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Hip to be square

AN AUSTIN HIPSTER DIGS DOWNTOWN GEORGETOWN

By Dan Dietz / Photos by Michelle Patterson

Welcome to the Waffle-Butt Society!" hollers the short-haired woman closest to the door. She and a group of friends are reclining in chairs outside Cianfrani, a coffee shop on the east side of Georgetown Square.

"Waffle-Butt?"

She points to her chair with its woven metal seat. "You sit here as long as we do..."

"Ahhhh," I say, getting it. "So how long have you guys been sitting here?"

"Oh," she says with a laugh, "about 10 years now."

It isn't even 11 a.m., and I've already found something weird. This is going to be a good day.

LET ME BACK UP. The idea for this article came from a conversation I had with Michael Barnes, the XL editor. Michael knew I'd been teaching at Southwestern University in Georgetown on and off for a few years.

"You know what would be really interesting," he said, "is an article about someone like you hanging out in a place like Georgetown."

"Someone like me?"

"Yes. Young, hip..."

"I don't think I'm all that hip, Michael."

"Please. Those glasses?" He nodded at my square plastic frames. "Those shoes?" I looked down at my black sneakers with the red argyle patches. "You are not the kind of person usually seen in downtown Georgetown."

That I could believe. In fact, I'd kind of gone out of my way to avoid spending time in Georgetown. I loved teaching at Southwestern, but as soon as class was dismissed, I hopped into my car and sped (fled?) back down Interstate 35 to the funky embrace of South Congress. Yet I'd always wondered if maybe, tucked away among the historic buildings, there weren't a few odd and off-beat elements just waiting to be discovered.

"OK," I said. "What do you have in mind?"

What he had in mind was this: an entire day in Georgetown Square, morning, noon and night. I'd wander the small-town streets, in search of the kind of weird and wonderful people, places and things that can be found in abundance in Austin.

"Make sure you wear the glasses," Michael repeated. His expression was disconcertingly serious.

"I will," I nodded, like a special

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ops commando accepting the mission that could very well be his last. "I will."

Morning

I motor into Georgetown Square at 10 on Saturday morning. The sky shimmers with the expectation of Texas heat. My first stop is supposed to be the courthouse, the historic building at the center of the square. But when I get out of my car and turn around, a large, white barrier blocks my view. It's at least 10 feet high and completely surrounds the courthouse. Artist that I am, my first thought is: Look! A canvas for a gigantic mural! Exactly the kind of thing I was hoping to find today.

"No," the woman manning the Georgetown Square Visitor's Center corrects me as I step inside. "It's a construction barrier."

"Oh," I say, trying to wipe the dorkiness from my face. My body insists that the cure for my embarrassment is a cup of coffee (my body thinks the cure for anything is a cup of coffee). So I head back out to hunt for caffeine.

LUCKILY, CIANFRANI IS ONLY A QUICK HOP ACROSS THE STREET. I walk over, and that's when I'm greeted by the Waffle-Butt Society.

Housed in a 120-year-old building that was once a saloon and billiards parlor, Cianfrani is actually pretty darn Austin-y: eclectic in decoration, packed with glass jars filled with beans of different blends, and of course, Wi-Fi for the laptop crowd. The pastry selection ain't much to look at, but you can't have everything.

Outside again and clutching my coffee, I notice a "Happy Graduation" cake. I ask Gwen Green, the Waffle-Butter who hailed me before, who's graduating. "That's her over there!" Gwen points to a middle-aged woman sitting on the sidewalk. "Pam! Show him your diploma."

Pam hands over a diploma from Austin College, congratulating Pamela Marion Fox on receiving her degree.

"When did you graduate?" I ask. "1974," she replies. Pam explains that when she got divorced, she whited out her husband's name from her diploma. Her new beau, a tough-looking man with a white handlebar moustache and the gloriously incongruous name John Kennedy, knew how much the diploma meant to her. So he asked the president of Austin College to grant her a new one — with her maiden name — and graduate her all over again.

"What can I say?" asks Kennedy. "I love her."

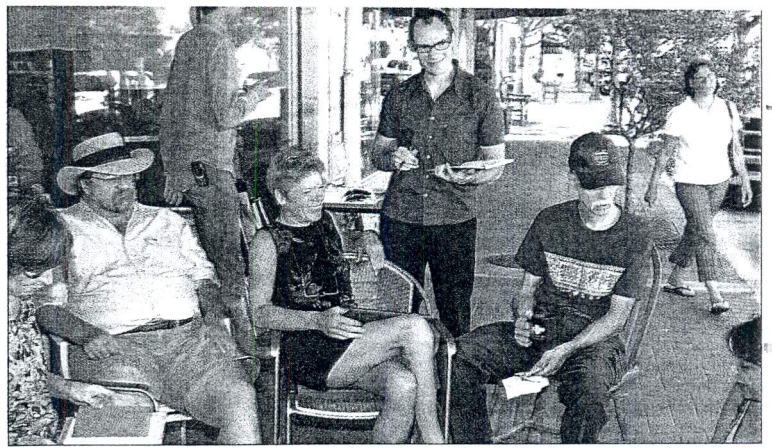
I can see how it would be hard to turn John Kennedy down. Besides the "ask not what your country can do for you" associations of his name, he drives a mean-looking black convertible. Yet despite his tough exterior, John's voice is soft and kind. He smiles as I eye the cake.

"Go on. Have a piece."
How can I refuse?

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ANNARELLA: The furnishings at this shop might remind you of Pottery Barn, but the pieces have less of a mass-produced look.

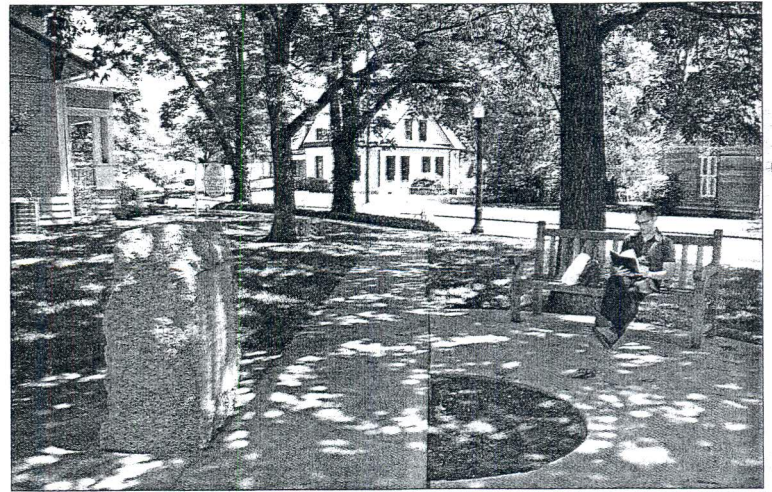


CIANFRANI COFFEE COMPANY (top left and top right): Dan Dietz, the hip guy sitting at an inside table, met John Kennedy at the coffeehouse, Kennedy, who lost his left arm in a motorcycle accident, did something special for his sweetie. Outside the coffeehouse, Patsy Yarbrough, Anthony Mallard, Gwen Green, Daniel Green and Mika Murray sit and talk. Daniel Green appears to be the only one safe from 'Waffle-Butt.'

TREASURES (left): This barber chair for tykes was the most fabulous thing found in this antique shop, but, alas, it already had been sold.

MONICA'S 701 (below left): Fried green tomatoes and bacon make the BLT at this contemporary restaurant quite decadent, but you can balance that with a salad that has greens, strawberries and candied walnuts.

FOUNDERS PARK (below right): A chunk of granite commemorates the founding of Georgetown in this quaint space that offers a good view of Old Grace, a gorgeous Episcopal church founded in 1868.



'I've been so busy trying to make Georgetown into Austin, that I've completely missed Georgetown itself.'

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I DECIDE IT'S TIME TO INVESTIGATE THE SHOPPING SCENE in Georgetown Square and see if I can uncover anything as cool and unusual as John Kennedy and the Waffle-Butt Society. First stop: a store called Treasures.

If Cianfrani is the kind of unexpectedly, unpretentiously cool place Austinites might flock to, Treasures is . . . well, just what you'd expect. A nice, well-kept little store with a country flair, stocked with antiques and home accents.

A fantastic sight greets me when I step inside: an old child-size barber seat, with a horsey-head attached to the front. The perfect distraction for that young boy or girl terrified of their first haircut. Not only is it priceless, it's sold, as proclaimed by the bright red letters on the hanging tag.

Nothing else in the store seems to carry the unique whimsy of that one fabulous object, however. Time for my next stop: Annarella.

NO ANTIQUES HERE. Annarella carries contemporary furniture, art and other items for the home. Imagine if someone decided to start their own Pottery Barn, but everything inside was a little less mass-produced looking.

A chair covered in some kind of brown, furry material beckons me. Sitting in it is like being mauled by a large dog — in a good way. I get up to investigate some cryptic and mysterious framed drawings. A set of baby blue duvet and pillow covers with a subtle Asian theme catches my eye. So much great stuff, so little time.

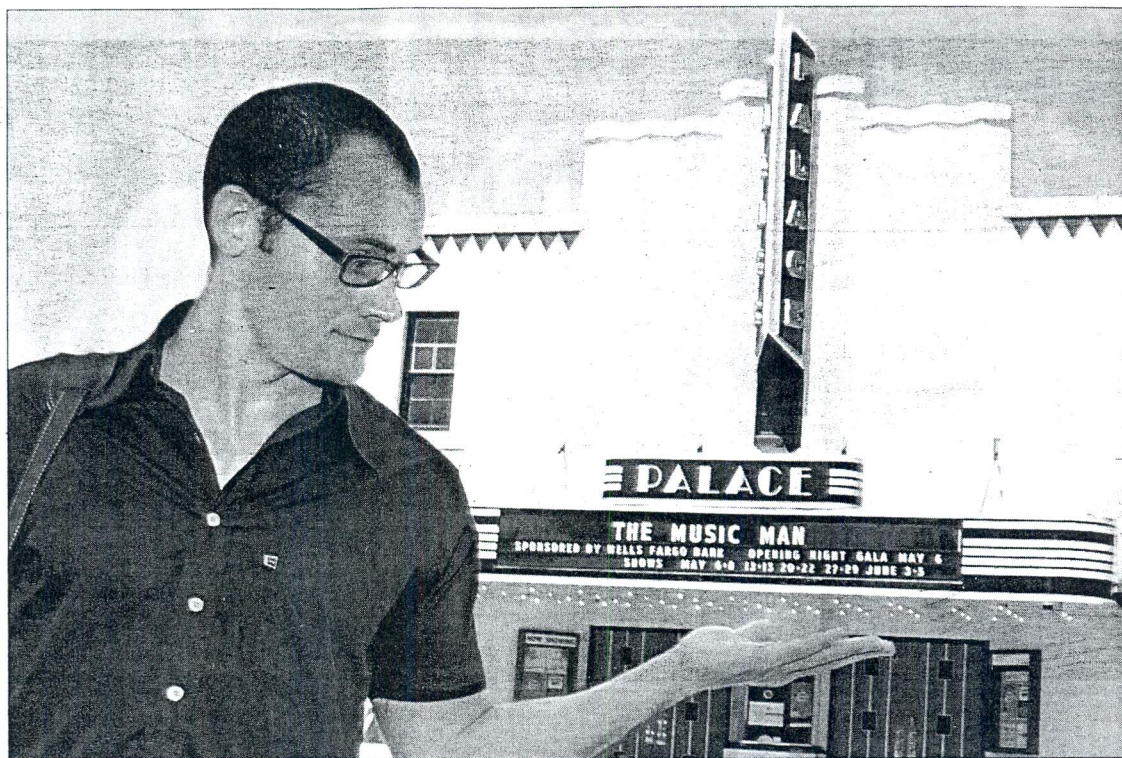
AS I LEAVE THE STORE, I TAKE STOCK. Cianfrani (and the Society) definitely qualify as weird and wonderful. Annarella has several hip gems on the shelves. And even Treasures had the barber seat. If the rest of my mission goes this well, I might have to declare this town Austin's Undiscovered Funky Backyard.

Noon

Hungry for some lunch, I walk over to Monica's 701 for a bite. Monica's is housed in what used to be the Masonic Lodge, built in 1900. It's an easy place to spot: just look for the onion-shaped dome at the top. Apparently the Masons used to meet here. Will the inside be decorated in odd symbology? Will I be greeted with a secret handshake?

Nope. The building might be a century old, but Monica's is as up-to-date as they come: retro-inspired upholstery, a glass wine wall splitting the space in half, and iron wheel-shaped chandeliers that warm the cool, modern elements of the restaurant.

Monica's serves contemporary cuisine with a Central Texas flair. For lunch, I order the Hill Country BLT with a signature



THE PALACE THEATRE: This performance space embodies all that is endearing about community theater.

Monica's Salad on the side.

The BLT arrives loaded for bear with bacon, lettuce, and fried green tomatoes. A real heart attack between two slices of bread. But one bite into this stack of rich, smoky-fried goodness removes all health concerns from my mind. If this sandwich sends me to meet my maker, I'll go happy.

The salad is as light and refreshing as the sandwich is . . . not. Greens, strawberries, and candied walnuts all artfully arranged — it almost feels like dessert.

After lunch, I ask Jim McKinney, founder of Monica's, a question of dire importance: "What's the most unusual thing you've ever witnessed in Georgetown Square?"

He stares at me blankly. "You know," I continue, "something odd or weird. Anything."

A long pause. "There was a fire about a block from here last fall," he offers. "That was . . . unusual."

"Oh really?" I ask eagerly. "How so?" "Well, you could smell the smoke from here."

Hmmm. Not quite the kind of offbeat tale I was hoping for. Monica's is a great spot, but I'll have to search elsewhere for the odd reality I'm sure lurks just under the surface of this placid square.

IT'S 1:30, AND I'M OUTSIDE OBSERVING THE FOOT TRAFFIC IN THE SQUARE. The only problem is . . . there is no foot traffic. There's one guy sitting on a bench, studying a map. If I follow him, will he lead me to any cool, undiscovered places?

I wait for him to get up and walk. Minutes pass. He looks at his map. Gets on his phone. Hangs up. Sits. Nothing.

A young woman sporting a pair of attitude-heavy sunglasses passes. Maybe I should follow her? No wait — that's not journalism, it's stalking. And besides, she's walking over to her car . . . and leaving the square. Oh, well.

More time passes. The blue sky presses down on the tree branches above me. It's starting to get hot.

2 P.M. COMES AND GOES. 2:30 FOLLOWS. I'M STARTING TO GET A LITTLE FREAKED OUT. I've been wandering around the square for more than an hour now, and the most interesting thing I've seen is a book-signing table for "Breastfeeding's Number One Question: How Do I Know My Baby Is Getting Enough Milk?"

What if this is the true reality of Georgetown Square? Retirees from Sun City cooing over animal sculptures and having those "You're from (random city)? I'm from (someplace near random city). What a small world" conversations. For the first time, it occurs to me that my mission could fail.

I SPOT THE GEORGETOWN HISTORY MUSEUM.

Surely if anyone can impart to me the weird, little-known facts about this city, these folks can.

Irene Lindquist, a kind-looking older woman, generously answers my questions about the town's history. Then I ask her the big one: "What's the weirdest, most unusual thing you've ever seen here in Georgetown Square?"

She blinks at me. "It could be a person," I offer. "Or an event. Something that happened."

She turns to her friend, who shrugs. "Well," Irene says finally, "there's the

Poppy Festival."

"Uh-huh," I nod, waiting for her to continue. "Poppy Festival" sounds promising. Lots of potentially weird happenings at a Poppy Festival, right? But Irene just stares off into space.

"You should talk to Chris Dyer," Irene's friend says.

I find Chris in the back. "The weirdest thing I've ever seen in Georgetown Square? Oh there's always something. Practically every week."

My heart smacks into my ribs. Finally! "Like what?"

"Well," he says. "One time this guy rode through on a horse and buggy. He was traveling from Arizona to the Gulf Coast."

"Really?" This could be interesting. "Did he do anything?"

"No. Just rode on through." "Oh," I say, disappointment creeping in to my voice. "Anything else?"

"Um . . ." A pause. "Seems like there's always someone coming through on a horse."

I need coffee.

Afternoon

(or, the Russian coffee T-shirt revelation)

Stepping back into Cianfrani is like entering the Austin embassy after being on foreign soil. A twentysomething guy surfs the Internet on his PowerBook, quietly rocking out to the MP3s streaming into his headphones. A hip young couple, all smiles and tattoos, comes in behind me. They saunter over to a dude sporting a shaved head and Con-

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HIP TO BE SQUARE

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verse sneakers. I can breathe again.

I step up to the counter and grab a large Russian Coffee, iced and laced with vanilla and (I think) caramel. Then I sit down and try to collect my thoughts.

First comes fear: What if I can't dig up anything offbeat and interesting here? This article is going to be lame.

Then anger: Who could possibly dig up anything offbeat and interesting here? Georgetown is lame.

Finally, resignation: I'll never dig up, etc. I'm lame.

I sink into misery and sip my coffee. A guy in a tie-dyed shirt enters and sits next to a woman waiting by the window. She starts talking about Japan.

"There's this mall there where you can buy these T-shirts with cool Japanese writing on them," she says. "Americans buy these shirts like crazy. But it turns out the writing actually says, 'I'm a Fascist American' and stuff like that."

"One of the coolest T-shirts I've ever seen," says Tie-Dye Guy, "has a picture of the state of Kentucky on it . . . and then underneath it is the word 'California.'"

"What?" the woman laughs. "I don't get it."

"It's a picture of one place but the name of another."

"I still don't get it," the woman insists. But I do. And that's when it hits me: That's exactly what I've been doing all day. I've been taking a picture of Georgetown and doing my best to write the word "Austin" underneath. I've been so busy trying to make Georgetown into Austin, that I've completely missed Georgetown itself. It's like I've been viewing the world through hip-colored glasses. And nothing's measuring up to my standards of cool.

In other words, I've been an idiot. I suck down the rest of my Russian Coffee and stride back out into the heat. From this point forward, I will take Georgetown as it comes.

I CROSS THE SQUARE AND HEAD INTO COBBLESTONE, ANOTHER ANTIQUE STORE. I see a framed motivational poster depicting a surfer balanced on a curling wave. "ATTITUDE," it proclaims. The snark-neurons in my brain start firing (this is an antique?) but I shut them up. Remember the Russian Coffee T-Shirt Revelation, I tell myself. My ATTITUDE is the whole problem here.

I glance down at a row of books and notice an "X Files" book-on-tape. An audio version of a novelization of a television show? It's so ludicrous, it's kinda . . . cool.

My next 30 minutes uncover equally charming and quirky objects. A lovely rocking cradle, at least 60 or 70 years old. A stack of old comics, including "The Flash vs. The Murderous Mirror Master" (I think I had that one when I was a kid!). A musical telephone rest from the 1950s ("Your choice of six beautiful tunes!"). The layout of the store is humble — it doesn't proclaim itself as hip or funky. But Cobblestone contains some of the most unusual treasures I've seen in a long time. All you have to do is look.

A FEW STEPS NORTH AND A CLIMB UP A WINDING STAIRCASE brings me to the Golden Bough Art Gallery. Here I'm greeted by Sondra L. Parker, a vibrant woman with long

white hair who deals exclusively in work by Central Texas artists.

Parker introduces me to the young man seated next to her. "This is James Gordy, one of our artists. You can find his paintings all over the gallery."

James walks me around, pointing his work out to me. It's full of bold colors and a sense of mythic grandeur. He makes a living primarily through commissions, which include a striking Christ on the cross as well as more abstract works.

In fact, James was asked to create a design for the Poppy Festival posters one year. Unfortunately, the work was deemed too racy (it depicts a number of near-nude figures, barely camouflaged by bursting poppies). Undeterred, Parker took the design and had it printed onto T-shirts advertising her gallery. She must have seen my eyebrows rise at the word "T-shirt," because she hands me one on my way out the door.

I DECIDE TO WHILE AWAY THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON IN FOUNDERS PARK, on the southeast edge of the square. Arriving at the park can be a little underwhelming. It's less of a park and more of a memorial. A large chunk of pink granite commemorates the founding of Georgetown. A couple of benches sit beneath a few shady trees. That's about it.

But sitting on the west-facing bench affords me a gorgeous view of Old Grace, an Episcopal church founded in 1868. It's a white, wood-framed Gothic Revival wonder. The pointed arched windows reach up, the symmetrical triangular roofs reach up, the whole structure seems to reach straight up to the sky. I sit in amazement at how such a small building can achieve such simple majesty. Old Grace asks one thing, but it asks it with force and dignity: Look up. I do. It's a humbling moment.

Evening

As 6 p.m. rolls around, I head for Wildfire to sample its selection of hearty dinner items.

I order a glass of wine but am informed that Georgetown is a dry city, and I therefore must join a "social club" for a fee of \$3 before they can serve me alcohol. No thanks. I order the roast duck.

As I wait for my entrée, I look around the restaurant. A bunch of booths and tables, some unassuming art on the walls, industrial-looking green carpet. This place might have seemed upscale when it was the only game in town. But now that Monica's has opened, Wildfire seems to need an Ambush Makeover.

The roast duck is served with a damp hand towel. I'm to eat this thing with my bare fingers? Embarrassed, I pick up the duck breast and sink my teeth into the rich, roasted meat. Soon my teeth and tongue are roaming around, finding every delicious morsel. My face is greasy. I set the bones down and look around. No one has even given a second thought to my barbaric display. And that's what Wildfire has that Monica's doesn't. Its interior might be painfully out-of-date, but it's also unassuming enough for me to feel comfortable eating like a slob at a backyard barbecue. Not a bad trade-off.

After dinner, I notice my body's start-

ing to ache from all the walking around. I ask my server if he happens to have any ibuprofen. He informs me that it is illegal for them to "dispense drugs of any kind" here. I almost ask if there's a social club I can join to get some aspirin, but I decide not to hassle the poor kid and leave.

LUCKILY, THE PALACE THEATRE, MY FINAL STOP OF THE DAY, IS RIGHT NEXT DOOR.

The marquee proudly displays tonight's live theatrical production: Meredith Willson's "The Music Man." I step inside and soon find Mary Ellen Butler, looking every inch like the director she is — frazzled and loving every minute of it.

"You wouldn't happen to have any ibuprofen would you?" I ask.

"Oh, honey," she says with wry, tired smile. "This is the theater. You wouldn't believe the things I've got. Come on."

She takes me out of the building and leads me around to a back alley.

"I'm going to show you our backstage," she says. "You'll love this."

She's right. The alley opens up onto a huge courtyard, and the entire space is filled with tents, set pieces and actors dressed in period costume. It's like a gigantic gypsy camp populated by residents of small-town, turn-of-the-century America. A young woman in a huge hat holds out an even huger bottle of ibuprofen.

"Two?" she asks.

"You have no idea how beautiful this looks to me right now," I say. She thinks I'm talking about the painkillers, but I'm really talking about the whole magical place back here. After a day searching diligently for the unusual, it's amazing to

have it erupt in front of me in colorful, theatrical glory.

I go back around to the front and ease in to my seat. The story unfolds in front of me. A film-flam man claiming to be a music instructor arrives in a small town to fleece the citizens out of their dough. But over the course of his tenure, he teaches the townspeople the value of big dreams, and they teach him the value of small ones. When the kids finally play their instruments, the notes are off key, the tune barely recognizable. But rather than lash out in fury, the townspeople sigh in rapture. They're so proud, they don't care whether the music is good or bad.

The show is pure community theater, with moments that stumble and moments that shine. But the audience cheers like it's Broadway.

One of the locals comes up to me at intermission, beaming with pride. "Aren't those the best actors you've ever seen?" he asks.

I could hedge. I could qualify. I could stick my nose up in the air.

But instead, I smile and nod. "They're really something," I agree.

Because they are. Dancing around that cramped stage. Maneuvering set pieces like some giant game of Tetris. Giving everything they have for their neighbors in the seats out there. And even breaking character to smile slightly when those neighbors whistle and applaud.

It's about as unhip as an evening's entertainment can get.

And I'm lucky to have found it.

Dan Dietz is an Austin playwright whose award-winning scripts include 'Dirigible,' 'TempOdyssey,' 'Tilt Angel' and 'Blind Horses.'

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