

M J GREENWOOD

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark dress with white polka dots and a white belt, is shown from the waist up. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the camera. The background is a cloudy sky with two power lines stretching across it from the top left towards the right. The title 'The Blue Hour' is overlaid in large white serif font.

The
Blue
Hour

Introductory sample

Chapter One

*US Fighter Command,
St Eval Airbase,
Cornwall,
June 2nd, 1944*

Darling Tilly,

The sight of us all going left a kind of tingling in my blood as we drive slowly to the harbour. The men are all cheerful and cracking jokes because the days to come are going to put an end to the long suspense.

I want you to know how much I love you. You mean everything to me and this gives me the courage to continue. When, if, I return we'll be married and head home to West Virginia with our baby.

My dreams for our future even outnumber yours

and your plans are made of so many dreams ! I think of every minor detail a hundred times. The money enclosed is for emergencies. I pray I live to make you happy my darling.

For always,

Jack

**Somerway Rehabilitation Unit,
Padstow, Cornwall, May 2015**

A scent of tobacco lingered outside Tilly's door, on which an arresting black-and-white photograph was taped of her. Aged 19, tall, angular and poured into a skin-tight scarlet-tinted swimming costume. Lustrous blonde hair spilled over shoulders and framed a confident face with a direct, full-lipped smile. Arms loosely held behind her back highlighted the tiny waist and endless, slim legs. Beyond the grassy dunes she posed on were cloudless skies and white-tipped waves.

Morphine uncoiled in Tilly. It softened and dissolved the searing pain along each vertebra until her spine felt like a string of warmed pearls. She wanted to go home. Never to leave it again. Tilly closed her eyes, circled the rough nylon arms of the chair with the flat, creased pads of her fingertips and

hummed along to Nat King Cole's *Unforgettable* playing on the radio.

She recalled the first time she'd kissed Jack Turner; 7th May 1943. He might have arrived from another planet. The warm sun was on her face and gulls wheeled like ribbons of light. Greedy gulls that nobody fed because there was so little food. She'd stood arm-in-arm with Rose Sinclair at Liverpool's Pier Head, facing the river, waiting for a ferry to take them dancing in New Brighton, when she heard a long, low whistle and deep American voice. Slow and sweet as hot treacle.

'If she looks as good from the front, she's mine,' he'd said. Brimming with confidence, just the kind of man Tilly wanted. There was the other American though. The one with a nasal, whiny voice, who never took to her.

'C'mon, Jack,' he'd drawled, 'this ain't time for blind flying.'

A pointed comment, an insult. Tilly hadn't turned; instead, she'd watched Rose's eyes widen, and reflected in her dark irises, two male figures.

'He's effing gorgeous,' whispered Rose, unlinking her arm, straightening her green dress. Her thin-lipped mouth opened, revealing wonky teeth. 'A

dreamboat.’ Tilly focused on the turbulent expanse of river as clouds parted and sunlight flooded through. She’d checked her clean nails with their half-moon crescents and plucked a stray blonde hair off the grey pencil skirt Aunty Vi had made. It traced Tilly’s hips along with a thin navy belt to highlight her waist. She’d pointed one navy shoe at forty-five degrees, because Aunty Vi stated it accentuated long legs. The ferry hooted; its metal sides ground harshly against dock walls. The Yank stepped closer to her left.

‘First Lieutenant Jack Turner, ma’am. US 8th Air Force. Pleased to meet you.’ Tilly saw his wide, white smile. Nothing like the mouths of native tombstone teeth she’d explored with curiosity and little pleasure. She’d smiled back, trying to hide her own sharp little canines. He introduced the other man, Second Lieutenant Danny Pierce. Short, blond and sturdy. He’d given a cursory nod, checked his watch and strode off with both hands jiggling in taut trouser pockets. He had a fleshy bottom.

‘He’s a busy guy,’ Jack said. He smiled and blew a smoke ring over Tilly’s head. The halo gusted away.

‘She looks better from the front, doesn’t she?’ Rose said, smarmily.

‘Truly.’ He didn’t return Rose’s look.

‘I’m Rose and she’s Tilly,’ stated Rose, trying to keep in with them. He smiled, but only at Tilly.

She remembered how like a movie star he’d appeared; a prescription for English womanhood, at six foot, broad-shouldered and slim-hipped. His fawn trousers were tucked into polished black, calf-length boots and beneath the olive cap his oiled, auburn hair shone. His speckled, pear-green eyes appraised and invited her blatantly and Tilly appraised him right back. There were his high cheekbones and a spill of freckles over the bridge of his tanned nose. Aunty Vi stated freckles were *Angels’ kisses* and a face without them was *A sky without stars*. A leather bag hung across his shoulder; the same deep walnut colour of her mother’s best church shoes.

Memories seeped into Tilly; the wash of tide, creaking ferry, shrill gulls, scent of tobacco and engine oil. Rose hadn’t wanted to remain invisible but she’d been side-lined. Jack pulled a chunky, embossed lighter and pack of Lucky Strike from the pocket of his flying jacket and offered them cigarettes. He flicked the lighter and as Tilly leant forward the breeze nipped out the flame. He pulled open his jacket lapel; smiled an invitation. Tilly stepped into

the shelter of his body like it was a bedroom. He smelt of Lifebuoy soap and the faint musk of fresh sweat. Shaving nicks scratched the paler skin beneath his chin. Tilly inhaled deeply to make sure the cigarette lit, and coughed. She wasn't an expert smoker then. Jack grinned and shifted back. Yards off, Danny kicked a stone as Rose took hold of Tilly's cigarette to light her own. Jack hadn't offered his body to her. A serpentine coil of smoke spilled from the American's curved lips. She blushed, and he grinned at the rising flush.

'Tilly's a lovely name,' said Jack, eyebrows raised a fraction.

'It's Matilda and means Battle Maid.' Snippy, challenging. Tilly couldn't help herself, then or now.

'I'd better watch out then. Do you waltz, Matilda? Could I persuade a Battle Maid to dance?' The way he looked. Full of it, she'd thought, and exactly the kind of man she'd longed for.

'What's yours mean?' she asked, as he'd taken a black diary from his trouser pocket, tore a sheet, licked the end of a pencil and scribbled.

'Turner? Supposed to be a carpenter but I make pictures.' He shrugged. 'Here's a number you can get me on at Burtonwood but only if you can't make it

here next Saturday at 8pm.’ He folded the paper and handed it over. Their fingers touched. She slipped the precious note deep into her navy handbag, closing the clasp with a snap. Danny sauntered off, his right hand performing a cutting motion over his head.

‘Suit yourself, short-arsed Yank,’ hissed Rose and turning, walked quickly to the ferry, expecting her best friend to follow.

Jack looked beyond Tilly and pointed out parallel shafts of light splitting clouds as dusk deepened to violet.

‘The blue hour and they’re God’s fingers, crepuscular.’

‘Sounds like something dug out of sand,’ said Tilly, and Jack laughed. A deep, warm laugh. He asked to take her picture, telling her it might appear in the Force’s magazine.

Like a shot, thought Tilly, and smoothed her hair as Jack opened the leather bag and pulled out a camera embossed with Leica. He removed the lens cover, blew on the glass and lifted it to his eyes, focusing entirely on her. Exactly what she wanted.

‘There’s best,’ he said, thumbing at the Pier Head’s sandstone wall. Tilly obeyed and leant against it. She glanced at Rose on the ferry, watching with

eyes like slits.

‘Turn a little to the right. Nope, that’s left. Better. Look at me and don’t smile.’ An order. Another thrill. A gull landed beyond Tilly’s outstretched arm and she caught a whiff of burning coal from the churning ferry. Her lips parted but she didn’t smile as she looked directly at Jack. An old man in a greasy mackintosh walked past and spat in the gutter as the camera’s flash popped and dazzled. Jack put it carefully away, walked to her and kissed her so deeply their teeth grated. She tasted a peppery tang of cigarettes, mint gum and whisky.

‘Tilly!’ yelled Rose from the ferry. Long seconds passed before Tilly pulled away. Jack pressed his lips together. The cat that got the cream, she thought.

‘For Christ’s sake!’ Danny shouted, shaking his head.

Jack took out a bar of Hershey’s milk chocolate from his jacket pocket and, pressed it in Tilly’s palm.

‘Payment?’ asked Tilly, challenging.

‘Not for all the tea in China. Good day, ma’am. Be seeing you Saturday.’ He strode away with an easy lope and looked back three times before reaching Danny. They exchanged words with angry faces. Tilly

hid the Hershey in her handbag and boarded the ferry. She wasn't going to share.

'I've never been kissed like that,' she told Rose brightly.

'It's not for the want of trying,' she'd answered, buttoning her coat fiercely. Tilly ignored the catty remark and tucked her arm through Rose's, who shook herself free. A bald ferryman in a washed-out uniform winked at Tilly from the quayside as the ferry cast off. Rain blanketed the boat and everyone but Tilly flocked inside. She sheltered by a wooden cover and snuck pieces of chocolate, enjoying the sweet melt of it. Darkness fell, with few stars. The blacked-out city disappeared and the ferry became a juddering, churning shadow. Behind the steaming funnel someone cleared their throat. A fake sound, to draw her attention. Tilly turned and there was the man in the raincoat who'd spat in the gutter. He gripped his flaccid penis and jerked his hand.

'I've seen better cigarettes than that,' snapped Tilly, with more bravado than she felt. He'd scuttled away and Tilly's hands shook as she lit a cigarette. Only when the ferry docked did Rose come out, saying she didn't feel well and wanted to go home. It was a lie Tilly agreed to and they'd returned in silence

and parted. In a newspaper shop near bomb-blasted Elliot Street, Tilly spotted a postcard. Drawn on its front was a voluptuous woman paddling in the sea, wearing a red swimming costume, posing to a photographer. It stated: *When there's something good about, the Press always spots it; Look out for my picture in the Sunday papers!* Tilly bought it from an old woman behind the counter, whose whiskery mouth turned down. She retraced her steps home through the derelict city centre, softly singing Dick Haymes' *You'll never know* until she reached sodden, deserted Watford Road and the door of her red-bricked terrace. In the blacked-out kitchen her mother knelt, scouring the oven. A cold, depressing home that smelt of mutton and cabbage. Elizabeth barely looked up as she asked why her daughter was back so early. Tilly told the same lie Rose had slipped her.

'Sulky girl, that Rose,' said Elizabeth, sighing and sitting on her haunches, cheeks flaming. Her mother had retained the harsh Northern Irish accent she'd mostly failed to remove from her daughters' Mersey-mouths with costly elocution lessons. 'And a shop-worn face. But Rose is a *Yes* girl who'll be married before the likes of you, who only ever says

No.’ Tilly ran upstairs, stamping the threadbare runner. She wouldn’t mention Jack. Elizabeth stated Yanks were, *For common sluts and couldn’t be trusted as far as they’d like to throw you.* Tilly took out the postcard and crossed out *The Press* swapping it for, *A handsome GI*, and inserted *Hollywood* for *Sunday papers*. On the back, in her very best handwriting, she wrote:

Dear Jack, I can’t wait to dance on Saturday and see my picture, with best wishes, a British Battle Maid.

She added one small x and addressed it to Flight Lieutenant Jack Turner, care of Burtonwood Airbase, Warrington, licked a gummy stamp and snuck past her mother to the post box at the bottom of Watford Road, kissing the address before she let it drop.

Nat King Cole’s lyrics floated back to her, only now it was her mother singing. Elizabeth’s creped skin looming close; dead-eyed, bitter-mouthed, hissing about secrets better left buried.

‘Tilly, wake up.’ Not her mother. Nurse Evangeline’s almond eyes slid into focus as Tilly came to, pain-free, but not where she wanted to be.

‘I hope you’re not giving me those painkillers again because I can’t shit without crying.’ Tilly Barwise’s bracing Liverpool accent sliced through the

air.

‘I’ll give you something for that,’ came a murmured response as the dark-haired nurse bent over her. Tilly had successfully avoided prescription drugs, until the brandy she’d smuggled into a lemonade bottle was discovered, confiscated, and poured away.

‘And I don’t want to go out there and see any of them,’ she hissed. Tilly had remained resolutely self-confined from all other inmates, as she labelled patients, since the eighty-nine-year-old was admitted with three spinal fractures seven weeks before. She was now in the final three days allowed for her to shape up, or ship out to a nursing home.

‘Tilly, your daughter’s been on the phone,’ said Evangeline. ‘She’ll call again after dinner. It seems she’s found another carer. Now, it’s nearly time to put some fat on those bones.’ She patted the wheelchair.

‘I’m not talking to her,’ said Tilly, groggily. No point. Vicky had decided, and Tilly couldn’t argue until she was steady on her feet again. Evangeline was silent.

‘Can’t you look after me?’ asked Tilly, fractious, eyes shut.

‘No, I’m happy working here but if there’s an emergency I’ll help.’ She looked flustered.

‘You mean I might die at any minute and you’d be jobless?’

‘No. Anyway, let’s go to the dining room and see how much sunshine you spread around today.’

‘I’m not hungry, and I’m not having some stranger moving in and taking over,’ snapped Tilly. She lit a cigarette, blowing smoke out of her nostrils. ‘There’s no way I’m doing what I’m told.’

Evangeline reached over, removed the cigarette from Tilly’s hand, eased her bird-like body into a wheelchair, and paused.

Chapter Two

Diary entry: Burtonwood Airbase, April 2nd, 1943

At 12,000 feet in a B17 and even with a heat suit on it was cold enough to freeze my nuts off. The sun shone through clouds like sandbanks threaded with gold – until flak burst and jolted us all over the joint. The Lieutenant's voice came through our headsets:

'Guys, I think those Krauts want to kill us.'

'Who da' guessed it?' I said back.

We flew over forests, thick as the Blue Ridge Mountains and a railroad like a fallen ladder across a river's glittering bend. Visibility was 1,000 yards. I rolled my cameras as we dropped 3,000lb of bombs and 500 incendiaries to nail that target and the Jerry country club next door. Hit flak back at the coast and heard gurgling sounds over the radio. We dragged our tail gunner inside, covered in blood, his neck all cut up. I couldn't stomach the canteen's pink-gray sausages, gritty with bone. Drank whiskey and swallowed sleepers.

Newquay, Cornwall, May 2015

Ava felt the softening edges of Valium evaporate as the plane banked over the sheer salt-and-pepper cliffs at Newquay Airport. The aircraft rapidly descended. She glimpsed the shimmering green Atlantic, then clamped her eyes shut as she grasped the arm of the stonily silent man beside her. He flinched. In her heavy-duty haze of alcohol, sedatives and anti-depressants Ava hadn't so much as glanced at him since they'd take off from London.

'What do you do?' Ava's fingers rucked the sleeve of his suit.

'Accounting,' he stated, brusquely.

'Oh God,' Ava groaned, involuntarily. The engines laboured and, brakes roaring, the plane landed with three gentle jumps. With each one Ava yelped. When it stopped, she released her hold on the man. He pulled at his sleeve and stood without a word.

Ava waited until every passenger disembarked. She felt clammy and smelt strange; like pear drops, and sweat stained the armpits of her grey T-shirt. Fear, she thought, and gin. A cabin crew attendant patted Ava's arm at the top of the steps. That unexpected kindness brought tears to her eyes. She

scuttled across the windswept tarmac and into a loo. The mirror reflected her ghost-like pallor, greasy hair pulled scraggily back into a scrappy pony tail, purple-black circles under her eyes, all framed by sallow skin and an angry red spot on her chin. She gulped tap water and splashed her face. By the time Ava reached passport control the queue had petered out. The inspecting officer did a double-take of her photograph before waving her through. A look of pity, thought Ava, as she skirted the barn-like concourse reeking of aviation fuel, coffee and pizzas. There, at the exit, was the sign she'd been told to look for. *Ava Westmorland*, it stated, scrawled in red pen on a large paper bag. It was strange to see her maiden name again, especially written above a smiling, cartoon image of a fish that lay battered and lifeless on a bowl of chunky chips. The small, stout woman holding the sign was in her mid-fifties and her tanned face glanced hopefully at each passing single woman, with not a flicker at Ava. Her blue fleece was emblazoned, *May and Jeff's Fish and Chip Emporium – A Cod above the Rest*.

May, thought Ava, had been well-described by Tilly's daughter, Vicky, as Trevone's best chip shop owner, Tilly's tolerant cleaner and carer, and

someone who knows everyone like the back of her capable hands.

‘Hi, I’m Ava,’ she said, stopping before her. ‘Thanks for picking me up.’

May’s mouth opened slightly and if there was a look of someone’s heart sinking, it was written all over this woman’s lined face. ‘Lovely to meet you, I’m May,’ she replied, over-enthusiastically, in a soft Birmingham accent. She embraced Ava in a tangy fug of fish, chips, and vinegar, and crumpled the sign into a Sainsbury’s bag-for-life. A centimetre of white roots grew at the parting in May’s hair, like the striped pelt of a badger. ‘Have you only got hand luggage?’ Ava nodded. May frowned as she strode outside and Ava silently followed in her bustling wake. ‘The car’s this way and I haven’t long on the ticket.’

May walked and talked at speed: about her arthritic knee, the weather, the price of houses, and her son in Australia. Ava imagined this was how she gossiped to chip shop customers while sorting orders. Her sturdy calves, in knee-length blue shorts, set a pace which showed no sign of arthritis.

‘Oh, I better warn you there’s not much of a phone signal there. Well, there is if you head to the Golden Lion and there’s a glimmer at the lamppost

by Cliff View's gate.'

'I haven't got one,' said Ava. She couldn't say she'd chucked it down the loo.

'That's a first. Tilly hasn't got Wi-Fi, even with those dongle things.'

Ava shook her head and stared as the salty-scented wind breezed in with billowing white clouds that tore themselves apart to reveal glimpses of sun.

'A good couple of days coming,' May said, checking her watch. 'Oh hell, we've got two minutes.' She rooted for keys and unlocked a red Smart car. Ava dropped her bag into the tiny boot and settled inside as May pressed a button and the sunroof peeled back.

'Hurray!' said May, chucking coins into the automatic barrier and roaring off. 'Tilly tries the patience of a saint and God himself. Three carers came and went before this latest hospital admission.' May put up three fingers, folding them as she explained: 'Doreen left after two days; Beryl, I liked her, lasted one; and Janine, just two hours. If Tilly went in a home full-time it would kill her faster than she's trying to top herself with cigarettes and brandy. Are you experienced?'

'No.' Ava could barely look after herself.

Coming was a big mistake. She nibbled at the skin around her thumbnail and tasted blood.

‘Look,’ May said, pursing her lips as they passed a traffic warden. ‘Wardens are the bedrock of Cornish high finance. Mind you, I get my own back when they buy chips.’ May grinned and crunched gears. She suddenly slowed on a straight, empty stretch.

‘Speed camera. We know where they all are,’ said May, jabbing at one tucked behind a tree. She sped again. The undulating coastal road snaked twelve miles to Trevone Bay, with glimpses of sea on one side and opposite, clusters of towering wind turbines, fields of glittering solar panels, campsites, surf schools, pubs, and cottages. Ava let her eyes wander, only half taking in May’s chatter.

Tilly, thought Ava, such a sweet sounding, powder-puff, old-lady name. This one sounded an exhausting old bag nobody would seek out in their right mind. Which said it all.

‘Disagreements make Tilly feel better,’ carried on May. ‘She’s more civil with men. Unlike me, but I’ve been married thirty years. Jeff’s let me off the chippie to look after her Friday nights and Saturdays. Not the first weekend because there’s an annual

charity barn dance, so Evangeline's doing that one. You should come.'

Ava remained mute. She was done with dancing. May opened the glove compartment and scrabbled inside. She brought out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter. She extracted one and lit up while scooting in fourth gear down a winding lane of tall hedges and overhanging trees. Wild garlic and bluebells scented the air.

'Jeff thinks I've stopped,' said May, inhaling deeply. 'So, you won't let the cat out of the bag, will you?' She glanced over. Ava shook her head and May exhaled pleasantly. 'I haven't got time to show you around Cliff View. We have to make money now because it's a mausoleum in winter. We have a little apartment in Lanzarote. Never had nice chips there. I hope you're prepared for this isolation tank between November and February? If you stay. How old are you?'

'Thirty-three,' said Ava. Being isolated would be just fine and she gazed outside. White hawthorn hedges and verges of cow parsley and pink campions petered out into boggy moorland, with golden gorse and a carpet of purple heather. Raggedy-looking sheep dotted the ground, some with lambs tugging at

udders, their tails wagging. Overhead, gulls screeched and swooped. The air smelt of sun lotion.

‘Gorse has a lovely coconut scent,’ said May, inhaling. ‘There’s an old Cornish saying, *When gorse is out of bloom, kissing’s out of season*, but it’s always in bloom!’

Ava willed every flower to scorch and wither. At a junction the car came to a grinding halt and with a flourish, May spread her hands, as if she’d personally unrolled the scene. There was the tang of sea under a forget-me-not blue sky above the wide curving sweep of Trevone Bay. Around it, a cluster of older properties were encroached by glitzy luxury homes with glass balconies and wall-to-ceiling windows. Building work spread in almost every direction.

‘Place is a goldmine,’ said May. ‘Young’uns can’t afford to buy, or rent, so they leave.’ She shuddered. ‘See those?’ Ava followed May’s finger jabbing at airy, spacious mansions with BMWs, sports cars and 4x4s on gravel drives. ‘Sell for well over a million to owners who are here a few weeks of the year and rent them at astronomic rates.’

Ava could see why they’d pay for the spectacular view of the Atlantic as it poured into the horseshoe-shaped bay, dotted with surfers. The Cornish dream

with cedar-boarded eco-homes next to acres of regimented caravans and tents.

‘Look, Cliff View.’ May tilted her chin.

There, clinging to the side of the headland and separate from all other properties, was a dilapidated bungalow. Unloved, thought Ava, and in that respect, it would suit her well. The lane petered out to a potholed track as they drew up on a stony parking bay. Close up, Cliff View was all peeling paint and scrappy, splintered wood. It stuck out like a sore thumb amongst its swish neighbours but it had the best view of the ocean. May yanked the handbrake and breathed heavily. Beads of sweat covered her face.

‘No menopausal woman should work in a chippie, or in my case, far from a chaise longue and icy gin and tonic.’ She swiped her forehead with her sleeve.

Unlike Cliff View’s neglected exterior, Ava noted, its sand-engrained lawn had neat borders brimming with purple tulips, alliums, fading bluebells and delicate ferns. There was a peculiar echoing, breathy sound.

‘What’s that?’ asked Ava.

‘Round Hole – behind Cliff View. It’s a

collapsed cave the sea rushes through. Legend says it's where ocean gods talk to locals and when someone important dies, or there's a shipwreck, it shrieks like a banshee.'

'Does it ever stop?' Ava hated the ghostly winnowing.

'Quieter. You get used to it. A bit like Tilly though, there's always something brewing.'

'How long have you been here?' Ava asked, as they got out of the car.

'Parents came in the 70s when you could buy a place for a pittance. I'm an *Emmet* – an *ant* because us incomers crawl all over Cornwall – but I'm not a *blow-in*.'

'Which is?'

'Holidaymakers, who blow in and blow out. My lovely bread and butter.'

'What about Tilly?' asked Ava, lifting her bag. A gull dropped a mussel shell on the gravel path which smashed and the bird swooped down to gobble the fleshy contents.

'Outsider everywhere,' May replied, walking ahead as the gull soared up with its feast.

Cliff View's flinty stone walls were flecked with a salty residue and its slate roof wore a gritty sheen. A

murder of crows balanced upon it, preening, as they cawed, rattled and clicked. The worn navy door was surrounded by rosemary and its blue flowers were alive with bees. May extracted keys from an old brick on the earth, unlocked the door and shouldered it open.

‘You’ve got until noon Monday. Good luck.’ May handed over the keys, ran a hand through a clump of rosemary, absently smelt her fingers and briefly touched Ava’s hand.

‘Thank you,’ said Ava, feeling her throat constrict and eyes well.

‘You’re quieter than the others,’ May said. Ava smiled thinly. She’d got a whole lot quieter in the last six months.

‘There’s food and wine in the fridge,’ May added, walking off. ‘My number’s on the chalkboard if you need anything.’ Ava watched a plume of blue smoke float above her disappearing head. She closed the door and leant heavily on it.

May tucked herself behind the lamppost and took out her mobile. She waved it until a one-bar signal appeared and called Sniffy Dave at the Golden Lion. The landlord answered.

‘Are you still running a book on Tilly’s new

carer leaving by Wednesday?’ May asked.

‘Yep,’ said Dave, sniffing. Bloody sniffing. He told everyone it was because his nose was allergic to beer but the rest of his body loved it.

‘I think you better shorten the odds.’

‘Right,’ Dave sniffed, and the signal vanished.



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