for a moment.

"He was shaped by Irish missionaries," she said. "And then he spent thirty years in an Irish Catholic parish." She paused. "He was looking for something familiar. Something from before San Francisco. Something from the school." She paused. "He was looking for home in the most available form."

"Yes," Flora said. "I think so."

"That doesn't explain leaving," Precious said. "That doesn't explain my grandmother or my father."

"No," Flora said. "It doesn't. But it tells us something about who he was. A man formed by a particular institution who spent his life looking for the version of that institution available to him." She paused. "A man who said: I was afraid. A man who kept to himself at work, who was private, who was respected but not known." She paused. "He had an interior life that he didn't share with the world. He kept it in the pew in the third row."

"He sang," Precious said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"My grandmother sings," Precious said. "She sings in the kitchen. She always has." She was quiet for a moment. "I sing. My father sings. We've always known it was from her side." She paused. "Maybe it was from both sides."

Flora held the phone.

"Precious," she said. "The other family. James, Aoife, Daniel. I think it's time to find out if they know about your father."

A long pause.

"Yes," Precious said. "I think so too."

# Chapter Three

James Okafor was forty-six, worked in finance in San Francisco, and lived in the Marina. Nancy found him through his professional profile — public, the professional profile of someone who had decided that visibility was a professional asset.

Flora called him on a Thursday.

He answered on the second ring with the voice of someone who answered unknown numbers carefully but answered them — the professional habit of a man whose work required him to be reachable.

Flora introduced herself. Said she was a private investigator. Said she was calling on behalf of a client who was researching the family of Francis Okafor.

A silence.

Then: "Who is the client?"

"Her name is Precious Oduya," Flora said. "She's thirty-four. Her father is Clifford Okafor. Clifford is your father's son from a previous relationship."

A longer silence.

This silence had a specific quality — not surprise exactly. Something more like the arrival of something that had been expected for a long time without being certain of its form.

"Cliff," James said.

"You know about him," Flora said.

"My father told me," James said. "Before he died. In 2019, when he was ill. He told me there was a son, a son he'd left when the son was very young. He said the son's name was Cliff." He paused. "He said: I was afraid. I was young and I was afraid and I left." He paused. "He said he'd met Cliff once,

when Cliff was twenty-two. He said Cliff had come to the door and they'd talked on the pavement and Cliff had driven away and Francis had stood on the pavement for a long time." He paused. "He said it was the worst thing he'd ever done. Leaving. He said it was the worst thing."

Flora held the phone.

"Did your siblings know?" she said.

"My father told all three of us. Before he died. He said: there's something you need to know. He said: there's a son." He paused. "My sister Aoife wanted to find Cliff immediately. Daniel didn't know what to think. I —" He stopped. "I didn't know what to think either. And then our father died and then there was the estate and then the pandemic and the years went by." He paused. "We talked about it, the three of us. We agreed: if Cliff ever wanted to find us, the door was open. But we weren't sure we had the right to find him."

"He didn't want to find you," Flora said. "He made peace with not finding you." She paused. "But his daughter did. Precious wanted to know who her grandfather was. She wanted to know the other half."

A silence.

"She's thirty-four," James said.

"Yes."

"She's our niece," he said. The word arriving with a weight that suggested he was hearing it for the first time in this context, the relationship being real for the first time rather than theoretical.

"Yes," Flora said.

He was quiet for a long time.

"What does she want?" he said. "From us."

"She wants to understand who your father was," Flora said. "Not what he did — she knows what he did. Who he was. What kind of man. What he was like." She paused. "You knew him for forty-six years. You knew him in a way no one else did."

"He was complicated," James said.

"Yes," Flora said. "I imagine he was."

"He was —" James paused. "He was a man who had done something he couldn't fix and who lived with that knowledge every day and who made the life he had as good as he could make it and was very good at not talking

about what he couldn't fix." He paused. "He was a generous father to us. He was present and attentive and he showed up. He worked hard. He cared." He paused. "He was also a man with a door he never opened. We all knew the door was there. We didn't know what was behind it until he told us at the end." He paused. "The worst thing he ever did was leave a woman and a child. The best things he ever did were us — me and Aoife and Daniel. And they were both true. He was both those things."

Flora looked at the case note on the cork board.

*Find the before.*

"His before," she said. "Before San Francisco. Before your mother. Before Cliff. He went to St. Gregory's College in Lagos — the Catholic mission school."

"I know," James said. "He talked about it. The Brothers. The school. He was shaped by it very deeply." He paused. "He said once: the Brothers taught me what it was to try to be good. He said: they didn't always teach me how to be good. Just the importance of trying." He paused. "I think that's what he lived with. The trying. He was always trying."

"He sat in the same pew at St. Brendan's for thirty years," Flora said.

"Yes," James said. "Every Sunday. I went with him sometimes, as a child. As a teenager I stopped going and he didn't pressure me." He paused. "But he went. Every Sunday, same pew, front left." He paused. "He sang. He had a good voice. He said: the Brothers taught us to sing. He said: I've never been able to stop."

Flora held the phone.

She thought about Mireille Okafor singing in the kitchen. She thought about Cliff with his mother's hands on the table. She thought about Precious in the client chair saying: I sing. My father sings.

"He sang," she said.

"Yes," James said.

"Would you be willing to talk to Precious?" Flora said. "And your sister and brother. Would any of you be willing to tell her who her grandfather was."

A long pause.

"We've been waiting," James said. "Since he died. Waiting to see if anyone came." He paused. "Yes. We'd like to talk to her."

# Chapter Four

Precious came in the following week.

She sat in the client chair and Flora told her what she had found — St. Gregory's College, the Irish missionaries, the same pew, the singing, what James had said about the door that was always there and the worst thing and the trying.

She sat with it.

She sat with it the way she sat with everything — with the full attention of someone who had decided to understand rather than to feel first and understand later.

"He was afraid," she said. "He said so to my father. He was twenty-two, he was afraid, he left." She paused. "And then he spent thirty years in a pew trying." She paused. "That's not an excuse. But it's a shape. It's the shape of someone who knew what they'd done and couldn't find the way back and kept trying to be good enough in the life they had."

"Yes," Flora said.

"My grandmother's shape is different," Precious said. "She didn't go to the pew. She went to her work, her family, her garden. She carried what happened without a pew." She paused. "Same event. Different shapes." She looked at the cork board. "James wants to talk to me."

"Yes," Flora said. "All three of them do."

Precious looked at her hands.

"I don't know what to call them," she said. "Half-aunt, half-uncle. It sounds clinical. But they're strangers. I don't know them at all."

"You don't have to call them anything yet," Flora said. "You can just talk."

"Yes," Precious said. "I can just talk."

She was quiet for a moment.

"My grandmother started calling Cliff on his birthday," she said. "They had dinner. They're still learning each other." She paused. "I started this because I wanted to know the other half. The Francis half. Now I'm going to be sitting across from people who are that half. People who knew him for forty-six years." She paused. "It's stranger than I expected."

"The finding always is," Flora said.

Precious looked at her.

"Mireille said that about you," she said. "She said: they find things and they don't make it simple. They make it true." She paused. "I think I understand what she meant now."

"Good," Flora said.

Precious looked at the cork board.

She looked at all twenty-three things.

She looked at the Farallon Islands above the door.

She looked at the case note — *Find the before.*

"He was afraid," she said. "Francis. My grandfather. He was twenty-two and afraid and he made a choice and he lived with it." She paused. "I don't forgive it. I don't think I have the standing to forgive it — it wasn't done to me. It was done to my grandmother and my father." She paused. "But I understand it a little more than I did. The shape of him." She paused. "He sang. I sing. I didn't know that came from anywhere other than my grandmother."

"It came from both," Flora said.

"Yes," Precious said. "It came from both."

She stood.

She went to the door.

She stopped and looked at the cork board one more time.

"Can I add something?" she said.

Flora looked at her.

Precious reached into her coat pocket and produced a photograph. She had brought it after all — she had said she was bringing nothing, but she had brought this.

The photograph was of an old man, seventies perhaps, sitting in a church pew. Looking not at the camera but slightly past it, at something ahead of him, his mouth slightly open. Singing.

"This is from my father's collection," Precious said. "He found it after Francis died. He doesn't know where it came from — maybe Pauline sent it to him, maybe he found it online, he can't remember. But he kept it." She paused. "It's the only photograph my father has of his father."

Flora looked at the photograph.

Francis Okafor. Seventies. Third pew from the front on the left side. Mouth open, singing, looking at something ahead of him.

"Bring it to James," Flora said. "He should see it. He should know your father has it."

Precious looked at the photograph.

"Yes," she said. "I will." She looked at Flora. "But first —"

She held the photograph out.

Flora took it.

She went to the cork board.

She found a pin.

She pinned the photograph below the twenty-three things.

The twenty-fourth thing.

An old man in a pew, mouth open, singing.

Precious looked at it.

"He's in the record now," she said.

"Yes," Flora said. "He is."

Precious went to the door.

She went down the stairs.

The fourth step.

The door.

The street.

# Chapter Five

Nancy made tea.

She brought the cups and they sat in the April office, the warm spring day outside the window, Clement Street in its full spring mode, the trees budding, the air carrying what April air carried in San Francisco when it was being kind.

"He was afraid," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said.

"And he tried," Nancy said. "For the rest of his life he tried." She paused. "It wasn't enough. What he'd done couldn't be fixed by trying. But he tried."

"Yes," Flora said.

"And now his granddaughter knows," Nancy said. "The trying and the failing and the singing." She paused. "She knows the shape of him."

"Yes."

Nancy looked at the photograph on the cork board.

The old man in the pew, mouth open, looking ahead, singing.

"He looks like Cliff," Nancy said.

Flora looked at the photograph.

She had not met Cliff. She had read Nancy's notes from the case four years ago, the way she read all their old cases, the record of what they had done. She knew the description — tall, the mother's eyes.

"And like Precious?" she said.

Nancy looked at the photograph.

"Around the jaw," she said. "The way she holds her jaw when she's thinking."

Flora looked at the photograph.

The jaw. The singing. The things that traveled through blood without asking permission.

She thought about Mireille Okafor and the blue silk from somewhere that she wouldn't tell anyone about. She thought about the country of before, the photographs that stopped in 1987. She thought about Cliff with his hands on the table saying: I'm not angry. I was never angry.

She thought about a man in the third pew from the front, singing, every Sunday, thirty years.

"He came from an Irish Catholic mission school," she said. "In Lagos. And he ended up in an Irish Catholic parish in Daly City. And he sat in the same pew for thirty years."

"He was always going home," Nancy said.

"Yes," Flora said. "Just not to the right home."

Nancy held her tea.

She was quiet for a while.

Flora looked at the notepad. Nancy's hand on the pen, the careful deliberate grip she used now, the one that was slightly different from the grip she had used ten years ago, slightly more intentional, slightly more present.

"Nancy," she said.

Nancy looked at her.

"How is the system?" Flora said.

Nancy looked at the notepad.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She read both.

She looked at them again.

She looked at them a third time.

Good.

She looked at Flora.

"The system is working," she said. "Today the system is working."

"Good," Flora said.

"Good," Nancy said.

The April afternoon continued outside the window, warm and specific, the city in its spring mode, the dry cleaner below running the day's work, the steam coming up through the floor with the smell of something being made fresh and clean.

Flora looked at the cork board.

The twenty-four things.

The Farallon Islands above the door.

The case note in her mother's handwriting at the bottom.

*Find the before.*

She had found the before.

She had found the before of Francis Okafor — the mission school, the Brothers, the singing, the shape of a man formed by a specific place and a specific faith and a specific fear, the shape of a man who did the worst thing and spent thirty years in the same pew trying to be good enough.

She had found Precious's grandfather.

She had found Mireille's before again, the Francis she hadn't known, the Francis who sat in the pew with his mouth open looking at something ahead of him.

She had found something for herself too, though she had not come looking for it. She had found the work was continuous — that what her mother had started in this office in 1979 was still going, that the cases connected to each other, that the people came back in their grandchildren and their grandchildren's questions, that the finding was never finished.

She picked up her pen.

She wrote the date.

She wrote the time.

She waited for the next case.

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*Two months later Precious sent a note.*

*Brief, precise, the note of someone who chose words carefully.*

*It said: I had dinner with James and Aoife and Daniel last month. We ate for four hours. They showed me photographs of their father from when*

*he was young — from Lagos, from when he first came to San Francisco. He was thin and he looked scared and he was trying to smile.*

*Below that: James has a recording. A home video from 1998 at a Christmas party. Francis is singing. James sent me a copy.*

*Below that: I played it for my father. He listened three times. He said: he has my voice. He didn't mean I sound like him. He meant Francis sounds like Cliff.*

*Below that, one more line: My grandmother heard it too. She listened once, very carefully, and then she said: yes. That's him.*

*Flora read it.*

*She passed it to Nancy.*

*Nancy read it.*

*She stood and pinned it to the cork board below the twenty-four things.*

*The twenty-fifth thing.*

*She stepped back.*

*She looked at the cork board.*

*Twenty-five things.*

*The Farallon Islands above the door.*

*The case note at the bottom: Find the before.*

*And now: That's him.*

*The work continued.*

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*In the office on the second floor, the cork board held what it held.*

*The Farallon Islands postcard above the door.*

*The note on card stock gone slightly yellow.*

*The postcard from Inverness. The postcard from Penang.*

*A folded note: Second movement. Last night. I got out of the way.*

*A single sheet: He wrote back.*

*A postcard of a table: I'm the one who gets to sit at it first.*

*A cream note in fountain pen: You cannot smell your own smell. But you can know that it exists.*

*A card on good paper: Tell him he was right.*

*A postcard of a lake: She sang the song on Wednesday. She knew all the words. She held my hand.*

*A cream card: Tell Cecile she has her grandmother's eyes.*

*A torn piece of paper: Tell Flora. Today.*

*A note in careful English: The book is home.*

*An envelope from 1999 in a hand that was not theirs.*

*A postcard of the Great Highway: We walked. The fog was in. / She thinks like her mother.*

*A postcard of the Gulf of Guinea coast: Now he's in the record and you're in his record.*

*A photograph of a viewport: darkness and faint cold light.*

*A deep-sea postcard: I'm going back down in March. This time I'll know what I'm looking for.*

*A postcard of the Louisiana bayou: He played for two hours. I understand now what he was doing for forty years.*

*A small folded paper: After the noise. Still.*

*A letter on architectural letterhead: She said her mother would have approved of Drake and Voss.*

*A case note in Marion Voss's handwriting: Find the before.*

*A letter in an envelope addressed to a man who had been looking for eleven years and found.*

*A photograph of an old man in a pew: mouth open, singing, looking ahead.*

*A note: That's him.*

*The sign on the frosted glass door was still slightly crooked.*

*Neither of them had fixed it.*

*Neither of them ever would.*

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*End.*