

The Sound of Home

A *Classic* Beauty and the Beast Story

By Judith Nolan

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"All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players..."

William Shakespeare

Brigit O'Donnell had discovered there were three sorts of exhaustion.

There was the honest weariness that came at the end of useful work, when the body complained but the heart was easy. There was grief, which wore the body like an ill-fitting coat and never came off, even in sleep. And there was the particular exhaustion of a book tour, which consisted of answering the same six questions in twelve cities while pretending each had never been asked before.

By five o'clock on a rainy October afternoon, Brigit had endured all three. She did her best to still look interested and engaged, but her spirit was flagging badly.

The signing table before her was littered with empty coffee cups, used pens and discarded press notes, along with a final, dangerously unstable tower of *Three Hundred Days*. Beyond it, a patient line still wound between the shelves of the Fifth Avenue bookshop.

"Miss O'Donnell, did you always know you would write about the Troubles?" a young woman asked breathlessly.

"No," Brigit replied, signing the title page. "When I was nine, I meant to write stories about horses. Somehow, I got sidetracked into this more sombre storyline."

"Oh..." The woman blinked and frowned. Then she laughed, and some of the anxiety went out of her face. "Do you think peace is really possible in Ireland?"

Brigit looked up. There it was, the seventh question. It was also the only one that truly mattered.

"Aye," she said quietly. "Not easy or neat. And it will never be cheap. But possible, or there'd be no sense in any of us getting out of bed in the morning."

"Okay...", the woman replied doubtfully as she hugged the signed book to her chest and went away without truly understanding.

Half an hour later, the bookshop doors were closed behind the last reader. Brigit's publisher descended upon her with a car, a dinner reservation and the bright determination of a woman who had never been asked to speak for the dead.

"You have three hours before we attend that dinner," Ellen announced. "Your hotel's impossible in this traffic, so we'll go straight downtown."

"No, we won't." Brigit drew on her coat. "You'll go to dinner and charm the reviewers and those critics. I'm escaping while the coast is clear. It's been a year since I was last in this city and I want to see it."

She smiled wistfully. "Besides, it's Monday and also Samhain again. The night when the walls between the worlds grow thin and spirits of the underworld walk the earth. A night of masks and bale fires when anything is possible and nothing is quite as it seems."

"Please don't go all Irish on me," Ellen complained good-naturedly. "I know it's Halloween tonight. But exactly where are you escaping to? It better have a phone."

Brigit smiled. "I haven't decided. That is the charm of it all."

Ellen stared at her with worried eyes. "You can't simply vanish in Manhattan. And I don't want to be the one to identify you in the morgue."

Brigit hugged her. "Oh, Ellen, I grew up in the Bogside. I can vanish in a broom cupboard if there's sufficient motivation. I know how to take care of myself."

The bell above the shop door rang as it was opened. Brigit turned to see a young woman walk in from the darkening street, shaking drops of rain from her dark hair as she folded down her umbrella and stood it beside the door.

Brigit's face lit at once. "Ah, Catherine Chandler, and right on time." She glanced back to Ellen. "She's my accomplice in my escape plans. I couldn't be in safer hands."

"If you say so." Ellen looked from one woman to the other and sighed the sigh of the efficiently defeated. "All right, sharp at eight-thirty. The Oak Room. Please try not to start an international incident before then. Don't wear yourself out before you've wined and dined the book reviewers and critics."

"I'll do my very best to return her to you safe and sound," Catherine promised, as she tucked Brigit's hand into the crook of her arm. "We're going out for a walk and a catch-up."

"Sounds safe enough," Ellen replied doubtfully as she watched them walk away and out of the shop.

Outside, the autumn rain had made mirrors of the pavements. Brigit tucked her hand deeper into Catherine's hold, and for half a block they walked beneath the protection of the large umbrella without speaking.

With Catherine, silence was not a demand to be filled. Brigit had remembered that special kindness of not needing to explain her thoughts or feelings.

"You do look tired," Catherine said at last. "We can go to my apartment and just chill out, if you want that instead. I've got wine and cheese."

Brigit sighed. "I am tired. I'm also overfed, overquoted and in danger of becoming wise in public. If you don't mind, I need some fresh air and uncomplicated company."

Catherine nodded. "I can supply both those things."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." Brigit glanced sideways. "And you? You look happy."

Catherine's smile altered. It became softer and more private, and Brigit felt again what she had understood within minutes of their first meeting.

"He's well, then?" Brigit asked softly.

"Yes, he is very well. We plan to see each other later after it gets fully dark."

Brigit pushed further. "And is he still listening to those voices only he can hear?"

"Oh, yes...," Catherine laughed. "Always."

Somewhere far beneath their feet, beyond stone and steam and the roar of trains, Vincent stopped on the bridge in the Whispering Gallery and smiled. He

was holding a well-thumbed copy of Brigit's book, and he looked upwards as if he could see all the way to the surface.

"Catherine..." he breathed, pleased that he could feel her contentment through their bond. "I'll be with you soon..."

"Oh, look..." Brigit stopped under the wide awning of an imposing theatre.

Gold light washed across a painted poster attached to the stone wall. *THE RETURNING TIDE*. Beneath the title, in letters almost as large, was the name EDWARD MULHARE.

The rain ran from the brim of their shared umbrella as Brigit moved closer.

"Cork," she said with certainty.

"The play?" Catherine asked as she turned to look.

"The man." Brigit pointed to the dignified face on the poster. "You can hear Cork in his voice even after all these years away. It's buried under London and New York and heaven knows how many hotel rooms, but it's there."

Catherine looked closer. "How do you know? Have you seen him perform?"

Brigit shook her head. "Not live, only on the television. A proper grand gentleman he was then, always immaculately dressed, with a talking car and a very good-looking sidekick. She sighed. "But, as Devon Miles, Edward always did it for me."

"Oh, yes..." Catherine smiled. "I remember him, now. That's a description of a TV show called '*Knight Rider*'."

"That's the one." Brigit nodded. "It's also accurate. That man could read the phonebook and not put you to sleep. That is a rare talent."

"Yes..." Catherine studied the poster. "I've heard talk at work about this play. I've been trying to make time to see it. The critics have given it rave reviews in the Times. The run has been extended because of popular demand. There's even talk of a Broadway opening next year."

The first bell sounded inside the theatre. Brigit looked at the doors.

Then at Catherine. "Should we?"

"If you want to. How long before you have to return for dinner?" Catherine asked.

Brigit's lips compressed. "Long enough to cause an international incident. But I would rather be here than there. I've seen enough critics to last me for an eternity."

"All right, then..." Catherine folded down her umbrella and shook off the rain. "Let's go on inside and telephone *The Oak Room* to tell Ellen that you haven't been kidnapped. Then we'll see this Exposition King of yours and find out if he's that good."

"Oh, I would love that," Brigit said with a quick smile. "The reviewers and critics can do without me for one night. Come on..."

Below the city, Vincent sensed Catherine's sudden desire to attend the play. He left the Gallery, and the world Below behind, as he raced away toward the surface to join her in the theatre far above.

Twenty minutes later, Catherine and Brigit were seated in the manager's box, courtesy of two returned tickets and a house manager who recognized both Catherine's name and Brigit's face.

They were handed a programme each. They read it quickly to understand the scenes that were about to unfold before them. Edward Mulhare was listed as playing Michael Ahern, a sea captain returning to Cork after forty years, to discover that memory had preserved a home which time had not.

The house lights dimmed and the audience quickly became silent. The play began with a darkened quay, the distant, slow cry of gulls and a grey-haired man standing alone in the shadows cast by a nearby ship's lantern.

Edward Mulhare entered without theatrical flourish. He simply stepped into the circle of light, removed his sea cap and looked toward an unseen shore only he could see.

The theatre became very still. The audience seemed to lean forward as one, waiting for him to speak. But he simply stood there, looking out and the audience did not move a single muscle.

Vincent climbed up through a hidden opening in the theatre's basement. He edged along deserted hallways before arriving in the box directly across from the two women.

He had followed Catherine's delighted curiosity through the bond. From behind a drawn velvet curtain, he could see down to the stage and across to his love.

He could see Brigit, too. She was leaning forward, her entire concentration on the tall, grey-haired man on the stage.

Vincent drew the curtain aside slowly. Then he settled back to watch the play and enjoy the anonymity of his position.

Brigit leaned forward to watch the play unfold. At first, she watched with the keen appraisal of a writer. Then Edward spoke the name of a Cork street, and something inside her felt it land.

The actor's voice was elegant, measured, trained to carry to the furthest row. But beneath it lay older music. The taste of salt air, the sound of soft bells beside old stones, and the rain.

Vincent watched the play unfold. He could not have named its place. He only knew the sound of exile recognising home.

Onstage, Captain Ahern found the house of his childhood occupied by strangers. He stood at the garden wall listening to laughter through an open window and said, "A man may return to the door. It does not follow that the door remembers him."

Brigit lowered her head and sighed. Catherine reached for her hand and held it tightly, lending her silent support.

In the darkness, Vincent saw Brigit's grief. Not through any bond, but through the terrible clarity of kinship. He thought of Ian, whom he had never known, and of all those who lived on in the rooms of another person's heart.

The play unfolded and the actors all took their parts. The audience was held spellbound until the last scene. At the final curtain, the entire house rose as one and began to clap and cheer loudly.

Edward Mulhare bowed once with the company, grave and gracious. At the second curtain he was smiling. At the third, the sea captain had vanished and the actor stood revealed. He was a tall, broad-shouldered Irishman who appeared plainly astonished that so many strangers wished him well.

"There he is," Brigit said above the applause. "That's himself."

"How can you tell?" Catherine asked.

"How he bows to us. No sea captain would be that embarrassed by affection."

The house lights came up. Catherine expected Brigit to hurry away to join her belated dinner. Instead, she remained seated, studying the programme.

"Do you want to meet him?" Catherine inquired.

Brigit shook her head. "Certainly not."

Catherine was puzzled. "That sounded very definite."

"I'm an Irishwoman abroad. We're suspicious of other Irish people abroad. They may know our cousins or aunts. We have too many of both."

"Brigit..." Catherine rose to her feet.

Brigit remained seated. "Besides, what would I say? *'Good evening, Mr Mulhare. Your second-act vowels reminded me so much of damp stone and turf smoke that you made my heart ache with longing'?*"

Catherine smiled. "It would be memorable. He certainly didn't put anyone to sleep. No one seemed keen to leave at the interval."

From the aisle outside their box came a discreet cough. The house manager stood waiting.

"Mr Mulhare asked whether Miss O'Donnell might come backstage for a moment," he said. "He recognized her from the newspaper."

Brigit looked accusingly at Catherine. "You arranged this."

"I didn't," Catherine denied quickly. "But I think it's a great idea."

Brigit rose. "Then the universe has become interfering in its old age."

She took Catherine's arm. "Come on. You get to meet him too. There's still time before you need to meet Vincent."

The manager walked ahead of them as he led the way backstage. The theatre shed its magic with indecent haste. The quay was painted canvas. The ship's lantern had an electrical cord. Captain Ahern's house was supported from behind by raw timber, sandbags and a stagehand eating a corned beef sandwich washed down with a bottle of beer.

The man grinned at them as they passed. He looked them both over with approval, as he drank from the bottle and munched his sandwich contentedly.

Edward's dressing-room door stood half-open. The manager knocked and then pushed the door fully open for the two women to go inside.

"I'll be waiting outside when you're done with our star," he said before he left them.

Edward turned from his dressing mirror. He had washed the captain's grey colouring from his white-blond hair but not yet the years painted around his eyes.

He rose as they entered and gave a small bow.

"Miss O'Donnell." His smile warmed the cluttered room. "I hoped it was you. I'm Edward Mulhare." He held out his hand.

"I had gathered that from the very large letters on the posters outside." Brigit smiled as she accepted his hand. "But please, call me Brigit."

"Brigit..." Edward repeated softly as he raised her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers with elegant grace, then released her.

Brigit turned to her friend beside her. "And this is Catherine Chandler."

Edward greeted Catherine in the same graceful manner, then turned back to Brigit. "I read your book last winter. It was a deeply emotional experience."

Brigit shook her head. "And here I was prepared to say something gracious about your play and how much I enjoyed it."

Edward inclined his head. "You may still do so," he said gravely. "Writers require praise, but actors require it every twenty minutes."

"It was truly beautiful," Brigit said, and her teasing tone fell away. "Painful in places. But beautiful. You made me long for home."

Edward accepted her words. He understood what they had cost her and did not cheapen them by pretending otherwise.

"Your captain has been away forty years," she continued. "Yet he sounds as though he left Cork on Tuesday."

Edward waved one hand. "One never entirely leaves Cork behind. It follows one about, offering corrections."

"Ah, yes. Derry does much the same, only louder. Especially if you were born a Croppy girl in the Bogside."

Brigit moved two steps closer to him and looked up into his face. "*Éirinn go Brách...*"

"*Go raibh míle maith agat,*" Edward answered automatically. He stopped, faintly surprised by his own response.

Brigit smiled. '*There he is, the Corkman beneath all those beautifully polished words...*'

For a long moment they regarded one another solemnly. Then Edward laughed, a rich delighted sound that seemed too large for the old dressing room.

"I was about to make a pot of tea," he said. "Would you ladies care to join me for a cup?"

"We don't have anywhere else to be right now," Brigit replied quickly.

"I'm free for an hour," Catherine added with a smile. "If we're not intruding."

"Not a chance of that," Edward replied. "I don't get to bed until after midnight. I always need to relax and wind down after a performance."

"Please, be seated..." He indicated two armchairs that had seen better days. "And I'll pour you both a cup of Barry's tea. A true taste of home."

He made a quiet ceremony out of filling a battered electric kettle from the tap in a nearby sink. Then he set out a fine china teapot beside three elegant cups and saucers. Every action was completed unhurriedly but with precision, wasting nothing.

As he worked, he asked Brigit about her book tour. In turn, she asked him about returning to the stage after the years he'd spent in California.

"I don't miss it. Television is a very peculiar discipline," he said. "One spends an entire day achieving thirty seconds of effortless authority. Theatre is more honest. If you lose the audience, you hear them unwrapping sweets and talking among themselves."

Catherine nodded. "And if you lose television viewers, they leave the room to put the kettle on and check the cookie jar."

Edward laughed. "Precisely. One can preserve one's illusions only so far."

"But you stayed," Brigit observed. "Here, in New York, I mean."

"I arrived here after the last world war and found this city was awash with everything that was missing back home. I had found my calling on the stage as Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* and never truly looked back. One day, I discovered that New York had ceased to be the place I lived and become the place from which I measured everywhere else."

"Home by stealth," Brigit replied softly.

Edward inclined his head. "The city's preferred method. One day I woke up and realised I had lived more than half my life on this side of the Atlantic."

His expression became pensive and then he shrugged. "Home was not home, anymore."

"That sentiment I can understand," Brigit agreed softly. "Especially on the eve of Samhain."

"Ah..." Edward nodded. "When the walls between the worlds grow thin and spirits of the underworld walk the earth. When anything is possible and nothing is quite as it seems..."

The kettle boiled and clicked off. Edward turned away to complete the ritual of making the tea.

Catherine listened, amused, as Cork and Derry circled one another with the instinctive pleasure of people who had found familiar weather in a foreign land. There was no flirtation in it. Brigit's love for Ian was present as surely as the wedding ring she still wore. This was something quieter: recognition, perhaps, and the relief of not having to explain the direction from which one's ghosts approached.

A stage manager appeared to remind Edward of the visitors waiting outside the stage door for him to appear. "Will you be much longer?" he asked.

Edward indicated his seated guests. "I am entertaining right now. I'll be out in due course."

"Very well..." The man grimaced as he turned and hurried away again.

"Now, where were we?" Edward poured the tea into the three cups and served them.

Brigit studied his half-painted face as she accepted her cup and saucer. "Is it difficult?"

Edward straightened to hand Catherine hers. "Being looked at, do you mean?"

Brigit shook her head. "Being mistaken for all the men you've played."

Edward considered. "Less difficult than being mistaken for no one at all. More lonely, sometimes."

In the corridor beyond, a pipe knocked once. Catherine turned her head to listen.

The sound came again. Three soft strokes, a pause, then two more quickly followed.

Brigit saw Catherine's face and understood. The knocks were a summons and a question.

"I'm afraid you've missed your dinner engagement," Catherine said.

"It wasn't that important. I expect they've reached dessert and denounced me by now." Brigit looked at Edward. "How long before the theatre is completely empty?"

He raised one eyebrow. "That is a remarkably sinister question for this hour of the night."

"I... would like to introduce you to a very good friend of ours. He has asked to meet you."

Edward sipped his tea as he watched her. "A shy friend?"

Catherine studied him. "It's more that he's a very private one."

"And it will soon be Samhain..." Edward's expression changed.

The actor's curiosity remained, but the gentleman's discretion moved before it. He put aside his cup.

"The place will be clear in thirty minutes, if I'm seen to leave by the stage door and pretend I'm going home," he said. "Will that do?"

"Perfectly," Brigit replied after glancing at Catherine.

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An empty theatre was larger than a crowded one. It held echoes that repeated themselves in ever-decreasing circles.

Without applause or music, every footstep seemed to awaken a hundred listening shadows. A single ghost light burned at centre stage. The false quay loomed beyond it, its painted moon awaiting tomorrow night's performance.

Edward had washed Captain Ahern's makeup from his face and changed into a dark three-piece suit. He had then left by the stage door to greet all those who wished to speak to him or secure his autograph.

The stage manager breathed a sigh of relief as the last of the stragglers left for home. He didn't argue when Edward said he needed to fetch something from his dressing room and he would use his own key to lock the side door when he was done.

"Good night, then..." the man replied, as he left the building and locked the stage door behind him.

Catherine and Brigit sat waiting for Edward in the front row. He walked back to them, his handsome face alive with curiosity.

"Is your mysterious friend here in the building?" he asked.

"He is," Catherine replied quietly. "There are many ways in and out of this theatre that do not include doors."

"Mystery upon mystery..." Edward glanced at the boxes, then at the high darkness over the stage. "I have worked with many unforeseen entrances. Nothing surprises me anymore."

"He has spent his life learning how to be cautious," Brigit said. "But tonight is Samhain and anything is possible."

Edward nodded. "Then he should take all the time he needs. I am a threat to no one." He leaned back against the stage wall and waited.

Vincent heard him and understood. He had not intended to come closer. It was enough to have seen the play, and to know Brigit was safe and pleased. He was content to wait for Catherine to come to him.

But Catherine's heart held no fear. Brigit's faith in Edward Mulhare waited without demand. And the man had answered mystery with patience.

Vincent descended the narrow stair from the upper box.

The three people in the stalls heard the door open. Catherine turned first.

Vincent stepped into the faint amber light at the side of the stage with his hood pulled forward to conceal his face.

Edward did not move a muscle. His eyes took in the cloak and the large, gloved hands held quietly at the man's sides. They came at last to the deep pit of shadow where the mysterious man's incredible face showed briefly in the fitful light.

For one fleeting second professional assessment sharpened Edward's gaze. He was looking for seams, spirit gum, the edge of a mask. Then he understood there were none.

The actor vanished. The man remained. "Amazing," he breathed. "Truly amazing."

"Edward," Brigit said gently. "This is our very good friend, Vincent."

Vincent came nearer, stopping beyond the ghost light. "I hope you will forgive the cautious manner of our meeting."

Edward's eyes had not left him. There was wonder in them, and an honest astonishment. But there was no disgust.

"My dear fellow," he said at last. "I have made an entrance through a fireplace, a French window and, on one unfortunate occasion, the wrong cupboard. Yours is infinitely better for its simple drama."

Catherine's soft laughter broke the tension.

Vincent nodded. "You accept what your eyes cannot understand."

"I've worn enough masks in my time." Edward stepped forward and offered his hand. "One learns to see beneath such barriers."

Vincent looked at the outstretched hand, then took it in a firm grip.

The gesture was simple and profound. That was its grace.

They all sat together in the front row, four figures gathered around the lonely ghost light. Catherine explained only what was necessary, that Vincent lived in a community apart from the city, but she did not say exactly where. That its safety depended upon secrecy and Catherine belonged to both worlds. She guarded the passage between them.

Edward listened without interruption. "There are children?" he asked.

"Many," Vincent replied. "They often have nowhere else to go. We accept them without question and raise them as our own."

"And you have families there as well?"

"Yes, many of them. Again, those who have nowhere else."

"And they receive an education where you live?"

Vincent's face brightened. "A library full of books on many subjects."

Edward nodded. "Then it is unquestionably a civilisation."

"Father will be relieved to hear it." Catherine smiled. "He occasionally has expressed doubts."

Edward looked around the false harbour, at the flats and ropes and painted distance. "I have spent most of my life asking people to believe in a world because a curtain rose. It would be arrogant to deny one merely because you need to remain apart."

Brigit watched him, pleased but not surprised. "Thank you."

"Why did you wish to meet me?" Edward asked Vincent.

Vincent's gaze moved toward the dark auditorium. "Your play spoke of exile without making a virtue of pain. And of home without pretending we may always return to it."

Edward was silent. He nodded once and sighed.

"Brigit's book once helped me through a dark time," Vincent continued. "Her words reached a place she could never have known existed. Tonight, your voice did the same."

The words touched Edward more deeply than the evening's applause. It showed only in the slight lowering of his head.

"Then Captain Michael Ahern has justified his existence," he said.

"And Edward?" Brigit asked.

He glanced at her.

"Has anyone seen *him* tonight?"

The question might have been an intrusion from another person. From Brigit it was a hand laid upon an old locked door. Beneath it lay the smaller, more dangerous question every performer carried and seldom dared to voice. '*Would you like me as me?*'

Edward turned and looked toward the row upon row of empty seats behind them. "Thousands of people have looked directly at me over the years. I'm not sure that seeing is what they were doing."

"No," Vincent said softly. "It is not always the same."

Their eyes met across the ghost light. One man who could walk openly through the world, while strangers called him by other names. Another who could never enter it without shadows, yet was loved and known beyond disguise.

"Perhaps," Edward said. "We have opposite difficulties."

"Perhaps they meet in the same place."

From somewhere high above came a creak, as though the old theatre had settled closer to listen.

Edward looked up. "You realise, of course, that every theatre is haunted."

"By actors?" Catherine asked.

"Mostly by critics. Actors have more sense than to remain after closing."

Brigit laughed. "There's the Corkman."

Edward inclined his head and his voice softened into a brogue. "Ah, he is never very far away."

It was nearly midnight when they rose. Edward promised nothing aloud until Brigit asked him plainly.

"Vincent's world must remain secret."

"It will."

"Even from people you trust."

"Especially from people I trust. They might imagine themselves entitled to know more than they should."

Catherine nodded. It was precisely the answer she needed.

Edward turned to Vincent. "Will you come again?"

"If I may."

"Tomorrow's audience has already paid for the best seats, but I believe the upper box remains beyond the reach of commerce."

"Then I would be honoured." Vincent turned to Catherine and a nod of understanding passed between them.

Then he withdrew the way he had come, his cloak folding into the darkness. Catherine watched until the door closed behind him. She would be joining him soon enough to walk the city until dawn.

She'd told Joe she was taking the next day off work. Her boss hadn't been happy but he had acquiesced reluctantly.

Edward watched Catherine. He saw her love shine from her eyes.

"His lady," Brigit murmured. "Samhain is their time to be together and no one will look twice at them tonight."

"Yes, I can understand that," Edward said. He had seen that much without explanation.

He bowed to them. "I shall see you both out." He smiled. "I do believe Samhain is upon us and the walls are growing thin once more."

"Thank you," Catherine replied, as she collected her umbrella and followed them to the small side door.

Outside, the rain had stopped. Catherine and Brigit walked east beneath a clean black sky while Edward remained alone at the door watching them until they were lost among the colourful crowds of costumed Halloween-goers.

Then a large, cloaked figure seemed to drift down from the upper shadows of the building. The figure's boots touched the wet pavement and he joined the two women. All three then linked arms and walked on.

Edward smiled before he returned to the stage and stood for a moment beside the ghost light, listening to the vast silence where an audience had been. Then he looked upward toward the box.

For the first time in many years, the darkness beyond the footlights did not seem empty. He walked slowly back to his dressing room, to tidy up before leaving for his Manhattan apartment.

As Brigit walked with her two close friends, she thought of Ian. Of Vincent who could hear love echoed through stone. Of Edward, applauded by crowds and recognised at last by three strangers, as midnight arrived and the walls thinned once more.

The finest company in New York, she decided, had gathered in an empty theatre. And not one of them had been pretending.

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