

Spick and Span

S HILPA HATED TO CLEAN the bathroom. If there could be self-cleaning ovens and self-defrosting freezers, why couldn't someone invent the self-deodorizing toilet and the self-descumming bathtub? She had hated it when she was growing up in the New Jersey suburbs, when she shared a house with her classmates in college, and even when she graduated to her first apartment in the city. What made matters worse was that she seemed to be going down the bathroom status ladder, not up. As a teenager, she nearly suffocated in the petal-pink of her parents' Seventies-style bathroom, with its plastic cushioned seats and floral linoleum. Then, as a college student, the major issue was an inordinate amount of hair of all hues perpetually catching in the tub drain. Now, otherwise pleased with her studio on

the Lower East Side, she had to contend with chipped lime-green tile, blackened grout, and halos of rust stains. Rather than climbing up the bathroom status ladder, she seemed to be stagnating. It was a metaphor for her life.

Sundays were her bathroom-cleaning days. Ideally, if not in practice. Perhaps if she tackled it in the morning rather than at ten o'clock at night she'd wake up Monday morning to a clean bathroom. But Sundays were also for brunching and browsing, getting a pedicure or a haircut at the local salon.

She was scouring the rust stain around the tub drain for the umpteenth time when the phone rang. It was almost ten o'clock, so that ruled out her mother. She wondered who it could be as she ran into her living room, which was also her dining room and bedroom. It could be that guy, Harley. Rachel, who she worked with at the Farber Foundation, had put them in touch. He had called and suggested dinner. She had decided to break the mould and invited him to an art opening this coming Wednesday. What if he was calling to cancel? she fretted, as the bluish grey paste of soap scum and cleanser dripped down her rubber gloves. She checked the caller ID. She relaxed; it was a 732 number, central Jersey. A world away.

"Shil, it's me, Mir. Is it too late?" It was her cousin Mira. Out of the blue.

"No, I was just cleaning the bathroom," Shilpa replied.

"Oh," Mira returned, with a blend of curiosity and surprise, as if it were an archaic activity, like firing pottery or knitting. "I so don't envy you," she began. "One of the deals I made with Anil was that I'd cook, but not clean."

Shilpa rolled her eyes. It was the thing to do now, get married and hire someone twice a month to clean. No one said anything; in fact, these women were lauded. But if Shilpa said she wanted a cleaning lady, even once a month, everyone would stare with disbelief. Where was it written that a woman could employ a maid only once she had a husband?

"Anyway, the reason I'm calling is that I was wondering whether you had plans for next weekend."

"Why? Is someone getting married?" Shilpa asked, the receiver almost slipping out of her hands.

These days, she was anxious that yet another one of her cousins,

almost all of them younger, would be tying the knot while she languished as a professional single in Manhattan. They had admired her at first – until they got promotions and put downpayments on houses that had laundry rooms the size of her living space.

Mira laughed heartily. “Well, that’s the point. It’s the annual GSA matrimonial convention!”

“Oh, God,” Shilpa moaned, her voice sinking.

The GSA, the Gujarati Samaj of America, held an annual event to allow spouse-seeking Gujaratis to meet. Shilpa had always refused to go, despite her parents’ protests that “good boys” would be there. Unlike some other parents, hers hadn’t seen it as a solution to their dharmic duty as Hindus, only an aid. They pushed her for a few years, until Shilpa turned thirty. Then they stopped. Shilpa knew why. She had become too old to be considered a suitable girl. It wouldn’t matter if she were the daughter of the wealthiest Gujarati family in America, heir to a budding conglomerate of enterprises, with no brother or lurking male cousin. Or if she had won countless Miss India USA pageants, with a complexion – like the Indian bleaching cream promised – that was fair and lovely.

“The conference is in New Jersey this year and my mom’s one of the main organizers,” Mira continued. “We need facilitators and we both thought of you, Shil. I mean, we know you’re not into the marriage game.”

“Well, it’s not like I never . . .” Shilpa had to interject; her self-respect was at play here. Sure, the GSA may deem her unsuitable, but there were other avenues. Who knew, something might develop with Harley, she thought, trying to persuade herself.

“No, I mean, you’re not into this kind of scene, which is cool. But others *are*. Anyway, we both thought you’d be great as one of the facilitators. It’s not that complicated. My mom will be going over the details the Friday before the participants arrive.”

“It’s the whole weekend?”

“Shilly, it would really help us out. And you’re a social worker, you’re great dealing with disappointed people,” Mira replied flatly.

Lovely, Shilpa thought, a new motto for her business card. “Hold on, let me check my calendar.”

She put the phone down and then dove onto her bed. Tears would be handy right now. But she knew all too well that this issue of her

relatives and marriage was steeped into her like black tea, too strong to be so easily expelled. She often told herself that she was being ridiculous. She had bought into this whole idea of suitability and age, one more social stigma that she as a social worker should be resisting and fighting against. Normally, in the company of her colleagues and artist and activist friends, all equally unsuitable in the eyes of the GSA and their ilk, with the promise of a date like Harley, she was fine. But now, with the prospect of facing the same rust stain in the bathtub, she wasn't so sure. So many of her cousins and friends were choosing easy-care lives in the suburbs. They didn't seem to mind that going out to eat meant driving to a chain restaurant in a strip mall. They, after all, didn't have to clean the bathroom on Sunday nights. Alone. Maybe she could learn from the kids at the marital convention, willing to play Russian roulette with their intimate lives. Shilpa wanted to go to sleep. But then she remembered the phone on her desk.

"You're in luck, Mir. I just happen to be free that weekend." At this point, it would be easier to surrender than lie.

"That's fantastic!" Mira squealed in exaggerated glee, before offering to cover any expenses and inviting her to stay with her and Anil for the weekend.

Shilpa murmured her assent before hanging the receiver and falling back into bed. The bathroom would have to wait.

At the Farber Foundation, Shilpa and Rachel, and the phalanx of other social workers, addiction therapists, relationship counsellors, and job placement officers, were modern-day Octavia Hills. They were educated, liberal, middle-class women mopping up the spills in the emotional lives of those lower on the social ladder. Often, the jobs were messy, forcing Shilpa and her colleagues to vent about their cases at the weekly meetings on Wednesday mornings, fuelled by fair-trade coffee and tea. Rachel and Shilpa were coming out of one such meeting and heading to lunch, when Shilpa mentioned the GSA convention.

"What'll you have to do?" Rachel asked, grabbing her coat, as they walked toward the elevators.

"I don't know. Go over ground rules. Get people to talk. Basically, what I do here, but in a tacky, suburban hotel with four hundred brown people. It's a favour to my aunt," Shilpa added, to soften her previous statement.

“Maybe you’ll meet someone,” Rachel suggested, with a weak smile.

“Rachel, they’re probably all twenty-five,” Shilpa said, pressing the down button.

“So? I’d date some of my brother’s friends. But he won’t give me their phone numbers.” Rachel laughed, bringing a smile to Shilpa’s lips. “Oh, I forgot. What’s going on with Harley?”

“I’m meeting him tonight at that art opening I was telling you about, remember, the one with my friend Nayana?”

The elevator arrived, both of them stepping in, joining the others heading down to the lobby.

“That’s an unusual choice. Very public.”

“He said he liked art. And it’ll be intimate without being too first-datey. You know, where even the server at the restaurant can figure it out.”

“I know.”

“This way, we can stand in front of the canvases and installations, having a glass of wine, talk about whatever.”

Rachel nodded, smiling. “My God, can I come?”

She started to laugh again, with even some of the elevator spectators breaking a grin. Shilpa joined in as the elevator doors opened.

At 7:08 PM, Shilpa was standing in front of “Bollywood Barbie.” The painting was based on a blown-up magazine photograph of an Indian film star from the 1970s. The star’s head was left intact, but the body had been disembowelled, only to be sutured with a multitude of fabric, some classically Indian like the silk sari, others evoking global-pop influences, such as the Gap T-shirt across the woman’s torso. The woman was posing, as if in mid-frolic across the sea of flowers in the Kashmiri highlands that have been depicted in countless Bollywood movies. Shilpa looked at the Gap T-shirt again. She loved to hate it. Yet its universal appeal was somehow reassuring. She wanted to congratulate Nayana on the piece, but she was busy playing starlet to a reporter from the ethnic Indian press.

Shilpa scanned the gathering again. Rachel had shown her a picture. What if he didn’t recognize her, with all the assortment of Indian women milling around? Or worse, he started to talk to any of them? She hadn’t planned for that. Damn. Shilpa tilted her head and sighed. It was Wednesday and she was already exhausted. And the

weekend in Jersey was going to suck, Shilpa was sure of that now. Her phone rang.

“Harley? Are you lost?” Shilpa asked impatiently and then stopped talking, and listened. She nodded and said into her phone, “No, I understand. A deadline is a deadline.” She shut up like a clam again, as he tried to explain. “Sunday night?” Shilpa was about to say that she had to finish cleaning her bathroom. “I’m in Jersey for this convention.” She frowned. “Yeah, I’ll have my cellphone, so if you want a call, that’ll be great.” She tried to be enthusiastic, but she knew it wasn’t going to happen. She clicked the phone.

Dateless. Again. She was sure everyone could read the slouch in her shoulders. Shilpa wanted to slink behind a gallery wall, but there was no place to hide in the gigantic whitewashed rectangle. She couldn’t even lean against the wall for fear of colliding with someone’s creation, so she crossed her arms, hugging herself.

Nayana was approaching her, only briefly accepting congratulations on the way.

“Everything okay?”

“Oh yeah, it’s just that I got stood up,” Shilpa said, tightening her arms around her. “But your piece is amazing. Political yet sexy, Bollywoody yet universal.” Shilpa stopped, realizing that she was sounding like a Home Shopping Network hostess. “I think it’s your best work.”

“Really? Thanks,” Nayana replied. “Hey, you should stick around, meet some new people. How about a drink?”

Shilpa raised her shoulders and dropped them. Dateless, but not friendless. “Lead the way,” she said, following Nayana into the crowd.

Even before Shilpa arrived at the GSA convention, varying shades of brown surrounded her. Sitting backwards on the New Jersey Transit train after Friday’s commuter rush, on caramel-coloured vinyl seats, Shilpa watched the skyline of Manhattan retreat. The sudden luxury of space across the Hudson – filled with the unshorn, strawlike grasslands in waste sites ringing the oil refineries around Newark Bay – was bewildering. She knew this train route, she had ridden it many times, and yet the contrast with the city never ceased to amaze her. The decaying brown-bricked factories were interspersed with taupe and grey-painted modest wood-framed homes in Linden and Rahway,

until they too yielded to the concrete parking jungle of Metropark station, with its maze of office parks and executive inns. Shilpa walked down the stairs past the bright pink waiting area and onto the street. There were a few people waiting outside, but they were dwarfed by the expanse of rectangular parking spaces, many of them still occupied. She looked for Mira's silver car, feeling like a teen waiting for her mother to pick her up from the mall.

Mira and she were only a year apart, had grown up together in the central Jersey suburbs, and shared the same thin, long nose inherited from their mothers. Both had been rebellious as teenagers, lying to their mothers to attend concerts, screaming at them over dinner tables, or grimacing at their clothing suggestions in shopping malls. They even went to the same university. And there the differences surfaced. Mira joined the debating and ski clubs, and dated the president of the Young Republicans. Shilpa worked on campus radio and dated the programming director. Mira bleached her social circle, trading in Indian friends for white ones. Shilpa's, on the other hand, became a motley crew: United Nations meets rainbow coalition.

She had mutated from her sheltered, suburban, immigrant Indian upbringing into something for which she didn't have a name. She hadn't planned it; she didn't have a dream of becoming a doctor, let alone marrying one. She switched her majors from biochem to sociology and became interested in social work. For a year, she combined her burgeoning curiosity in her roots with housing advocacy work for Mumbai's millions of slumdweller. And, along the way, there were men: Puneet, who proposed to her before she left for India; Hafiz, who became her travel guide and lover on her weekends away from Manhattan on the Arabian Sea.

A silver Audi station wagon pulled up to the curb. Mira jumped out of the driver's seat, dressed in knee-length boots, a long black leather coat, and carefully tousled, highlighted hair. She apologized, moaning about how crazy supermarkets were on Friday evenings. Shilpa sank into the passenger seat, soon succumbing to the chic dazzle of the dashboard. As they drove, Mira chattered about the weekend events.

"My mom will go over all the details at the conference site. We've got about an hour. I thought we could get some takeout. Do you like Thai food? Anil is gaga over Thai."

"Sure, Thai's great. Where's the convention?"

“At the Ramada. It’s nearby.”

“Whoa, this is major.”

Mira rolled her eyes. “God, I know. Mom’s acting like a Hollywood director, barking orders on her cellphone.”

“So who are these people?”

Mira turned into a strip mall plaza, which had a rainbow of neon signs: Jade Chinese Buffet; Nick’s Hair Palace; Liberty Wines; Royal Bangkok.

“That’s a good question. I flipped through some of the profiles. They’re pretty well-rounded people. Professionals. The guys in computers, engineering, some doctors; the girls in insurance, pharmacy. You know, the usual.”

“So what’s their problem? Why can’t they hook up?” Like she should talk.

“I called in the order; don’t worry, I got plenty of vegetarian,” Mira said hurriedly, taking the keys out of the ignition. Returning her attention to their conversation, she continued, “It’s hard to say. You’ve seem them at clubs, all in black, the guys holding beer bottles, the women in boots, none of them talking.”

“They don’t know how to talk,” Shilpa said flatly, enjoying the comfort of her seat.

“Yeah,” Mira nodded emphatically, opening the car door. “Wait here, I’ll be a sec.”

Dinner was necessarily quick. By the time Mira drove past a dozen strip malls and into a tall-treed neighbourhood, returned the Audi to its appropriate garage space, and rushed across a slate floor into the kitchen and took out plates, there was barely twenty minutes to slurp pad thai and green vegetable curry. Shilpa was thankful for the lack of time to absorb the comforts of her cousin’s home. At least on the road, she could look scornfully at the passage of strip malls and SUVs, and when it came into view, the Ramada-Metropark.

“Anil and I are going to catch a movie. My mom said that you should be done by about ten thirty or eleven at the latest. Bye,” Mira blurted, the automatic window sliding up before Shilpa could respond.

It wasn’t that difficult to find the meeting room. Brown-skinned, youngish people, in black, brown, and grey, and occasionally tan or

blue, were pouring into the room, with its burgundy, bottle-green, and violet carpet and dark green felt chairs. At the front of the room was her aunt, Saroj Maasi, in a glittering topaz-coloured salwar kameez, and Seventies gold-foil platform heels. She was saying, “Testing, vun, two, tree,” into the microphone, swinging her laser pointer now and then like a wand on a newly initiated Disney witch, while yelling commands to a bespectacled, gangly audiovisual guy fiddling with a laptop and projection screen.

Shilpa’s aunt started with the basics: nine hundred participants, paying \$120 each; the GSA’s eighth annual conference; participants from forty states and ten foreign countries, including the Middle East, the UK, and Australia. She talked about how essential “you the volunteers” are, and how, without their role as “table coordinators” and “runners,” the convention would not be possible. She invited them to give themselves a hand, bringing together her garishly bejewelled fingers as a catalyst. After the noise had died down, Saroj Maasi got down to the logistics.

In the morning, participants would pick up name tags and a seat assignment. At each table was a book with the names, photo, e-mail, and a precise statement of everyone attending the convention. The participants – first all the “girls,” then all the “boys” – would ascend the stage and introduce themselves.

“Some of you were handpicked as volunteers because we know you have excellent skills in helping others,” said Saroj maasi, staring, Shilpa thought, momentarily at her. “Offer participants some help with their introduction, especially the shyer ones. The introduction is so very crucial; this might be their only chance.”

“Each participant has a number,” Saroj maasi bellowed. “These are used to identify who they are interested in. At their table, there will be five index cards. On each card, they’ll write, I’m number such-and-such and I want to meet number so-and-so.”

Shilpa’s aunt explained how the table coordinators would supervise this and collect the cards and give them to the runners. The runners would take them to the “nerve centre” table that would be in the middle of the hall. Here, they would be sorted and then sent back out.

“If boy 32 says he wants to see girl 48 on one of his cards, the runner will take his card to girl 48, where the table coordinator will determine whether girl 48 is interested. If she is, the runner will get

the boy and set up chairs in the adjacent room, where they can talk for about twenty minutes.”

Many of the volunteers started whispering to each other now. Saroj Maasi, sensing the growing fatigue, only increased the loudness of her bellowing, explaining what would happen if boy 81 is refused by girl 39, and the crucial role of the table coordinator to “manage their disappointment.” Shilpa flipped through her handbook in disbelief. The whole thing had been mapped out with military precision. There would be casualties. Ostensibly, that’s why Shilpa was here, to comfort the wounded and get them fighting again. Romance? Not in the game plan.

Saroj Maasi struggled with the seat belt in the back, tucking her shimmering dupatta around her. “God, my feet,” she moaned, her face twisting as she slid off her platform heels. Shilpa braced herself as Anil pulled out of the hotel driveway, heading onto Route 1 and its strip-mall landscape. She bet she wouldn’t be able to count to a hundred before *the* question would be asked. Whether it came from Anil, Mira, or, worse, her mother’s sister, it would hang in the air, floating in this bubble of luxury as they glided home. She made it to eighty-seven.

“So, any news?” It came from Saroj Maasi. But Shilpa knew that Anil and Mira’s ears were pricked.

“There’s a few prospects,” Shilpa declared.

“Tell us about him,” Mira piped, gaining strength from her mother’s initiative.

“It’s early days,” Shilpa heard herself lying. She couldn’t tell them the story of being stood up by Harley after an evening dedicated to the unquestioned virtues of marriage. “I wouldn’t start planning the engagement just yet,” she quipped.

But Saroj Maasi didn’t believe her. “If you had done pharmacy, instead of social work, you could easily find a doctor,” she interjected. “So many of these young doctors are looking for pharmacists. If only you lived in New Jersey,” her aunt moaned.

“I know,” Shilpa declared, throwing up her arm and striking the car’s ceiling. “I could have all of this,” she said, as the Audi glided by yet another strip mall.

And she could have this bathroom, Shilpa thought, as she readied herself for bed. Her cousin’s upstairs bathroom confirmed Shilpa’s

deepest fears: matte-finished bathroom tiles; delicately veined Italian marble flooring, with flossed candylike bursts of sunflower yellow and tangerine orange; fig and lavender room sprays; and overhead, brilliantly white light that reminded Shilpa of her one and only Mexican vacation. It was so immaculate she wanted to mess it up. She could only imagine the gleaming Roman tub in the en suite in the master bathroom. She didn't stoop to asking for a peek; she wasn't going to give Mira the satisfaction. After all, this was the subtle message of the whole GSA convention. Follow the game plan and have a bathroom floor you could eat from.

At breakfast, Shilpa sat with Anil as Mira grandiosely dropped fluffy blueberry pancakes onto their plates. Anil looked like a well-exercised horse, his hair shining, his teeth whiter than the bathroom sink, happily chomping at the food. He had on a button-down shirt and evenly creased wool pants. He was going to drop her off on his way to work. Although his hairline was receding, he had avoided developing a paunch; he must be going to the gym, Shilpa thought. They exchanged pleasantries about work, but it was just a precursor to what he really wanted to ask.

"So, Shil, what's happening with that guy you mentioned last night?"

Shilpa smiled. Round two. "Nothing much."

"So you're still looking?" Anil asked.

"Women my age are always looking," she replied bluntly, her fork piercing the pancake. "Why, do you know anyone in the city?"

"Sure, but practically all the guys I know are married or they're dating –"

"Let me guess, twenty-seven-year-old chickies who are lawyers or HR divas," she interjected.

Anil smiled weakly, surrendering, if only for the moment.

"Would you consider someone who's –"

"Innocently divorced?" she interjected again. Anil dropped his fork in surprise. "I play this game a lot, Anil."

"What about someone who's separated? I know a guy who lives nearby, interesting, really into films. He has his own production company."

"A filmmaker in Jersey? What has he made?"

Mira overheard, finishing up the last batch. “Oh my God, Anil, please don’t tell me you’re talking about that guy who does marriage videos.”

Anil was unapologetic. “Hey, he’s making good money.” Mira flashed a smile to serve as an apology on his behalf.

“Does he do bathrooms?” Shilpa asked, laughing.

Overnight, the Ramada’s only ballroom, named after a local politician, had been transformed. Round tables, with ten chairs crammed around each of them, were scattered around the room. Each had ten black binders and a stack of index cards on them. In the middle of the room, volunteers were listening to final directions from Saroj Maasi – this time in a fuchsia and mustard salwar kameez. Against the walls, chairs had been placed for the attending parents, no doubt curious about their children’s prospects. Shilpa had passed them outside, sari-ed and salwar-kameezed aunties and balding, Brylcreemed uncles. Soon a bell sounded, and parents and participants began filing into the hall.

Shilpa looked at her aunt as she welcomed everybody and quickly explained the proceedings. She thought of all the performance art she had seen. None of it could invite the amused admiration she felt at the moment for her aunt, who was telling jokes to break the ice in blazing pink high heels. No one would mistake this for art. But she was revving them up, and judging from the eye tennis already happening at Shilpa’s table, it was going to be an exciting day.

Of course, the participants were curious about her status. She explained it away by saying that she was the organizer’s niece, which they seemed to buy. At first, she felt like a kindergarten teacher, getting everyone to join in the circle and making sure no one monopolized the game. Yet, after the first rounds of “coupling,” with all eight candidates from her table heading to the other room to chat with a prospect, she walked out of the room with smiles. She had shepherded them through the first stage, without any casualties.

She decided to reward herself with the tasty lunch. There was a small buffet of samosas, yellow spongy, tangy squares of dhokla, and pav bhaji, the semi-puréed spicy vegetable mixture eaten with toasted, buttered hamburger buns. The lunch had been set up in a hallway outside the rented rooms, but conversations were spilling into the foyer. Some of the aunties were quizzing their progeny about their

dates. Many of the uncles had heaping styrofoam plates and were busy chattering with each other, confident in their wives' supervisory skills of this exercise. Shilpa took her plate and decided to look for her aunt. She caught the glimmer of her salwar kameez walking toward the reception area and concierge, and followed her. Saroj Maasi was immersed in some logistical mishap; Shilpa motioned to show that she was going to grab one of the couches in the lobby.

Her fingers were only breaking into the savoury dhokla when she heard her name being called. He was standing there, a little awkwardly in jeans and a cream sweater, sombre colours in a moving sea of pinks, oranges, greens, and, above all, brown. Shilpa was too shocked to even remove her fingers from the gooey mess of a soggy hamburger bun. She felt the wetness around her knuckles. He looked around the room and then zeroed in on her.

"Shilpa?" he ventured, stopping in front of her.

"Ah, yeah," Shilpa replied, her effort to hide the awkwardness of her eating replaced by curiosity.

"I thought it was you. You're a little different than the picture Rachel gave me."

"You mean with my hand deep in dhokla?" she laughed, relaxing. "So, what are you doing here? How'd you find me?" She wanted to add a third question: why did you stand me up?

"Rachel said something about Metropark. So, I just hit every hotel in the area, asked the people at reception where the Indian convention was. I thought if it didn't run too late, we could still have that date. That is," he added with a wink, "if you haven't met anyone here."

"Ah," she gestured with her eyes to her plate, "with my etiquette, I don't think you've got too much to worry about." She laughed again, giving her eyes a moment to confirm that he was actually there. "I think I'm done in a couple of hours."

"Excellent."

Shilpa raised her plate toward him. "Hey, are you hungry? The food's great. It's Gujarati. You can't usually get this stuff in restaurants."

"Sounds good."

"Come on, I'll take you in," Shilpa offered, standing up.

As they got in the buffet line, some of the aunties were giving themselves whiplash craning their necks to see Harley and her. Even Saroj

Maasi had stopped directing for a moment to gawk, but quickly composed herself and strolled toward them.

“So this is him,” Saroj Maasi announced, asserting her place among the flock of other leering aunties.

Shilpa blushed at Harley.

“I’m Harley,” he said simply, before Shilpa could open her mouth to introduce him.

“Like the motorcycle,” piped one of the aunties. Another produced a plate for Harley.

“Yeah, like the motorcycle,” Harley chimed, flashing the auntie a smile of thanks as he accepted the plate. Shilpa couldn’t get over the fact that he had come all the way out to Jersey to see her.

As the aunties took turns heaping food onto his wilting paper plate, Saroj Maasi whispered to Shilpa, “If you want to leave early with your Harley, I’ll get one of the aunties to substitute.”

My Harley. It was a little early for “my Harley,” Shilpa thought. But who knew. Shilpa watched him dig into the pav bhaji and charm the aunties. She reminded herself that it was Sunday. But this was a Sunday her dirty bathroom would have to wait.

SHEPPING FOR SABZI

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