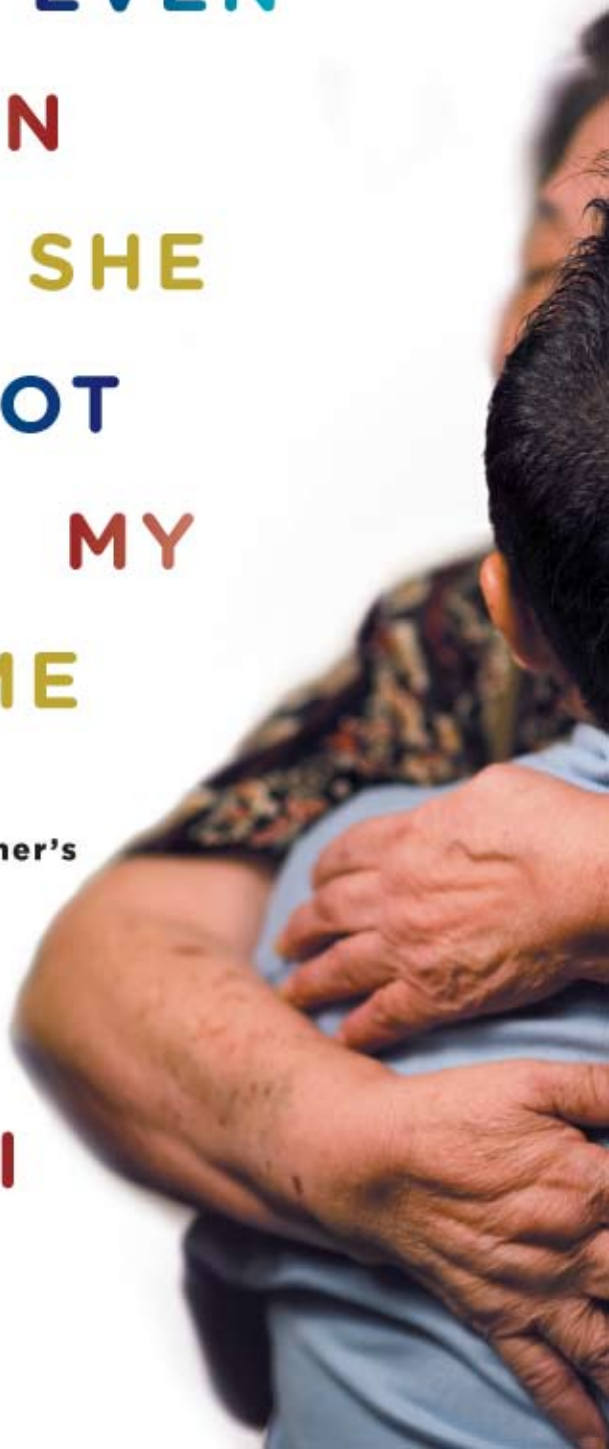


**EVEN**  
**WHEN**  
**SHE**  
**FORGOT**  
**MY**  
**NAME**

**Love, Life  
and My Mother's  
Alzheimer's**

**WONG**  
**CHAI**  
**KEE**



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and My Mother's  
Alzheimer's**

**WONG CHAI KEE**



**EPIGRAM**

To Queenie

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In memory of Pa, 1905-1989

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Preface	1
<b>I THEN</b>	
Sorrows	9
Resourcefulness	20
Education	36
Love	44
<b>II NOW &amp; THEN</b>	
Pretense	53
Siege	59
Newspapers	66
Name	71
Home	80
Money	84
Grace	90
Re-awakenings	95
Lost	102
Dreams	109
Delights	115
Death	120
Joy	127
Redemption	133
Spunk	138
<b>III THEN AGAIN</b>	
Volatility	147
Equanimity	155
Finality	160
Spirituality	166
Epilogue	174
Acknowledgements	177
About the Author	182

## PREFACE

Tell what is yours to tell. Let others tell what is theirs.

Margaret Atwood

Storytellers ought not to be too tame ...  
If they lose all their wildness,  
they cannot give us the truest joys.

Ben Okri

There are mountains in my mind  
that I can't climb no matter how I try.  
Smooth glass-like walls with no finger holds ...

I dream of wings, something with which  
to ascend unassailable heights,  
but my thoughts are mired in concrete ...

Robert D. McManes



Well, write it down also good.  
My only regret is that I cannot write.

Ma

I record here the voice of my mother, and find myself amazed. What was it about this woman who spent not a single day in school, yet could read the Chinese dailies without using a dictionary? How did she, an overseas Chinese born and bred in middle-class comfort, survive ten years of toil in the wintry mountains of Fujian, China? How did Alzheimer's disease fail to shut her up, after having shut down most of her brain?

Ma was diagnosed with Alzheimer's on 9 January 2004. The disease diminished my mother severely, but it also brought out the bigness in her. The range had gone, but she showed new depths. In September 2004, I told her my intention.

"You are so busy," she teased. "Are you sure you have time to write?" She flashed an impish smile, clearly liking what she heard. However, a week later, she said, "*Siah soo sai sze kian* ... Writing book is wasting time." Her earlier delight had deserted her memory.

"Ma, this book will be about how you brought us up. *Ngee keh nai sim, ngee keh oi, ngee keh thung khoo* ... About your perseverance, your love, your pain."

"Well, write it down also good," she said, suddenly appeased. "My only regret is that I cannot write." Her old words found their way back into her silent mind.

This book is my chance to present a paean to my mother, to share how she embodied unconditional devotion and unflagging dedication—in her youth, her married life and even during the impossible Alzheimer's moments.

This is also my eyewitness account of how Ma fought Alzheimer's from January 2004 to January 2006. She never looked for mountains. She climbed because she had to. "This brain is becoming useless," she said. "Memory strength compared to the past is no longer the

same. Getting worse and worse. Don't know what's happening, anything also can forget. Many things, big things, small things, old things, new things."

Initially, she laughed off the occasional memory lapses as signs of growing old. She began to forget what she forgot, then forgot that she had forgotten. The periodic shark bites and perpetual piranha-nibbles of Alzheimer's had crippled her faculties. Through it all, she saw herself never as mind-less, only as being slower and more confused.

*Smooth glass-like walls with no finger holds.* Losing a memory strand here and there derailed her efforts, and she would start over again. Words disappeared in dead calm then spurted out in a whirlwind. How could she keep track of thoughts that made dizzy leaps into nowhere, and everywhere? A coherent sentence suddenly turned gibberish. Yet, unannounced, she would throw out nuggets of wisdom, in defiance of inertia. With ingenuity and verve, my mother made her way out of the labyrinth, sneaking through any gap she could find. At every opening Alzheimer's allowed, she rushed out bursting forth wit, wisecrack and wisdom, as if they were long overdue and curfew was imminent.

"*Yit ting yew lu zhute* ... There's always a way out," insisted Ma whenever an intractable problem loomed. She doggedly slogged across the swamp that her brain had become. She made the most of sleeping with an enemy that owned her brain. Even in her most desperate hours, Ma's cry was "Help me!" or "Do something!"—not, "Let me die."

It started out the worst of times, but ended up better than she could ever have imagined. Alzheimer's knew no mercy, yet gave my mother the happiest two years of her life.

If not for Alzheimer's, routine ways would have persisted. Ma and I would not have exchanged so many "I love you"s. No other words meant as much or could express as much how she felt. Inceas-



ingly, it came down to matters of the heart. As her mind lost its way, her heart held sway.

If not for Alzheimer's, my mother's life would be what Thoreau said of most people—a life of quiet desperation. The brain silencer let Ma open her heart to me. She felt imprisoned, yet enjoyed a freedom she never knew. Life's inertia kept on hold the feelings that so defined us. Her fears, small pleasures, anguish, grace, anxieties and hopes would have brushed by me like a breeze, would never have stirred my soul. Desperation broke through silence, joy surprised. Ma was carried away, so was I, and we rode on each other's momentum.

If not for Alzheimer's, we would not have talked about ordinary things, enjoyed simple pleasures, sucked durian seeds together. In the slowness of Alzheimer's time, we prayed for each other, shared our thoughts, and expressed whatever stirred our hearts. In ways that never failed to take my breath away, she devoted ordinary moments to God. Her spirituality deepened. Eventually, everything good left Ma—her intellect, her passion for food, her love of family, even her ability to bounce back—but her devotion to God went with her to eternity.

I hope the reader is heartened by my mother's voice and inspired by her irrepressible character. Ma lived by two dicta—"Keep looking for a way out of ordeals that fate metes out," and "Snatch whatever pleasure you can find, in or out of life's distressful drama." Ma took to heart Dylan Thomas' defiant cry:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And with that battle cry, my mother's story begins.



*Ma in her pensive youth.*

## **I    THEN**

My mother preached that. Everyone needs stories  
they can live their lives by.

Robert Coles

Increasingly, I realised that I could not merely tell his story.  
Rather, I would have to tell my story about him.

Ronald Steel

Nothing happens without consequences;  
nothing ever did happen without antecedents.

Anon.

# 1

## SORROWS

There are three things which are real:  
God, human folly and laughter.  
The first two are beyond our comprehension,  
so we must do what we can with the third.

John F. Kennedy

Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.

Mark Twain

The most thoroughly wasted of all days is that on  
which one has not laughed.

Nicolas Chamfort



Laugh three times a day.  
Laugh once in the morning,  
once in the afternoon and  
once just before you sleep.

Ma

My mother's name, Chye Yuen, means "Colourful Cloud". Ma liked its auspicious association with Indonesia's first female president Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose name was derived from the Sanskrit *meghavati* (she who has a rain cloud) as her birth had brought rain to a land dependent on crops.

No other name better depicts her character in a life that saw clouds of many hues and shades. Dull moments were rare, chance having hurled so many adventures and maelstroms her way. She etched dark days, plain days and bright days with her inimitable brand of drama. Laughter gave routines a blast of colour. Distress put a lid on laughter but never kept it locked. Ma's name pointed to her zest for life, her spirit that rode on good times and helped her rise above the bad.

"Laugh three times a day," my mother said. "Laugh once in the morning, once in the afternoon and once just before you sleep." It was her mantra. In time, it became mine. When friends mention that my laughter announces my arrival, I know I take after Ma. "Learn to laugh, and you learn to *kon koi* (see open), and not *kon fah* (see broken)," Ma's Hakka equivalent of *c'est la vie*.

That was how she coped with misfortune, especially when they were undeserved. By the time she taught me this life lesson, much toil and tragedy had clouded her life. Her youth, however, was colourful.



"I caught your father's eye when I was 14," she said.

Her mother bade her time and told Pa, "Come back when my daughter is 19." She gave Pa five years; not to test his love, but to prove his worth. Pa returned a success—right hand man to a *towkay* jeweller, and fit to be a good provider to her precious daughter.

In 1936, six years before the Japanese conquered Singapore, Pa took the family to China; 23-year-old Ma with three young children in tow. The village folk would see he had come a long way since sailing to Singapore as a fortune-seeking *sin kek* (new arrival) just after World War One. A 15-year-old kitchen hand as a *sin kek*, he now managed the jewellery shop for his boss.

Pa returned to Singapore alone to open his own jewellery shop. He had explained to Ma that the start-up years would be tough. "I was willing to eat bitterness with your Pa," Ma often told me. She felt duty-bound to be by the side of the man she loved, but Pa was adamant. "I'll bring the family back once the time is right," he promised her.

Ma consoled herself that it was the best arrangement, for now, though minding three children alone in a strange land proved traumatic for her.

With Ma in China, Pa devoted himself to bringing together business partners, loyal customers and even his long-time boss, to build his business. He was supremely adept at earning *guan xi* (connections) and patronage. People warmed to his respectful manner and easy smile.

It was not mere sweetness of tongue that won customers over; it was trust. Pa could grade diamonds with a chestnut-size magnifying glass-piece (he carried it in his right trouser-pocket all his working life). His gemmological skills and business reputation had made him a brand name, so he named his shop Tong Hin Goldsmiths & Diamond Dealers, after himself. The location was choice, near the bustling Arab Street.

Pa's business took off faster than expected, but he did not bring his family back. Instead, he gave one excuse after another, until Ma's

China stay was forcibly prolonged by the Japanese occupation of Singapore between 1942 and 1945.

“*Sip nan* ... Ten years.” Ma sighed long and deep, whenever she recalled being abandoned by Pa. Ma told me how, during her days in China, she had to scale the mountainous terrains of Kee Kang village, next to the town of Fu Liao in the southern Chinese province of Tai Pu, to hack branches, bundle them into two stacks and hang them on the ends of a bamboo rod set across her shoulders. Reaching home, a mud-walled house with no electricity or running water, she set the branches out to dry. These were later sold as firewood. Day after day, for ten years of her young womanhood, she repeated this routine.

“Climb up, climb down,” she repeated. “That’s what each day was like.” Except for the occasional days when she had the opportunity to earn a little more money on the plains. On such days, before the break of dawn, a thicker bamboo pole would be set across her shoulders. She would carry thirty bricks split in two piles to a building site over ten kilometres away, trudging across uneven paths to arrive at the site by late morning. She returned after noon with enough money for proper meals—that still meant plain porridge, but with more rice grains than usual—for her three children.

(As a young girl in the Riau Islands, Indonesia, Ma had helped her mother in the sundry shop and her father in the rubber plantation. She was familiar with life in the woods, proudly declaring to my younger brother, Bert, “I helped to put out a forest fire.” Still, work was light and life was carefree; insufficient preparation for the kind of toil she would suffer in China.)

The first year was the worst. The switch was too sudden. A foreigner in China, she was not used to the hard life of the Hakkas, who

were pushed to the harsh mountainous fringes of fertile plains fiercely protected by the original settlers. Worse, Ma felt that Pa had deceived her, betrayed her unquestioning trust.

Most trying were the pregnancy months. Ma toiled for weeks not knowing she was pregnant. Eventual discovery did not change the tough regimen. When she was not working her shoulders, she was bending her back in the planting field, soaked calf-high in water. “Wet wind entered my body,” she said, explaining how she developed rheumatoid arthritis.

Ma lost her innocence. Sadness grew, bitterness threatened, but the pain remained private under her cheery air.

Neighbours marvelled at her spirit, “*Thung soh, cho khee woi si, arn woi seow* ... Auntie Tong works to death, still so able to laugh.” Her reputation combed Kee Kang village. She knew everyone, and everyone enjoyed knowing her.

“I was born in the Year of the Ox,” she often said. “Ox-year people are fated for ceaseless toil.”

She was beset with one ailment or another—if not by constipation, then by diarrhoea or gastritis; if not arthritis, it was insomnia or piles. But I never saw her sick in bed, indeed never lying in bed. She was up before I woke, and went to bed only after I slept. She never took a day off; sickness went with her to work.

Ma would tell me that cows, during every twelfth month of the year, would only laze and graze, for harvest would be over and the next farming cycle had yet to begin. “I was born at the year-end of the ox year. *Poon loi hey onn lock nghew* ... Supposed to be a cow of comfort.” She throttled out a laugh at the irony. The almanac’s false assurance did not turn her into a cynic. “*Moh pian* ... No choice,” she said. “It’s like that, so it’s like that, my life of no ease.”

“In Kee Kang village, there was this very stubborn water buffalo. If it refused to move, pull it hard, also no use.” Ma loved to repeat this story. She herself was strong-willed, immovable under pressure.

Three years after her return to Singapore, Ma was still reeling from the shock of Pa’s betrayal. For ten years, she took his word without question, only to discover that he had acquired a second wife. Pa left it to Ma to make the best of her first-wife status. He spared no room for guilt. A trophy second wife made business sense, and it was his just deserts. The moment of glory was his, and his to multiply.

He knew the power of public relations—being photographed with the right people, and appearing politically correct. Photographs of his shop’s official re-opening showed him with the rich and famous. The Sultan of Johor was the Guest of Honour. Pa beamed with pride, stooping in regal respect as he watched His Royal Highness sign the guest book. In another photograph, this time at the Sultan’s residence, Pa struck a Clark Gable pose in a photograph taken with the Sultan in heavily bemedalled military white. He was in his element when entertaining guests—multi-racial gatherings of prominent business and community leaders, Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian and Englishmen. It was post-war Singapore, the colonial masters continued where they had left off. With English guests gracing the occasion, Pa had arrived. Pa soaked up the glamour; his demeanour switching seamlessly between unvarnished joy and thinly veiled satisfaction.

Life in the post-war years had all the trappings of wealth. Ma found herself accorded *tai tai* status—as first wife of a talk-of-the-town diamond dealer. Fourth Sister had her own nanny, a *ma cheh* (maid on a vow of celibate singlehood, dressed in the traditional servant garb of white *samfoo* blouse and black trousers, with a pig-tail, often down to the waist).

She and Third Sister were chauffeured everywhere in a Chevrolet. “We nicknamed it aeroplane-car because the fins at the back looked like the tail of a plane,” Third Sister recalled. Pa looked every inch the millionaire in the back seat. He never got a driving licence. As a shop manager, he did not want to; as tycoon he did not need to, and later as a bankrupt and lowly employee, he could not afford to.

Ma could not bring herself to share Pa’s euphoria. Around the time she turned 80, Ma started displaying, at the headboard of her bed, a portrait of herself as a young woman, preparing for us to use it at her wake. The photograph showed a slender woman in loosely fitting silk *qipao*. She wore the pensive mood I had come to know.

Other photographs from that post-war period showed Ma’s face had no spirit, only various shades of sadness. One showed Second Wife grinning girlishly at the camera, while Ma wore an opaque look of sad jadedness. Second Wife’s first child, a pretty five-year-old, sat on her lap. Three-year-old Third Sister, born a year after Ma’s return to Singapore, stood adorably in front of Ma. “The Spring of my life was lost,” she was wont to repeat about her China years. “Needlessly thrown away.” When I was growing up, by which time Pa’s business had long collapsed, Ma was still not beyond feeling piteous. “Your Pa made me endure endless toil for ten years,” she vented.

• • •

When Pa became bankrupt, Second Wife left him for an airline pilot. For three years, Ma over-rode contempt to look after Second Wife’s two youngest children, Michael, older than I by two years, and Rita, who was my age.

Not once in Rita's and Michael's presence, or even mine, did Ma breathe a bad word about their mother. She branded Second Wife as a "wolfish seductress" only in my teenage years, long after Rita and Michael had returned to live with their mother. Ma did not patronise the two children with pity either, never giving me the slightest impression that they were as good as orphans.

Rita became the younger sister I always wanted. I worshipped Michael as my heroic big brother. He seemed to know everything and could do anything he wanted. I was enthralled by his magic tricks and listened mouth agape to his scouting stories.

Ma had the vested authority of first wife to discipline Rita and Michael, but she never laid her hands on them, never scolded them even once. It was a double standard: her anger at Pa spilled over to me, not them. "I don't want people to talk and say I ill-treat them because they are not my own," She told Third Sister, then a teenager.

The truth lay in Ma's magnanimity. "*Moh cho fai sze, nghem dat kwai ghee* ... They did no wrong, cannot lay blame on them," she said. "The children must not pay for the wrongs the adults did."

Seeing the children traumatised by separation from their mother, she felt the need to make up for their loss. Ma gave them the best food she could cook. New clothes and shoes went to them first. I came to regard them as my betters. Rita's name rang sweetly as Ree-tar, Ma's endearing sing-song way of calling her. Michael, she called as Pa called him, Ah Seng. That was her way of accepting Michael as Pa's favourite son.

Ma always had tender feelings for her two charges; they were her children too. Michael and Rita returned her love, addressing her as *tai mah* (big mother). The ill will of the parents did not pass

down the generations. Ma continued to talk fondly of them, and loved their visits when they returned from their adoptive countries. "Looking after them was the right thing to do," she said. She enjoyed it too.



Over the decades, acrimony set in. Ma and Pa grew apart. She tried to forgive Pa but the all-giving love was gone. I grew up seeing them quarrel. Ma would constantly remind him of his betrayal, Pa would hold his tongue, then lash out, "You, Empress Dowager!"

Even in the heat of battle, Pa never so much as raised his hand at Ma. Perhaps he was a gentleman, or perhaps she would not allow it. Managing his anger like built-up steam in a pressure cooker, he periodically flung his leg at the teakwood cupboard and sputtered monologues.

Through the years, Ma remained tough, as her forebears had been. During their southward migration from Northern China, the Hakka men were constantly on the alert against bandits and soldiers, leaving the women to fend for families and tend the fields. Legend has it that invading Yuan soldiers, about to seize the refugee emperor of Southern Song, fled without a fight when they sighted a regiment of Hakka women dressed in traditional black, marching toward them.

Ma was stubbornly independent, like a typical Hakka woman. During the Qing Dynasty when women routinely disabled themselves to sculpt miniature feet, not a single Hakka woman bound her feet. Hakka women resisted this social glorification of deformed feet, not that they challenged this grotesque definition of beauty. They were

more down-to-earth; the custom compromised their independence and role in the family. While the men of the house sought new migratory routes, the women looked after the family. Without this unfailing support, the venturesome Hakkas would not have been the most migratory clan amongst the Chinese.

If Ma had been poor all the way, adversity would be more bearable. As it was, she had a comfortable girlhood, and her prospects rose when she married Pa. In the following three decades she had come full circle, with ten years of toil followed by ten years as a *tai tai*, only to return to another ten years of abject poverty. Ma's life was one convoluted with comedowns and comebacks.

Unlike Ma, Pa did not suffer hunger and toil. But his humiliation was complete. Tagged a bankrupt after three decades of unbroken success, he became a pariah in the eyes of *towkays* previously his peers. It prompted him to fling Communist slogans at capitalism. In those jobless years, he turned farmer and started growing vegetables behind the backyard. Eventually, he swallowed his pride to become a lowly employee again. In his own way, it was also *wei lack kah* ... For family's sake.

To supplement his meagre salary, he doubled up as a middleman on his days off. He visited Bukit Timah *tai tais* and Katong *nonyas*, serving as their broker to sell and buy jewellery pieces to refresh their collection. Rather than being seen in a pawnshop, some *tai tais* and *nonyas* sold pieces for needed cash through Pa. He always kept their confidence. No curious buyer would know where certain familiar-looking pieces came from.

Remaking himself into an itinerant salesman, Pa made enough to finance Michael's education in Australia, and that was in the 1960s.

• • •

My mother's Hakka heritage laid the foundation for her independent spirit, indomitable will and inimitable tenacity. She was the wife who stood by Pa, who supported the family when he was jobless, the one he would lean on in his declining years.

In the end, Pa and Ma profited from their common roots. Pa himself was hardy. He could count on Ma to stick with him through thick and thin, with her innate capacity for "eating bitterness."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wong Chai Kee writes with the introspective bent of a psychotherapist, the sensitivity of a son touched by bittersweet Alzheimer's, and the wide eyes of one caught in its glare. A psychologist who graduated from The University of Melbourne, Australia, he has run his own management consultancy firm in Singapore for twenty-two years. He loves writing, and has written numerous articles on psychology and on Christianity. This memoir, depicting his mother's life of sensuality and spirituality in a world constricted by Alzheimer's, is his first book. It is part family history, part psychological portrayal, and mostly a clear-eyed first-person account of lives bruised and blessed by Alzheimer's. An avid reader, especially of memoirs and history, he has an insatiable urge to buy books, and reads at least a page of every book bought.

“What’s my name?” I said. She paused.  
Her lips quivered: cornered, the  
answer had escaped.

“Do I need to say your name?” Worry had left her brow.  
Silence followed, seconds that felt like minutes.

“I’m your mother,” she said. “You’re my son. Isn’t that enough?”

Unwilling to admit she forgot my name, she blamed me for it. I recalled talking back to her as a teenager, and getting a stern retort. “Don’t you ever forget,” she said, pointing below her bowels. “I pass you out from down here.”

Her back against the wall, she changed the script. It was her stage.

A few minutes later, she turned toward me, her eyes soft and tender, “Your name is in my heart,” she said. “That’s the important thing. Other things don’t matter.”



Wong Chai Kee graduated from The University of Melbourne with a degree in psychology and runs his own management consultancy firm in Singapore. He has written numerous articles on psychology and Christianity. This memoir, depicting his mother’s life in a world constricted by Alzheimer’s, is his first book. It is part family history, part psychological portrayal, and mostly a clear-eyed first-person account of lives bruised and blessed by Alzheimer’s disease.

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