

Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #3 - 2003
Nearly Fall



Peculiar Peace

“The girl beside the window looked up. She had straggly, waist-length, dirty blond hair, very pale eyebrows, and protuberant eyes... The girl gave off an aura of distinct dottiness.” [J.K. Rowling]

I would add that her attire was not stylish or acceptably alternative, just weird and out of sync. There were no subculture sets at school who thought she was cool. Her father should have been an embarrassment to her—people thought he made a living off published bits of misinformation, gossip, and untested theories. She read books and magazines that others—if they read them at all—

would carefully hide if they were riding the bus or waiting in the doctor's office. She saw ghosts and beasts which couldn't be rationally explained or seen by others. She naively believed in ideas for which there was little or no proof.

In her culture, she was marginalized—a person who was just sort of there, on the edge. Or not. Nobody really cared, because whatever she thought or did, didn't matter one way or the other. But it was a plain quirky fact that she radiated peace in spite of these things.

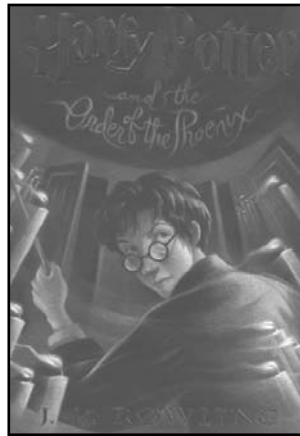
I'm always looking for people who inspire me to live more like the Christian I claim to be. Unexpectedly, this girl named Luna Lovegood does that, even though she is a minor character in a work of fiction. Which, by the way, is one of the powers of story—its ability to sneak up on you and clobber you with truth.

When Harry runs across her at the end of the latest book, (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*) it is the end of the school year and Luna is placing a note on the message board asking for the return of her belongings which have been systematically stolen and hidden throughout the school year. She is quietly confident they will be returned in time so she can pack.

In a brief, and what seems like, casual conversation, Harry learns two things about her that change him. He finds that she has known all along that, behind her back, students call her "Loony Lovegood," and yet, unlike himself, she is not consumed by personal doubt or the need for revenge. He also learns he's not the only one who's lost a parent—Luna's mother was killed, not in a heroic battle like Harry's mom and dad, but in an unfortunate trick of her own making that went awry. (Cheez, mun.) All year

Harry's energy has been sapped by rage and grief over the rotten deal he's gotten in life but here for the first time he gets his eyes off his navel long enough to see he's not the only one who endures trouble and pain. Seeing Luna standing alone in front of the board composing that note with dignity and

patience, he is strangely moved to pity. As she walked away from him, "he found that the terrible weight in his stomach seemed to have lessened slightly."



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Comfort Me with Water

As a person—minus the hair and eyes—I have a few things in common with Luna. I have a missing parent—many years ago my father was killed in an airplane crash. It's been a while, but I used to be called a name, unfairly, I believe: Marge the Sarge. However, as a Christian I have more in common with Luna, because I, too, believe in things unseen and mysterious. I believe in the body and blood of Christ. A lot of people would think that macabre at best. When I read a book like *Girl Meets God* while waiting in the dentist's office, I wonder what kind of nut people think I am. I believe in the Holy Ghost and the resurrection of the dead. I often feel marginalized even in the church. But when I reckon

on with Luna's suffering and her deeply attractive serenity, we part company. A mere trifle, and I have trouble keeping the peace of Christ. Like last night when I grumbled about getting stuck at four (four!) traffic lights when, if only my husband had driven another way. He laughed, but he did say that if God made me take a job in the city with a two hour commute I would deserve it. I don't think Denis' burdens were lessened by his encounter with me.

Harry's self pity and whining are a little too familiar, but when his grief was lightened by this brief conversation with Luna, I immediately thought of my encounters with Jesus. There have been times when just the act of remembering Christ's worst days on earth have mysteriously drenched me with peace. I know his worst days may have been the last two of his life. But I also count walking all the way to Samaria with the sun beating down on your head when you're tired and have no bottled

Aqua Fina to drink as pretty awful. In those hot and waterless times I wish I was more like Jesus because maybe then I could lighten the cares of others. Which would also be Scripturally tidy. As Paul says,

"...and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God..."

[II Cor 1:3-4]

That's a lot of "comfort" and had it been me, rather than the Holy Spirit writing those words, I would have edited that a bit. But it is God making a point and I have to admit, dull as I am, I need to be cracked on the skull a few times before I get it. And even then I am inclined to forget it at the first red light.



LUNA LOVEGOOD

In that case—the case of the four “comforts” and the modifying superlatives like “any” and “all” found in this Scripture—we can look on some things/events in our life and not rewrite them, but notice them surrounded by evidences of God’s comfort. And if I hadn’t written these evidences down this past summer, I would have quickly forgotten them and only remembered what a hard time it was, or what a bad day/season/year, whatever. Some of the evidences are small, but they are part of the *alls* and *anys* which add up to comfort and peace from God’s sweet hand.

Comfort me with Pig’s Feet

Manessah, our five year old granddaughter, stayed with us for awhile this summer. She always comforts me. The history of her conception is never far off and the meaning of her name—“God who comforts me in my sorrow” springs up in unbidden joy at the oddest times.

One night I went to her bed to look at her as she lay sleeping. She was on her back. Her great lashes rested on her cheeks. Her head on the pillow, thick hair spread in perfect order, and the covers neatly tucked about her. Both hands held her Luv Bunny who lay perfectly centered on her chest staring at me from his button eyes. I stood there praying for her soul: May she never know a day without the Holy Spirit. May she know repentance and joy of forgiveness in Christ and may God keep her through all things.

Sometimes it seems like she has no short term memory, a problem I share, which makes for remarkable conversations between the two of us. As we were driving to the store one day she spotted a young girl riding a bike alone and solemnly pronounced: “That child is without they’s parents. That is so, so dangerous. She shouldn’t *BE* riding without they’s parents. I am so,

so serious.”

I said, “Maybe she is going into that gas station to buy something.”

“What gas station?”

“That one. Right there. Where her bike is now parked.” Pointing.

“What bike? Where?”

“That *girl’s* bike!” Pointing, again.

“*What* girl?”

I just started laughing. She is crazy. But in a comforting way.

In another conversation she asked me if I knew you can eat pig’s



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feet. I feigned shock. “Yes,” she said with her hands out, palms up, gesturing up and down, “First, you take off their cluck-cluck things, and then you cook it. The foot turns into a hot dog, and you stick it in a bun!”

Perhaps she was the one who invented the following recipe which appeared (I am so, so serious) in our local newspaper last year.

Hot Doggies

8-10 hotdogs

½ cup catsup

½ cup cornflake crumbs

Score surface of hotdogs lightly, spiraling from end to end. Insert wood skewers for *extra eating fun!* [My emphasis.] Roll each hotdog in catsup, then in crumbs. Arrange on

foil in a shallow pan. Do not crowd. Bake at 350 degrees for 15 minutes. Serve with extra catsup or mustard.

Post Scripts

I gave up some things this past summer. It wasn’t voluntary like Lent, but necessary. I’ve missed days of normal work as the concentric circles of my life have drawn tighter. A measure of my restrictions would be the condition of our bathtub. There is nothing that so perversely satisfies me as shiny white porcelain and one day as I showered, I realized I was standing in a place that would alarm even a nineteen-year-old male living on his own for the first time. Scouring the tub requires a kind of repetitive motion that hurts. (Just one of the nutty things that happen to people with fibromyalgia. Currently it isn’t so bad. But I never know.) What homekeeper doesn’t dream, once in a while, of giving up cleaning the bathrooms and mopping the floors?

Here I was with a legitimate excuse for extra help. Thanks to Susanna, who has put in some hours here and there this summer, the dust has lifted and the floors no longer have that Bart Simpson-lives-here look.

I gave up chances to see friends and family members. Like when Denis went to Minneapolis to give a lecture on Christians developing discernment at the movies. It was hosted in our daughter’s home and I planned to be there to help her get ready (Truthfully? I wanted to feast on her twin babies). When I had to stay home on the couch it took awhile to get my thinking straightened out. I thought of Betty Stam who was a missionary to China during the Boxer Rebellion early in the 20th century. On the day she and her husband were marched naked through the streets and then beheaded, she had left (given up) their six month old daughter. In her last act as a mother, Betty tightly

wrapped the baby in a blanket with a five dollar bill tucked in her diaper. The baby was found hours later by Chinese Christians and the money helped them smuggle her to safety. Betty's prayer found in the flyleaf of her Bible included the phrase: "God, I give up all my own plans and desires to do thy will, at any cost."

I'm sure it wasn't her "plan" to get beheaded. Or to leave their little baby. No, no. My needing to stay home alone on a Friday night was a ridiculous embarrassing comparison. How dare I count such an ordinary little loss? Or is it so ridiculous? God receives and sanctifies all the losses we experience, the ordinary everyday ones as well as the tragic and the shocking. It is only we humans who, in our self aggrandizement, think that martyrdom, the loss of all our possessions, or the death of a child are the only things worthy of God's notice.

By the end of that Friday evening, I had reviewed for about the millionth time what it means to be content and patient in every season of life. Like a video I reran Jesus' walk to Samaria in human thirst and 90 degree heat. (It helped that our local weather had put us into record-breaking heat and drought.) The authenticity of his life here on earth has the power to disarm me. To reduced me to penitence. So I gave up my plans (for the moment) because I am getting to know the extravagant love of Christ.

In a subtle post script I realized how skilled I am at making every occasion about me. I am humiliated by such devotion to self-centeredness. Noel Piper once said to me before I addressed a women's retreat and was fretting nervously about my talk; "You know, it's not about you, after all." I was

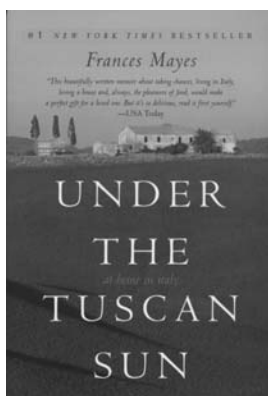
chastened and knew exactly what she meant. It's about what Christ is doing in a much larger context. It is about his desire to glorify himself through us.

It is also God's will that I be comforted. That you be comforted, too, even if it means trusting that all things may not be fully revealed in this life. That's a hard, mysterious thing for us postmodern people to believe.

The following week Shaun got an art job (he questions whether it can be called "art") painting a giant mascot on the gym wall of a new high school near Rochester. The entire family came for a whole seven day's visit.

Who can measure comfort? We have no idea what joy lay on the

As Christians, we love themes of restoration, for that is where we are headed.



other side of martyrdom for Betty Stam. But I am so, so certain she has it. Meanwhile, for me, there was a week of little voices and roly poly twin babies on the floor.

The Comfort of Restoration

Denis and I saw the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun* based on the book of the same name by Frances Mayes. The book is an account of her purchase of an old stone villa abandoned for thirty years and their work to restore the house and land. The richness of the ancient culture that quarried the stones, the old terraces with groves of olive and fruit trees carved into the hillside, the labor that was hard, the painful setbacks, the colors of land and light, the delight of fresh basil, pecorino cheese, tomatoes, olive oil, and wine. Her many themes weave into an extraordinary work of art. We hoped the adaptation of the

book would be as beautiful. The only things the movie has in common with the book are a woman, a house, and the fact that it took place in Italy. The movie is a rock solid disappointment. Don't bother to see it. But it did make me go back and read the book over again. Even though this restoration project was not mine, there is joy in hearing about another's. As Christians, we love themes of restoration for that is where we are headed.

"The old glass sags in places—strange that glass which looks so solid retains a slow liquidity—distorting the sharp clarity of the view into watery Impressionism. Usually, if I am polishing silver, ironing, vacuuming at home, I am highly conscious that I am 'wasting time,' I should be doing something more important—memos, class preparation, papers, writing. My job at the university is all-consuming. Housework becomes a nuisance. My houseplants know it's feast or famine. Why am I humming as I wash windows—one of the top ten dreaded chores? Now I am planning a vast garden. My list includes sewing!

"...Restoration. I like the word. The house, the land, perhaps ourselves. But restored to what? Our lives are full. It's our zeal for all this work that amazes me. Is it only that once into the project, what it all means doesn't come up? Or that excitement and belief reflect questions? The vast wheel has a place for our shoulders and we simply push into the turning? But I know there's a taproot as forceful as that giant root wrapped around the stone.

"Here, I am restored to the basic pleasure of connection to the outdoors. The windows are open to butterflies, horseflies, bees, or anything that wants to come in one window and out another. We eat outside almost every meal. I'm restored to my mother's sense of preserving the seasons and to time,

even time to take pleasure in polishing a pane of glass to a shine. To the house safe for dreaming. One end of the house is built right against the hillside. An omen of reconnection? Here, I don't dream of houses. Here, I am free to dream of rivers."

[Excerpts from pp. 85, 88]

When I close my eyes at night, I sort through the messages of the day: very few of us get to live in Tuscany, use Klein tools, and keep our dearest plans. Most of us get grief, broken screwdrivers, and a

When I close my eyes at night, I sort through the messages of the day: very few of us get to live in Tuscany, use Klein tools, and keep our dearest plans.

house with cracks and spiders. Though it may seem strange, this is where I encounter the powerful taproot lifting the stone of my life: the words of Jesus endlessly scrolling across my mind.

*My peace I give to you.
Let not your heart be troubled.*

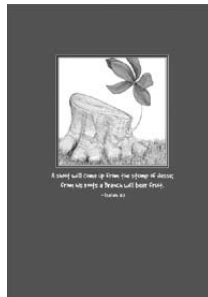
I go to prepare a place for you.

I know his promises aren't meant for me alone, but for all his children, especially those whose suffering is almost too great to look at. This is comfort enough for sleep and dreaming. ✚

Ransom Notes

Christmas Cards

Something I do each year is include a brochure from the Coalition. Bonnie Leifer, our good friend and member of our board of directors, is an artist. She creates cards with a thoughtfulness and beauty that are rare in this business. We highly recommend them. All proceeds go toward the support of this campus ministry.



Looking Back

September 18-22, Murfreesboro, and Nashville, TN.

Denis lectured on film at Charlie and Andi Peacock's Art House in Nashville, gave a weekend conference at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Murfreesboro, and preached on Sunday morning. I was supposed to go too, but stayed home, due to, you know, my restrictions.

Coming Up

October 10-12, Galveston Bible Church, Galveston, TX. Denis will speak at a weekend conference on faithfulness in the postmodern world with an emphasis on the impact of culture and film on the church.

October 24-26, Temple Bible Church, Temple, TX.

Denis speaks at another weekend conference. Dave McMurry, one of the pastors on staff at this church, heard Denis teach at Covenant Seminary two years ago when he was still a student. Now Dave is hoping Denis can pass on some help and encouragement to Christians in his church who want to understand and engage our postmodern neighbors.

Staying Home from Tennessee

What I missed: A small private showing of the soon-to-be-released movie *The Passion* and a discussion led by producer/director Mel Gibson at the Art House. Denis will write more about this film in *Critique*.

What Denis missed: On Saturday with an indulgent friend, I attended the 23rd Annual Horse Plowing Contest sponsored by the Minnesota and Iowa draft horse association. Yes, well. It was very special. You've seen dogs who love to retrieve or pull or dig? Like it is in their DNA and for as many times as you throw the stick they would rather die than not bring it back? These awesome horses—Percherons, Belgians, Clydesdales—are like that. They bend their giant necks into their collars, dig in their hooves, and pull their hearts out. As we watched them slowly turn a field into rows of black dirt, I could see why farmers welcomed tractors which worked bigger and faster. On the other hand, who would want to hug a tractor at the end of the day? Or who would offer God a prayer of praise for the beauty of a Massey Ferguson?

Publications, The Post Office, & Staying Alive

We get a lot of questions about how to subscribe to *Critique* and *Notes From Toad Hall* even though we assume it is clearly stated in each issue and on the website (www.ransomfellowship.org). We don't have subscriptions. You get on our mailing list by merely requesting it. Periodically we update our mailing list by sending out a notice that unless we hear from you, we assume it isn't knocking your socks off and you'd rather be reading something interesting like *Architectural Digest*. So we get really offended and remove your name. (Just kidding. It is merely part of our effort to keep you from receiving unwanted mail and for us to keep a lean, up-to-date mailing list.) Please note: All donors are always automatically maintained on the list.

The reason we don't charge a subscription for our publications is the same reason we have no set fee for speaking. It's one of our live-by-faith choices. We believe that if God has called us to minister to people in this way, then he will provide what Ransom needs to keep going. So we pray, and are sometimes scared, and often amazed when we've been able to continue year after year. We don't take it for granted.

However, one of our expenses which does shock me is not the faithful editorial labor so cheap it squeaks all the way to China but the cost of returned mail. Every time someone moves and doesn't tell us, the post office depending on, I don't know what—tight hats? adrenal function?—charges us \$2 to \$4 per address. Now that boils my spleen. We've sent them enough money to support both Denis and I for at least two weeks in an assisted living facility, minus Depends. So, if you are moving, letting us know may prolong my life.

Prayers For Divine Support

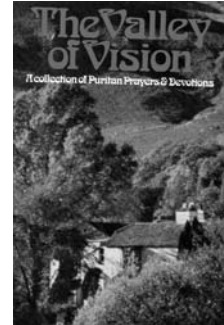
If you were to pray for Ransom Fellowship, that is, for Denis and I, pray that during these months and perhaps for the next several years while Denis continues to work on his master's in theology that we would not grow slack in our understanding of what God has called us to do. Which we believe is helping the church understand and love the people of this postmodern generation. That is why we write *Critique* and *Notes From Toad Hall*. That is why we listen, read, look, and speak to people, especially people who are part of the Church. That is why Denis is slowly working his way toward a masters in theology. For me, it means not giving up the gift of writing that God has given me. Writing is hard solitary work. Many days there is not much to show for it. A teenage friend of mine asked recently how many words I wrote in a day. I wondered where he was coming from and he told me he had just read Stephen King's book on writing and Stephen King writes three thousand words a day! Laughing in chagrin and disbelief, I joked that I considered shifting a few commas a good day's work. I don't think I won his respect.

Denis and I have never depended on impressing our supporters with numbers of words written, conversions, significant conversations leading to life changing choices, and other evangelical measures of successful ministry. I admit there are times when it is tempting. So pray that during these times, like any other, we would continue to live faithfully, trusting that God will provide for our needs and the needs of Ransom for as long as he sees fit to keep us going. We thank those of you who've have been so constant with us in love and prayer over the years. And from the Puritans whose prayers are often timely here is one for all of us:

Thou art the blessed God,

Happy in thyself, source of happiness in thy creatures,
my maker, benefactor, proprietor, upholder.
Thou has produced and sustained me, supported and indulged me,
saved and kept me;
Thou art in every situation able to meet my needs and miseries.
May I live by thee, live for thee, never be satisfied with my Christian progress
but as I resemble Christ;
And may conformity to his principles temper, and conduct grow
hourly in my life.
Let thy unexampled love constrain me into holy obedience and render
my duty my delight.
Keep me walking steadfastly towards the country of everlasting delights,
that paradise land which is my true inheritance.
Support me by the strength of heaven that I may never turn back,
or desire false pleasures that disappear into nothing.
As I pursue my heavenly journey by thy grace let me be known as a man with no aim
but that of a burning desire for thee,
and the good and salvation of my fellow men.
Amen

[*Valley of Vision* p.115] ❧



Family Notes

House repair corner

I am reporting this here because I am embarrassed to personally tell our male friends who've had to deal with it: we have a new toilet seat in our downstairs bathroom. When the old lid was in an upright position, it had a way of suddenly snapping down. Which startled men. Honest, I've quit smirking and I do feel a little bad about it. Anyway, you don't need to avoid it anymore. It only cost about fifteen dollars and ten minutes. I can't think why we didn't fix it a long time ago.

What it's for

This past summer our son-in-law, Jeff Konkle, began work for Klein Tools in Skokie, IL. He's been hired as an analyst and in addition to other fun things, he gets to design some and see all the prototypes for new tools and accessories. This is such a perfect guy job. (I want him to draw my name at Christmas so I can get one of his cool canvas bags.) He brings home all sorts of things they are working to develop—like the knee pads Marsena uses when she weeds the garden. Both Denis and I admired them. Denis even said “Hey, I want a pair of those!” I was astonished, wondering why he would want them, and without thinking I blurted, “What for?” I was thinking I hadn't ever seen him kneeling in the garden or for much else, and was sure I had only expressed complete amazement. But he looked severely hurt and said that was extremely belittling. Marsena even said your tone was totally mean, and she hardly ever censures me. And they repeated for me how I said *WHAT FOR?!?*

I think of myself as this really sensitive person who even, like the other day, I ate part of a rotten salad at a restaurant because I didn't want to hurt the waitress' feelings. But it shows how wrong a person can be without even trying. Not even half trying. They were right and I had to apologize. So then, last week Denis got mailed a pair of knee pads which crest-fell me a little, but he generously said he would share them. And just today I went to the basement to rotate laundry and there was my husband on his padded knees, lighting our ancient furnace, which requires lengthy nursing-along before it gets the idea. “And not only this,” he said as he reached far under the burner with the pointy vacuum cleaner attachment sucking up soot, “the water filter under the sink.” He's right. This, is what family is for. ♡



Final Notes

Comfort Me With Chocolate

In the last *Notes* [Summer 2003] I included a recipe for “Randy’s Favorite Chocolate Cake” and confessed I made a disaster when I tried to get it out of the pans. (The mess didn’t change the way it tasted.) Quite a few have tried the recipe and some declare it is now on their list of comfort foods—foods you eat when the weather and/or life are exceedingly gloomy and include things such as mashed potatoes, creme brulee, and Stonyfield Farm raspberry yogurt. To help me out with future sticky cakes Barbara Balbach of Ann Arbor, MI, sent me a bottle of Cake Release. It is a no fail trick for popping a cake out of anything. Seriously. I recommend it.

Make it Italian

The other day I had to send my bio to one of the few places I am lecturing in 2004, God willing. My bio is short and boring, but I included one personal feature that paid off. I mentioned I would accept almost any assignment if paid in chocolate. Three days later I received a big beautiful bar of Perugina Milk Chocolate from Jack Blackburn who organizes the *Heart of the Matter* series at the Border Bookstores in the Twin Cities. (I don’t think he is related to Jack Black.) His sensitive response makes me want people to know how much I like red Vespas.

Or Even Cheesy American

When we arrived home from vacation in August, a friend had forgotten a large package of those tiny little Hershey bars (Dark, Milk, or Krackle) in our refrigerator after she moved out. I honestly only ate two of them before I quickly returned them to her the next day. In spite of efforts to reeducate my palate, on a bad day, I am still tempted by trashy American chocolate.

The American public’s love for Hershey’s chocolate baffles European connoisseurs, who say Hershey’s chocolate is offensive, if not downright inedible. Known in the industry as “barnyard” or “cheesy” chocolate, Hershey’s unique, fermented flavor has never sold in Europe, despite attempts by the company to market it there.

“Milton Hershey completely ruined the American palate with his sour, gritty chocolate,” said Hans Scheu, a Swiss national who is now president of the Cocoa Merchants’ Association. “He had no idea what he was doing.”

Like most Europeans, Scheu despises the Hershey flavor and believes Milton Hershey could not possibly have intended to invent it.

“Who in their right mind would set out to produce such a sour chocolate?” he asked. “There is no way Mr. Hershey did this on purpose; it had to be a mistake.” [The Emperors of Chocolate by Joel Glenn Brenner]

This book, by the way, would make an excellent gift if you can’t justify getting it for yourself.

That’s it from Toad Hall, Wishing you much grace and a satisfied soul,

Warmly,

Margie



Toad Hall is the name of our home, christened by our children. It is from the book *The Wind in the Willows*, a favorite of ours. In it Mole, a shy yet daring character, and Ratty, who is much nicer and more sensible than his name would imply, have many adventures along the river. One of their friends is Toad of Toad Hall. Toad is something of an aristocrat and lives in a mansion. Otherwise, he has very little to commend him and really doesn’t deserve friends since he is a callous liar, lacks common sense and, well, he lives for the pleasure of the moment—which brings him no end of trouble.

When we moved to Minnesota in 1981, our children had rarely seen such tall homes with their imposing three stories. They were used to one-story adobes which rambled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to our children, a midwestern Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

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