

Lockdown Stories
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Chapter 0: Introduction

The arrival of the COV-19 virus proved to be a great and most unexpected societal disruptor. Some began living with an everlasting fear and doubt. Others found a way to mutual and selfless aid. A steadfast few entertained us and kept us laughing and inspired by their talents. A large group worldwide got ill and far too many died after short or long bouts with the illness. We stayed home, wore masks when going out, and generally slowed down. New rules and relationships were established. We learned new skills or relearned old ones. Emotions ranged from doubt and frustration to hope and happiness. Some leaders helped improve the situation and other leaders failed to do so. It was a grand experiment, a glorious success, and a magnificent failure depending on which audience you spoke with.

A different type of normal is now in place. There is a concern always in the back of our minds that this can happen again or something even worse. A new permanent sense of being ungrounded, untethered, and uncertainty is on us. What each of us will do from now on remains to be seen. May you find your own way in these interesting times.

These ten works are from that time which is far from over. Some are semi-fictionalized reporting on what food shopping was like over several months. They were written on the same day as the trip. Other stories exaggerate what a dentist visit will be like going forward, cover a lynching sadly based on terrible historical events, imagine what the Zen master Bodhidharma's life was like meditating alone in a cave, provide an essay about possible artistic goals, and offer a humorous rant about being called by the wrong name.

Section 1: Shopping in Infectia

[These descriptive pieces are semi-fictional takes on what it was like shopping that day.]

Chapter 1: InfectaMart (Visit #1 3-15-20)

Hallett German

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3/15/20

[It seems that Sociology has a sub-discipline for nearly everything. This includes the areas of natural and other disasters. It observes how organizations are strained and social relations are re-negotiated. This descriptive story is along those lines.]

In the time of great sickness, people modify their behavior. They arrive at the stores earlier than usual. They stand back twice the usual respectful distance while waiting to be served in the deli or checkout line. Some buy their usual with half-filled carts. And others get enough to make it through two zombie apocalypses. Everyone is complaining about the lack of their usual soap or bread (Although aficionados of the “cheap bread” could still be satisfied. Others complain that they spent more than their usual thirty-six dollars. It is a moment of great dissatisfaction.

Some shoppers wore no gloves, others wore two or just one. Perhaps it was easier to grab things this way as they eagerly search for that particular aisleway lacking human companions. Then quickly whisk away to the next empty row. If they see another being, very little is said between them. As if words could cause infections. Interestingly, I saw no one with masks and had to deal with far too many elderly people that were coughing more than desired.

What is revealing was what is being bought. Empty are the aisles of towelings, toilet paper, and small water bottles. But well stocked are areas comprised of laundry soap, chocolate, cereal, and the self-medication items of beer and wine. With a lack of sports to watch and events to go to, some were amusing themselves with nothing other than liquid refreshments. One wonders if the aristocrats made it through the plague this way as well.

The store personnel and shelf stockers were less than usual. Had the scare already kept them away? Those that could be found joked about purchasing what you could find. And the place seemed about 65% stocked.

No longer was there a store filled with abundant selections. Instead, shoppers were confronted with a new normal of scarcity. All were hoping for a return to the way it was. Until at least the next pandemic makes a fateful arrival.

Chapter 2: Just Like Moscow (Visit #2 3-28-20)

“Once an activity becomes the new normal, people adjust and set up new rulesets to follow. In time, the exceptions to these become rare. Until a new disruption requiring a redefinition of what normal arises”

There was no doubt, people were keeping to themselves and staying home. The roads alternated between minimal to light traffic,

Before exiting the car and heading into InfectAMart, I eye a lone police car sitting and observing eagerly what is happening at the store entrance. But nothing is happening other than a pair of aged workers standing far too close to each other while smoking and gossiping without a care in the world. On passing through the store’s portals, a worker is busy disinfecting several carts to hand out eagerly to the few passengers.

The space between the cash registers and the isles was very empty. No doubt to provide more than adequate space for social distancing. Each aisle told a different story. They ranged to like being at a disco with great abundance especially in the beer and wine aisles. To being completely empty as once found in Communist Moscow. Abundance and scarcity living together side by side without interruption. A unity of opposites.

People did not handle the darn social distancing thing well. Some misguided souls thought it was business as usual. And they dawdled in a certain section pondering at length on

what might be the best buy. And all the while their cart blocking the middle of the aisle. Plus being oblivious to the still patient people waiting on either side to move in quickly and make their own choices. I am surprised that a fistfight did not break out.

Some customers wore masks as if that could save them from impending doom be it a virus or a car crash.

The plexiglass with its supposed promise of safety to both the cashiers and the customers had not gone up yet. The cashiers were left on their own to bag. The dividers for customers to separate the food were gone as another “safety” mechanism. The cashiers now had a new role of being a knowledge merchant and knowing which days deliveries were made on scarce goods. As if that would satisfy anyone.

I escaped in gratitude not knowing next time if the medical police would be at the front door taking temperatures and inspecting each customer before entry. Or the whole store would be placed on hiatus.

The only expectation was that further change was coming. And with it further surprises, and frustrations.

Chapter 3: Thanks for the Smokes (Visit #3 4-10-20)

Six weeks had passed since the great virus had shown up first in the land of Infectia. And that meant another uncomfortable trudging to the grocery store.

This is my third trip (in six weeks) to InfectAMart since the start of the great virus. Before going in, I don now the obligatory face mask and gloves. During the first trip, only two people wore them. How many would be doing the same in this store session? It would turn out only to be 40%. That great sense of individualism and resistance in the proud country of Infectia could someday kill the dissidents in one fell swoop.

I found it funny that InfectAMart would send coupons for items that were very likely not to be there. Weren't computerized inventory systems supposed to eliminate discrepancies like this?

While driving on the nearly empty roads, I was wondering what to expect:

- Would the store aisles continue to be barren?
- Was the promised Plexiglass installed all around the cashiers?
- Were there markers to indicate social distancing?
- Were there still limits on what you could buy?

It took a while to get used to the mask and gloves. But as said in Buddhism, *every thought and action is a practice to awakening.*

Soon enough after taking one the designated “disinfected” carts, I found the answers:

For the first time in weeks, a few items were showing up in the aisles. Plastic spoons and forks. Canned chicken. Some limits had been removed such as buying bread and potatoes. But other items like toweling and toilet paper would arrive on the shelves only to disappear in 30 to 60 minutes later. I wondered during that time if there is fighting, hair pulling, or name-calling just to get this essential item whether to add to a diminished collection or increase a growing horde of paper-based treasure troves.

The aisles mostly had people that grabbed what they needed and moved on. The dawdlers had not still gotten the message and ruled a few aisles.

Soon it was time to check out. InfectAMart seems to have more staff this time including the always needed baggers. I waited at the designated social spacing spot which was more like

three feet than the socially prescribed six feet. The plexiglass, installed to “protect” the cashiers was only on one side. An elderly woman came up asking the cashier if they had her cigarettes. She indicated yes and indicated that the woman would go behind me. Seeing how desperate that she was for her nicotine replenishment, I said go ahead of me. She smiled and thanked me profusely three times. She also wore no mask. Be it the virus or the bloody pack of cigarettes, the Grim Reaper already had her claws deep inside her. I put my card in the plastic-covered credit/debit card reader. It barely worked through the plastic. After being bagged and being wished a Happy Easter whether carrying a Christian soul or not, I headed out relieved to survive the ordeal and thrilled to be soon de-masked/de-gloved.

Chapter 4: Beginning To See the Light (Visit #4 4-25-20)

It seemed to be close to some sort of imaginary halfway progress point in the uneasy land of Infectia. While the great and new virus raged, there were now two different sets of citizens. Those like myself that took the whole thing seriously and were decked with a mask, gloves, and personal protective gear. And those that walked around open and vulnerable without anything covering their hands, noses, and mouths. How would this dynamic turn out at InfectAMart? I would know soon enough.

On my visit, I saw no one cleaning the carts. (Although I saw later someone was monitoring those when they were returned.) There were so few to choose from. But it was at least being done at all.

I immediately headed up the toweling aisle praying that this would be my lucky day. And glories on top of glories, it was. I grabbed the last “Bounty” twelve-pack from the lowest shelf and guarded it like precious jewels during the remainder of the trip. And all the while celebrating my lucky catch in secret. There were many generic tissue boxes on sale perhaps as a possible poor substitution.

In addition to the toweling, I saw the return of a variety of salad (still only two purchases per customer) and bread selections. A large group of tasty yellow (and not tiny green ones like the first times) bananas were available. But toilet paper, rice, and many cleaning materials were still lacking.

I began observing how those in the store were donned. A majority of those in attendance wore masks as well as clothes. But a sizable number did not including those stocking the shelves and the one packing bags for a forthcoming home delivery or pickup. Age or other factors did not seem to factor in to this health choice. But enough on that.

There seemed to be a sufficient number of cashiers and dare I say it baggers to speed things along. People for the most part kept their social distance while waiting at the designated spots. (Which seemed far less than six feet.) And then I was done and out the door.

For the first time, there was a small semblance of hope that a new sense of normal was coming about. The aisles had largely transitioned from emptiness, to a few, and now a mostly sufficient number of selections. But it would be some time before great abundance and relatively unlimited selections without purchase limits would return.

I left InfectAMart with faith that a return to a normally stocked supermarket in the area was in sight. I just had to be patient and have faith.

Chapter 5: Farewell Infectia (Visit #5 5-9-20)

Time again to briefly descend into hell risking my own life for a few meals. This meant another shopping encounter and my 5th trip in 55 days to InfectAMart. By now, I am very used to wearing perishable gloves and breathing hard through my mask. Was it health theater or a preventive mechanism? I didn't know anymore.

It all becomes vastly different starting next week. Stores start to open, roadways will be more crowded. Infectias (who were one never to sacrifice anything especially for long periods) were prematurely celebrating by no longer wearing masks. That included the grounds crew, supermarket staff (with a few exceptions), and customers. All the cashiers that I saw were maskless. Those covered with masks were now in a growing minority.

Some things continued to be as before. No toweling, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and “the good rice”. In some areas, supplies had regressed. Like the complete absence of salad essentials and canned chicken. However, napkins and tissue paper were now in abundant supply.

Over eleven weeks of shopping, I had watched multiple transformations of shoppers and their behavior, the dynamic ebb and flow of groceries, and an everchanging shopping experience plus corresponding rules. From now, there are only setbacks and recoveries, moments of hope and darkness, and in time some sort of recovery. Farewell InfectAMart and Infectia. You served us well during our brief time together.

Section 2: Historical Fiction

Chapter 6: Bodhdharma in Winter (Written 3-28-20)

Even in a cave while meditating, one has a dim awareness that the harsh winds and snows of winter have made their arrival at last. As the days passed, the piles of snow around the cave kept increasing until it covered nearly the whole entrance.

But after so many years of seating and “gazing” at the wall, Bodhidharma was nearly impervious to the content and demands of his sense stores. He was mostly free of mental and emotional distractions. The mind was mostly empty. Yet his concentration was both subtle and intense. Sometimes, false manifestations filled with attractive or aversive images appeared. But without grasping on to their illusory essence, they soon disappeared.

He started to see his own true character and be free from the terrible grasp of Karma. His awareness of what was Buddha-nature grew. What life was before was an unsatisfying dream of wants, wishes, and scarcity. This was no longer the case for him. No more clinging. No more regrets, shames, or fits of anger. Just a simple sense of clarity.

Even so, he still felt there was much to learn and kept sitting. The snow took out its wrath on the cave entrance with its unrelenting fierceness. But Bodhidharma remained undeterred breath after breath, moment after moment.

At times, when I seek to calm myself, I visualize a hooded bearded man with an empty look sitting unwavering facing a cave wall. Then I feel my every part of my body relax and a soothing release. May you experience the same.

Chapter 7: A Most Unfortunate Son (Written 4-12-20)

*[Oh, the jailer, he went wild over me,
And he locked me up and threw away the key;
It seems to be the rage, so they keep me in a cage,
They go wild, simply wild, over me.] T-Bone Slim 1920*

[Based on horrific real circumstances.]

It all ended up in ruins. My poor family enduring a harsh range of emotions: ongoing bouts of grief, shock due to irreplaceable loss, raging anger that dared not be expressed in public, and anxiety as to what tomorrow may bring.

The day started promising enough. I had breakfast with my wife and children. We all laughed at the silly and now innocent things that each of us was saying. Then did the usual morning activities and soon it was time to head to work at the lumber company. As I did six days a week. Thirty-five years earlier, my family was plantation slaves, serving at the will of our “loving” owner and overseer. Now we give our services freely and willingly to the labor market.

The whole event happened sometime during the early evening. I was cheerfully thinking that soon I would be heading home to my adoring family. But that was not meant to be. A group of deputies had entered the workplace and surrounded me. Without given a chance to speak, they accused me of attacking and brutalizing a local woman whose husband had a fine standing in the small community. A woman of a different color. Without another choice, I willingly allowed them to place shackles on me and take me off to the courthouse. Things would work out.

Once there, the judge started by calling me names like fiend and devil. It was clear that I would not get a fair shake with this man. I knew from prior cases that I could seek a circuit court trial with another judge and delay things for three months. Hopefully, emotions may die down by then and I could get a fair trial. The judge agreed reluctantly and soon I was moved back to my tiny cell. And that was my involuntary home for two weeks. Until my circumstances changed that one hellish night.

I was roused out of a most uncomfortable slumber. This was after periods of constantly waking up and briefly falling back to sleep. Then I awoke to an angry crowd of white males vilifying and cursing at me. I am guessing that there were thirty to sixty of these “most proper citizens”. Now their “leader” spoke out. “This is the wild animal that attacked Mrs. Reuss. Then returned to work as if nothing had happened. Now he thinks that he can hide out here for a few months making a mockery of our justice process. Time for us to be the angel of justice instead. Let’s string him up, boys. Mr. Jailer, time to serve righteousness honorably by opening the cell of this foul being and getting out of the way. Or shall we do the same to you as well?” As one could predict, the deputy got a sudden case of cold feet and supplied the keys.

I was pulled out of my cell. My hands were so tightly tied that they lost all sense of feeling. A third rope was placed around my chest. It became hard to breathe at all. I was blindfolded and gagged. Then I was pushed and dragged into what I knew now would be my final moments. Soon we all stopped and the blindfold and gag were roughly removed. I was under the large limbs of the tall “Fairness Tree” near the Court House where all “obviously guilty” types were promptly hung. Those final moments were a series of blurs. Jeering faces illuminated by makeshift torches. The tying of the improvised gallows around the tree branches. The noose being lowered and placed around my neck ever so securely. Then the kicking out of the stool under me. I became an involuntary marionette ever so briefly grabbing at the rope around my neck and kicking my legs. Choking for what seemed to be an eternity. I cannot breathe. My lungs are on fire. Then lifelessness.

Those purveyors of “real justice” left my dead frame twirling slowly in the breeze for a day and a half. This would be a wakeup call for others that may think of doing similar misdeeds to “their good women.” During that first day, my wife and older children came by. They wailed at seeing the result of such a hideous act. One daughter was so shocked, that she died instantly. My poor wife now had two deaths to deal with at once. She managed the best she could by raising the children alone. The cost was very high for her – a premature death from all the unexpected stress.

In time, the town forgot conveniently about their only lynching and moved on to the “modern” age. But others still carried a burden in secret. Mrs. Reuss had been in a loveless marriage and was bored beyond tears. To feel something and to pass the time, she had been carrying on a very passionate affair with a younger man. On that very day of my arrest, she had broken up with her lover.

After all, she had her role in the community of loving wife to a prominent husband to maintain. The former emotional partner did not take it very well. He threw punches towards her still beautiful face. And never stopped until his rage subsided. On seeing his bloody handiwork, he fled and left the small city for parts unknown. When her husband saw this, he asked who did this to her. She mentioned quickly my name to cast suspicion away from herself. Her husband swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. And the rest is already known to you. It was said that in her final moments, she kept saying “forgive me”, “Lord have mercy”, and my name. Her husband, daughters, maids, and doctors did not know why. They thought that she was delirious. Instead, she was coming to terms with causing an innocent man to die and having her soul spend eternity in the unfriendly flames of Hell.

But my family and racial community did not forget. In time, they became educators, lawyers, and politicians who began transitioning the town to equality and fairness. On the 20th anniversary of my death, a small plaque was placed by the location of my death describing what happened. In time, the state and city passed resolutions saying that my death was a mistake and asking for forgiveness. But none of those “enlightened actions” can give back my life or the suffering and financial hardship that my family had to endure. Or remove the fact that no one was ever jailed for my hanging. I hope the people of your age are a lot smarter than the ones that lived in mine. And cause a lot less suffering to innocent beings just wishing to live a long and contented life. Instead of becoming your most unfortunate sons and daughters.

“Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Section 3: Other Works

Chapter 8: Recognition Not Required (Written 4-18-20)

To Mike

Somewhere during my lifetime, I became wired differently. I do not know when this began. Maybe it was the time spent in school where I just hid strategically in any forgotten corner that I could find. While there, I started to rapidly capture the steady stream of words and music rushing from my brain and passing by at light speed. Along the way, I wore out tall piles of steno notebooks and portable computers. Maybe it was the passing hours at work where we were repeatedly told what to do or else. And no time is provided to truly think. Maybe it was the eternity of those long solitary weekends and trying desperately to decide how to fill in that sizable void.

Somewhere along the way, I discovered the joy of music. No, not those popular danceable numbers with catching tunes/lyrics meant to stay forever in your head. Instead, I became enraptured by those dark and emotional musical collections displaying the essence of hurting souls. It felt important for me to do the same thing. I began to create, produce, and release my own songs. Then repeated the process. I did not care who heard it or whether they liked it. Each of these compositions pierced my soul for a moment, struggled to be born, and is gratefully now out of my head forever.

I cannot understand those that waste countless hours performing shameless self-promotion or any kind of promotion. All for a few more dollars in their pockets. And all along, losing precious time developing their works. I follow a different road. There are no concerts to do. No musical albums to release. No musical videos create or plug. No fame to achieve. Only a growing collection of my tunes and lyrics.

Someone asked me what was my desired choice – money, freedom, or both? Quickly I responded, “Freedom. It is always about freedom with my music.” And I have that completely. There is no calendar of tasks to perform, no difficult managers to please or argue with, no expectations on quality or quantity of output. Just more than ample time to explore various styles, lyrics, moods, instruments, and melodies. Experiment. Review. Trial and error. My hunger to develop songs is never satisfied even for one minute.

And one day I captured the whole thing with this.

“I live only for my music.

Just a passenger in this moving world.

From day start to end, I generate new works and learn.

Process and content equally matter to me.

Until that one day, I take my last breath and cease working in a musical world.

Where my soul escapes to, who is to say.

Light interweaving with dark.

Not rushing or judging

Until that fated day.”

Time to get back. I walked outside and want to write a series of inspiring numbers based on what I see in nature. I can only hope that others will do the same.

Chapter 9: Dr. Fearful My Dentist (Written 5-2-20)

[This is all based on imaginary events.]

Dr. Fearful

It has all been good so far. I have a small but thriving dental practice in the Midwest where I can get away with only three workdays. And my weekends are free too. The work is steady and my occasional upselling on cosmetic surgery and bite protectors makes the income stream quite comfortable. Sharon, my very capable dental assistant is a godsend. She does more than her share of the work and knows what I look for when viewing customer x-rays. Wembley is the over talented front desk receptionist and admin. He greets customers warmly. But makes sure they do not leave before paying. And also adeptly handles them when their feathers get occasionally ruffled. I pay them more than they can make elsewhere. And both are well satisfied working with me. I am planning to retire at 50. And buy a nice island villa somewhere else.

But out of nowhere, this virus arrived at my sleepy little city. And life changed. My patients went into self-quarantine, left town, got ill, or died. My tidy and reliable income stream dried out. I had to let Sharon and Wembley go. I made a vague promise to look for them when the market became healthy again. But we all knew what becomes of vague promises.

The more I read about this virus, the more scared I got. I learned that other dentists were feeling the same way. And I was becoming more and more freaked out. I just wanted to stay in the safety of my house and never leave again. But that was not an option, I had to return to work and quit dipping so deeply into my precious savings and investments.

And as soon the government gave the all-clear, I re-opened. And fortunately, Sharon and Wembley came back to work as well. With a slight pay increase. But all of us were all terrified that we would catch the disease. That's when we hired Barb the professional disease prevention cleaner as an ongoing consultant. And all went smoothly after that. Looking forward to that early retirement once again!

Paige

I just came back from Dr. Frederichs for the first time since the virus lockdown was lifted. I expected things to change. But not this much. But still, they are really looking out for me. And other the customers raved about their attention to have a healthy and germ-free environment. I will go back cheerfully in six months.

So here is the routine. You had to come in 20 minutes early. Then you were motioned by an electronic arrow to take a shower where a special disinfectant spray was poured all over your body. It smelled so powerful and I was about to pass out. While this was going on, your clothes were scanned through some sort of powerful technological wonder and germ detector/remover. When you came out of the shower, they were waiting for you, all folded and packaged in a plastic wrapper. Once dressed, you had to brush your hair with a temporary brush that supposedly did something health-related. As well as brush your teeth with a special toothpaste. It was all so disconcerting.

Next, you were allowed to go into a now cavernous waiting room that was white and empty of everything. Not even a chair to sit. A thermometer, covered in some of the protective wrappings, descended from the ceiling and was stuck on your forehead for a moment to determine if you have a fever. Finally, I heard a loud "ALL CLEAR" resounding from the walls.

An unseen God had approved my entry. And at long last, I was allowed to enter the inner sanctum of the dentist's office. There, I was greeted by what I think was the receptionist decked wearing an oversized protective outfit. It seemed like something from a sci-fi movie. They didn't say a word and thrust right into my face what appeared to be some sort of survey checking on my medical conditions. Rapidly, I answered the questions and returned the document. At last, I made it inside the true heart of the medical building. I was motioned to the chair. And passed out of mental strain and exhaustion.

The next thing that I know, I was awake in my car. Next to me was the dentist bill and findings sealed in a protective cover. It was time to start the car bewildered and uncertain as to what had taken place.

Wembley

Well, our approach of extra-careful medical protection worked. Patients were germ-free (as much as can be) when they finally deposited themselves in the chair. Most of them were wiped out physically and slept during their remaining stay with us. If still asleep (true all but one time), we put them in a wheelchair and deposited them safely in their car. We would then call their phones to wake them up. All the while covered with the safest health protections that money can buy and giving the most thorough treatment of their teeth. Serving our customers as only we can.

Chapter 10: The War Against "Hall" (Written 5-9-20)

Some pundits lament against some faux war against Xmas. Instead, I suffer endlessly by being called constantly by a nickname not of my choosing. I prefer being called Hallett or Hal. Please note. But some smart souls think they know better and insist on calling me Hall. Whether I like it or not.

Ugh. I am not a darn Hall or Hallway. Why would anyone want to be called after a place that you vacuum? Or hang up your hat? Or is badly carpeted?

Maybe I have some bad karma to work through. I love you Mom. But choosing a name that no one spelled correctly from day one has brought a lifetime of moderate aggravation. If I had a middle name, then I could use that instead. But I lucked out on that as well. At least I know how a boy named Sue feels.

Everything I get a correspondence with Hall in it or calling me by last name German, I want to respond with their name mangled purposely beyond belief. But of course, I do not. Instead, I sign quietly **HAL**let (in large bold capital letters) hoping that they get the hint. Unfortunately, it never seems to work.

The funny part is that I am not the only Hal German in the world. There is a Harold German who is called also Hal. I know because I used to get his mail while we lived in the same city in Pennsylvania. I bet that lucky guy is never is called Hall, Har, Hell, Hel, Al, Harm, or a million other creative misuses of my first name.

So that's it. I said my piece. Call me Hall at your own peril. Else expect a fantastic name mangling. Oh and happy holidays as well.

About the Author

Hallett German is a fiction and technical subject author on various aspects of IT and business. His works of fiction cross multiple genres including children, young adult, dysfunctional corporate mysteries/fantasies, historical fiction, and steampunk. His books offer a unique and original ride into other worlds and lives. He is the author of series (Olivia Plymouth, Amazi Chronicles, In Small Doses, and Corporate Intent) and single books (Combustible Networks, Ghosts vs. Robots, Saving Eddie, Killing Thoreau, Missed Landing, Her Time, and Command and Control).

His books can be found at <http://hallettgermanfiction.ml> and <https://sites.google.com/site/hallettgermanfiction/>