

Lifetime city-dweller, Jillian MacSweeney, follows her husband's dream to live on a farm on the Kansas prairie. They buy Lovers lane and rename it Windyridge. hear tales of farm life while you help Jillian solve a mystery.

The View from Windyridge

by Cynthia Ebers

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*The View
from Windyridge*



Cynthia Ebers

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Chapter One

I am new to country living. Early in our marriage, my handsome husband asked how I felt about someday living on a farm. My response had been something like, “With cows and chickens?” and his nod confirmed his objective. This idea seemed a fanciful notion to me, since our student loans bills were so high we could barely afford eggs, let alone land, a house, cattle, equipment, and chickens. But being an eager-to-please young wife, I had obligingly answered with “I might, for the right man...”

Years later, I found Frank checking the land and property listings. I realize now those teasing words, from so long ago, had been my first step down the long and dusty road between city life and country living.

Frank enticed me with such desirable descriptions as “peace and quiet” and “gorgeous sunsets” and “space for our future grandchildren to explore,” all of which turned out to be true. I just don’t remember him mentioning we would also have to deal with fetid skunks, treacherous floods, slithering snakes, consuming fires, swooping hawks, and my new archenemies, the howling coyotes.

The year I graduated from college, I met Frank at a lake in Oklahoma. Two of my girlfriends had signed us up for a fishing tournament, and we ended up giving those Oklahoma boys a thorough thrashing in the sport of angling. I jokingly say that I

actually went fishing for a husband, and Frank says he caught the “catch of a lifetime” in me. I guess we were both right; Frank followed me home to Kansas, and we tied the knot.

Through our genealogy research, Frank and I learned that both of us have ancestral homes in Scotland. Well, with a surname like MacSweeney, we already knew Frank’s ancestors were from Scotland, but I didn’t realize my roots were so deep in the British Isles as well. MacSweeney is a Gaelic name that means “son of a pleasant man,” which is a very appropriate moniker for my husband. His father was a very pleasant man who taught Frank to love the land, and who was taken too soon from this world by cancer.

We discovered that, within a few years of each other, our great-great-grandparents fled the poverty and starvation brought on by the potato famines to search for a better life. That human tragedy hit Ireland in 1845 and Scotland in 1846. A million people starved to death during that famine, and a million more were forced to immigrate to places like Canada, the United States, and Australia. Out of desperation our ancestral families left their homeland. With courage, perseverance, and hard work, they started their new lives in America.

Frank and I love to visit Scotland. We are landowners of a small (very small) plot of land near the southwest coast. When we were blessed with three wonderful daughters, we decided to give them traditional Scottish names as a tribute to our ancestral home.

The View from Windyridge

Our eldest arrived with strawberry blond hair and confident green eyes. We named her Bridget, which means “exalted or strong” with attributes of “beauty and intelligence,” all things we imagined necessary for a firstborn. Not unlike countless others with her station in life, she accepted the challenge wholeheartedly and has been pretty much in charge of everyone since the age of three. Everyone—friends, family, even strangers picking out clothes—wants her opinion before making any decision.

Our middle daughter was born with light blonde hair and shining blue eyes. We named her Lainey, which means “shining light” and symbolizes “positivity, optimism and radiance.” Her vibrant and happy personality has kept us constantly entertained. From the beginning, joy flowed from her soul. She can still see the humor in any situation, and frequently tells stories that have us all in stitches.

After two blond babies, our youngest gave us a surprise and showed up looking like her mother and grandmother, with brown hair and inquisitive green eyes. We named her Aileen, which means “bright and shining” and symbolizes qualities of “brightness, energy and optimism.” Her energy still lights up every room with her easy, contagious laugh. Her naturally bright mind and curiosity became evident the moment she could talk. With her constant “How?” and “Why?” questions, we knew a future in science was inevitable.

We had a nice home in the suburbs of the city where I was born and raised. Wichita is a wonderful city in the heart of the

Kansas prairie. The area is blessed with abundant natural resources that allow for a variety of industrial opportunities, creating jobs for a diverse population. There is affordable housing, excellent healthcare, and good schools, including three brick and mortar universities.

The city grew up along a meandering river that supplies water, power, and recreational opportunities. The river winds through the downtown area, hosting a series of museums along its banks. Those attractions feature everything from our Native American history, to an interactive venue where children explore science, and a botanical garden that is exquisite.

The people in our city love casual dining, fine dining, and every kind of dining in between. And our expert chefs and restaurateurs do not disappoint us! We also love our theater, ballet and music, and our sports. Our children have their choice of team sports in which to participate: soccer, baseball, basketball, football, indoor swimming, golf, tennis, rodeo, and volleyball. Volleyball became this mother's favorite sport when our "shining light" nearly got her orthodontic-corrected perfect smile knocked out of her head in a basketball game.

Frank and I both had careers in our chosen fields, family nearby, a church that we loved, and plenty of nice friends. I was happy being a volleyball mom in a nice city, where everything I wanted was available and convenient.

While I was comfortable with urban life, my Frank longed for the country. He grew up on a farm in the gently rolling hills of Oklahoma. From him, I learned that country folks refer to

their homes as their “place,” as in “I was up to the neighbor’s place last week,” or “I’m headed to my uncle’s place to cut hay,” or “Stop by our place on your way home from church.” My Frank longed for a place of his own.

After years of saving for a down payment, we set out to find Frank a piece of the country to put down his own roots. This was not an easy task, since we would not be able to actually live on the property for some time. Frank wanted his place to be close enough to our home that he could go there after work. His plan included raising a small herd of cattle that would need to be fed in the winter, and require fences be maintained. Land is expensive, and the closer to town a piece of property is located, the bigger the price tag. Frank’s dream was for at least eighty acres with some sort of water on the property.

We drove by a few sites and walked a few more, with only Frank having enough vision to see the land’s possibilities. I would always ask Frank, “Is this the one?” and he would just shrug, as if he were feeling a little disappointed.

Our realtor called us one Saturday and said he had set up an appointment for us to see a property that is a quarter section. In the country, land is measured in sections. A section is 640 acres in a one-mile by one-mile dimension. The land he wanted to show us was a quarter-section, meaning 160 acres in a one-half mile by one-half mile dimension.

The property for sale was located south of our home about forty-five minutes and was about fifteen minutes outside the town of Limestone. The quaint community earned its name

from the limestone rock quarry just outskirts of town. Limestone is large enough to have necessities like schools, churches, a grocery store, gas station, and farm supply, and also has the luxuries of a few of restaurants and a small hospital.

While such luxuries did not appear on Frank's wish list for his place, they certainly appeared on mine. I knew I would be the one sent for parts while he worked on broken equipment, or the one who would forget an ingredient for dinner and have to make another run to the grocery store. I did not want those stores to be twenty miles or more away.

When you live in the city, you don't realize that restaurants and a hospital are luxuries, but they are, and they should not be taken for granted. Many people live in or near a town without such amenities; I was just hoping not to become one of those people.

The property was easy to find, since it was located just a few miles off of the state highway. We had to leave the paved highway for a couple of miles, and then double back past a dead end sign. This turn led us down an unkempt piece of road for another three-quarters of a mile. I hadn't really realized the dip and climb we had been making while driving down the dirt road, but when we pulled onto the property, it was immediately apparent that we were on top of a small hill. We pulled to a stop, and saw a view stretching out for several miles in front of us.

"Wow," Frank said.

"Wow," I echoed. Even I could see the possibilities.

The agent selling the property was a handsome young man with a pristine Stetson hat that settled down on his forehead to just above his eyebrows. He had a pleasant smile within his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee.

“Kevin Hastings,” he said, and he stuck out his hand to Frank.

“Francis MacSweeney,” Frank replied. “Call me Frank.”

“Jillian,” I said, and Kevin gave me a firm handshake too.

Kevin and his wife, Stephanie, owned the local real estate office and auction house. Kevin was from the area and knew everyone and every parcel of land.

Frank looked around and saw grazing land for cattle and a field to grow his own hay. There was a small pond to stock so the grandkids could fish. The tract had one large creek near the east property line, and one smaller creek near the center. Trees lined the creeks, providing all kinds of opportunities for climbing and exploring. It didn’t escape me that there were tall and glorious cottonwoods along the creeks. Their shade would be perfect for sitting beneath for a leisurely picnic. I do love the sound of a breeze rustling through cottonwood leaves.

We spent several minutes taking in the view before we walked back to the realtor. Kevin, along with every neighbor we met for the next several years, informed us with a smirk that this property was known as “Lovers Lane.”

“Folks come from all around to park on this hill and enjoy the view,” the realtor said with an ornery grin. He actually

chortled as he added under his breath, “Half the people in this county were conceived on this hill.”

Frank gave a small cough to cover his laugh. I flinched briefly at his surprisingly vivid imagery, but I couldn’t deny that the view was beautiful and must be amazing under the enormous night sky, full of sparkling stars and moonlight.

Since Frank had never said “wow” before, and since I had been supportive but completely indifferent to the specifics up to that point, we both knew that Frank had found his place. I saw him taking in the view and gazing up into the sky. He looked at me with a smile and winked. A warm southerly breeze swirled the tall prairie grass around us.

“Is this the one?” I asked my husband, while already knowing the answer.

“This is the one,” he confirmed.

I surveyed the hilltop and the incredible view, and asked quite sincerely, “Will there be indoor plumbing at some point?”

We bought Lovers Lane and renamed it Windyridge.

Chapter Two

After owning Windyridge for many years, we finally took the giant and expensive step of building a house on our place in the country. First came the obstacle of bringing drinking water to the property. Windyridge is too far from town to connect to the rural water system, so a well had be dug.

Frank spent a great deal of time deciding where to dig the well. It seems you have to pay the drilling company regardless of their success in finding water. Their fee is charged by the foot, so drilling is very expensive. Frank hoped and prayed we could find water on the first try. He even got a divining rod, something he said his father and all of his uncles had used, to see if he could feel the underground current.

Frank walked the property over and over with his divining rod pointing to the ground, and he kept returning to the same spot. This looked a little like hocus pocus to me, but I believe in tradition, so hey, if Frank wants to look silly, like generations of farmers before him, I say go for it. I certainly didn't want to discourage him while he was making such an important and expensive decision.

My confident husband marked a spot and ordered the drill. Men with the necessary equipment showed up to do the drilling. I got a lawn chair and a diet soda and sat a few yards away to watch. I have always loved watching other people work. They hit water about sixty feet down, but being on a hill, Frank was

not convinced that they were actually down to the aquifer. He ordered the drilling to continue. At 140 feet deep, they came to a great source of water, and Frank knew that this was the spot. I cheered from my lawn chair, and the men helped Frank lower a pump down into the well.

The water had to be tested by the County Extension office to see if it was safe for human consumption. The results confirmed it was potable, but hard. The agents made recommendations for filters and a water softener for the house. Later, Frank dug and placed a couple of additional lines for outdoor spigots. That well has never gone dry, even in drought years. My hero was right. I made a pledge not to laugh at any more of his traditions.

No rural water means no rural sewer. A lagoon had to be dug and pipes laid. Next came electricity, which had to be strung on poles all the way from the mile-road east of us. During the house building, the electricians dug through the yard to bring electricity to the house. The electric company offered to put a light up on our pole (for a fee), and that light has been a blessing. Of course, being the last house on the wires, we knew our house would not be a priority in a power outage, so we had to wire the house for a back-up generator.

Along with electricity, we needed propane for heat. The propane company arrives with a tank, which you rent. They fill the tank, and then refill it whenever your supply gets down to 20 percent of what the tank will hold. There is no internet without a dish. No trash company will venture so far down dirt

roads, so you have to build a brick furnace to burn your trash or make a monthly trip to the dump.

If I am explaining all of this correctly, you should be envisioning lots and lots of money with wings, flying out in every direction. Building in the country is expensive.

I agonized over floor plans for months. There are websites devoted solely to floor plans, so the possibilities are literally endless. Nearing our retirement years, we needed the house to be affordable. We wanted a cozy, energy-efficient home, but designed in a way as to accentuate the beautiful view. Large windows, front and back porches, and a big heart of the home kitchen were all necessities.

We chose a spot near the top of the hill for the build site. The foundational remains of a milking barn from a century earlier had to be removed first. Frank worked on the back-breaking job night and day. I tried to help and ran the hydraulic hammer a few times—enough times to make a video and show my daughters how hard I was working. To be honest, most of my help came in the form of encouragement.

“You’re doing great, honey!” and “You got this, sweetheart!” All of which I’m sure was more annoying than helpful, but Frank would just give me a little wave and keep working.

After the century-old concrete was all broken up and removed, Frank used a scraper to build the pad site for the house. He had experience surveying and using heavy equipment, so I had confidence in his work. He had used the

same scraper a few years earlier during a drought year to repair the dam of our small pond and built a much needed larger pond on the property. They are both magnificent.

When Frank was finished, the contractor took over and built the house. The girls helped me with the myriad of new construction decisions: tiles, countertops, light fixtures, paint, flooring...the list seemed endless. There was even granite for the kitchen island and bathroom countertops and tile for the backsplash and showers; sturdy, easy to clean wood flooring for the living areas and cozy carpet for the bedrooms, with everything in warm hues that would make the house feel homey.

We sold our home in town to pay for the new build after promising ourselves we would not go in debt. Frank and I lived in a camper on the property while the house was being built, so Frank could “keep an eye on things.” I don’t recommend this.

Windyridge is in Kansas, “The Land of AHs” our license plates declare. We have unimpeded views of the big sky, with unbelievably glorious sunrises and sunsets that are filled with colors so vibrant that they will take your breath away. We enjoy nearly 250 days a year of happy sunshine in Kansas, along with summer temperatures that soar over one hundred degrees, and winter temperatures that dip down into the single digits and come with wind chills well below zero.

Spring in our beautiful state brings a hopeful green, and flowers bloom in every color of the rainbow. With the beauty comes intermittent ferocious storms of pouring rain that can flood our crops and wash away our roads. The thunderstorms

The View from Windyridge

fill our big sky with dramatic light shows. The streaks of lightening explode across the big sky in every direction with frenetic energy and sometimes crash to the ground in fiery bolts. Our storms occasionally bring hail that will level our crops, dent up our cars, and require us to put on new shingles on our roofs.

In drought years, our crops dry up and the prairie struggles to feed all the wildlife. An arid prairie leads to grass fires that endanger our homesteads, both the domestic and wild animals, as well as their homes, too. A prairie fire can consume hundreds of acres in a few minutes. And, of course, we have the tornadoes for which Dorothy made us famous. I have never seen a tornado on the ground, but I have seen their destruction.

We lock things up and tie everything down to protect our possessions from winds that assail us from all directions. Those winds can blow up to sixty miles an hour or more, especially from the south in spring. Kansas comes from a Native American word that means “Land of the South Wind” and we were appropriately named.

Living in the Land of AHs is not for the faint of heart. But between the extremes comes the calm and the beauty. Add a little rain to Kansas and you get FOOD! Our crops and beef help feed America. Our gardens flourish with a colorful array of vegetables for our families and friends. The running joke is that you better lock your car doors when you go to church, or when you come out, there will be a sack of fresh vegetables in your back seat. (I have been on both sides of this activity.) Life

is not always easy in Kansas, but it can be beautiful and it is home.

Yes, I got all of this splendor and beauty along with the dangerous and chaotic weather *in a camper*. This is either the definition of true love, or insanity; I'll let you decide for yourself.

Move-in day finally arrived. The storage company brought our belongings and unpacking was pure joy. I found myself being a little critical over some minor details in the new house, like a small portion of a seam that I could see in the drywall. Frank was quick to point out the camper was available. That shut me up. My Frank, always the voice of reason.

Frank had built up a small herd of cattle by then. We both agreed that every farm needs a dog, and that it would be a plus if we could find a breed that could help Frank with the cattle, especially since I am afraid of big animals, and pretty much useless in that department.

I started watching the websites of the area shelters for breeds like heelers, and shepherds, and got excited when the picture of an Australian shepherd mix showed up there. Her picture was absolutely charming. The pup had beautiful markings: black, white, and tan medium-length fur and freckles on her long narrow snout. She is one of those dogs that appears to be smiling all the time, which always makes me smile too.

The pretty canine won me over with her ears. While the right ear stood straight up in the air, the left one had a little flop, about two thirds of the way up, that pointed straight out. Just to

look at that smiling dog with the goofy left ear warmed my heart. Thankfully, the pup had a sweet and friendly personality to go along with her beauty.

We brought her home and named her Anna. Never having seen a cow before, Anna started out a little timid, but she learned quickly and has always been a great help to her farmer.

After a year or so, we realized that a farm can be a big lonely place by yourself, and we decided Anna needed a friend. We thought this new companion should be younger, and preferably male. Because of the great success we had in adopting her, I went back to searching the area shelters.

I came across three little male pups, brothers, who had a red healer for a mom and an “unknown” father. They were about two months old and very friendly. We decided on a sweet but shy pup and put in our application. I thought we should name him Reggie, and Frank agreed that Reggie would be an easy name to call.

Reggie looks like his mother. He has a smooth red coat that is perfect for running the fields without getting tangled or snagged in all manner of stickers and burrs. There is a little bit of white on his face and a thin dark line around his dark eyes. His tail starts out red, then has a ring of brownish red, and the last half is white all the way to the tip. His red ears stand up perfectly straight. Reggie has a shy-dog smile that is irresistible.

From the beginning, he has always walked right at the heel of his people. We didn't teach him that; he just seemed to know his place was right beside his farmer.

Frank mentioned a couple of times that our farm family was not yet complete. “We really need a cat. Cats are great mousers,” he said, “which is very important in the country.” Every building or vehicle, especially in the cold winter months, will attract small creatures that are trying to come in out of the cold.

I have always been a dog person, so I was a bit reluctant at first. Then one morning, I stepped into the garden shoes that I leave in the garage and the right one felt...tight. I took it off to see if there was a wadded up sock stuck inside, and out jumped a small gray mouse. The mouse and I both screamed, which sold me on the idea of a mouser.

Our nearest neighbor showed up at our door one day and said he was giving away kittens, so we picked out a female. She was the most amazing looking calico I had ever seen. Her underside, legs, and the mask on her face were pure white. Her calico markings were different from any I had seen before. Instead of black, she had a silky gray, and instead of orange, she had a soft tan color. I researched calico traits, and discovered that she is what is known as a dilute calico. She is sleek and elegant; simply beautiful.

Our two youngest granddaughters, Jocelyn and Emma Rose, who we call “Rosie,” named the new kitten “Sassy,” which turned out to be an appropriate title for Her Highness. That kitten has kept us entertained for hours. Her sneaky antics and acrobatics are hilarious. And from that silly furball, I learned the calming power of purring. Anna is the oldest, and

she is teaching Reggie all about how to be a dog on the farm. We were all learning about cats from Sassy.

“Have you ever noticed that Anna will do anything for a snack?” I asked my husband. “And Reggie will do anything for a pat on the head, or scratch under the chin, won’t you boy?” I said, and gave the heeler pup a scratch.

“But Sassy, she’s a little different; she will decide for herself what she wants and let you know. Isn’t that right, Your Highness?” And the curled up kitten on my lap purred her contentment that I finally understood.

Frank laughed lightly, and agreed: “You’re right. Felines are very different from canines.” In what he thought was a sneaky segue, he added, “We still need some chickens, though. Have you given it any more thought?”

I didn’t mention that chickens were very near the bottom of my important-things-to-spend-my-time-thinking-about list.

“It really would be nice to have fresh eggs. So convenient.” Frank pressed. “What’s a farm without chickens?” he asked, sincerely.

“Less work?” I offered. We had always purchased eggs in the grocery store, and I had never considered that process inconvenient. Frank’s disappointment at my comment was obvious.

“Where do we get chickens?” I conceded, with the resolution that chicken ownership was inevitable.

“We pick the breed we want, and then order them from a reputable hatchery,” Frank explained. “Then they arrive as soon as they are hatched and sexed.”

“They arrive? Like in the mail?” I laughed. He must be joking.

“Exactly,” he stated with a straight face. He wasn’t kidding. “This is the best way to make sure that we get the breed we want, and the probability that the chicks will be pullets.”

“Pullets,” I said flatly. Another term I hadn’t needed to know in the city.

“Chicks are sold as either pullets, which become egg-laying hens, cockerels, which become roosters, or you can buy straight runs, which means you buy chicks and then wait to see what they turn out to be. When we order from a reputable hatchery, they will guarantee the chicks to be pullets or replace them. And yes, they will come through the mail.”

“No roosters!” I asserted.

I had made this condition clear in a previous conversation concerning chickens. I absolutely did not want a rooster. We grew up hearing stories from my mother and grandmother about being chased and spurred by roosters. Any rooster that starts chasing me will find himself swimming in a pot of hot water alongside carrots and potatoes.

“We don’t need a rooster,” Frank confirmed. “We eat unfertilized eggs. I think we should get Golden Comets, a hybrid chicken bred to be good egg layers. How many do you want?”

Want is such a relative term. I surrendered gracefully.

“How about three?” I offered.

“Let’s get four,” he answered.

We placed our order online, and six weeks later, we received a call from the post office in Limestone.

“Your chicks are here,” a cheerful female voice informed us.

I entered the post office feeling a little embarrassed. What kind of person buys live animals through the mail, I wondered? Apparently lots of people. The very nice lady at the counter said she had enjoyed listening to our chicks peeping. She said that chicks were arriving almost daily, and they always reminded her of growing up on a farm. Rural life is very different from city dwelling.

The friendly clerk walked to the back room and returned carrying a small box with air holes, and the chicks were indeed peeping. I took the box straight home and looked inside. The hatchery had sent five fluffy little Golden Comet chicks. I had really only wanted three, but they sure were cute. They had to have comet names, of course, and I decided on Halley, Hubble, Levy, Temple, and Tuttle. I hoped to be able to tell them apart someday, so I could decide which is which.

When Frank got home, he transferred the chicks to the brooder box he had prepared. They would stay nice and toasty with their warming light until they were old enough to move outside. Frank had a roaming cage, with a small chicken house attached, for the next phase of their development. The cage

would be moved to a new spot each day for fresh grass and bugs.

Eventually, after the pullets grew a little bigger and learned how to roost, they would be free range during the day and roost inside the house Frank was building for them at night. The coop would have nesting boxes for them to lay their eggs, which would probably begin to happen “in six months or so.”

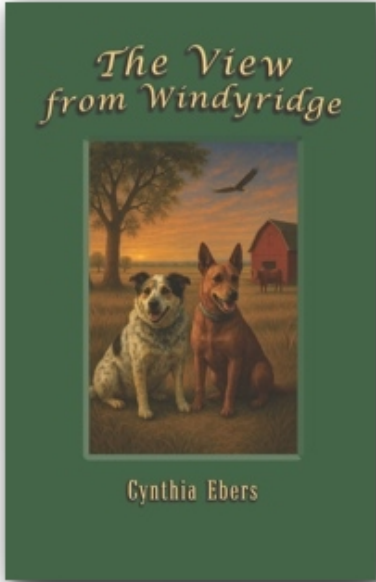
From day one, no matter the weather, the pullets required daily food and water. After they start laying eggs and become hens, we will also need to collect the eggs every day in addition to feeding and watering, again, in all kinds of weather. Doesn't all of this sound convenient?

Truthfully, very few responsibilities are as adorable as fluffy peeping chicks, and the most delicious omelets come from farm-fresh eggs. I surrendered to the joys of country living. With sixteen head of cattle, two dogs, one cat, and five chickens, our little farm family was complete.

We found a new church in Limestone while we were still living in the camper, and started getting to know the people in our new community. Frank already knew quite a few of the surrounding farmers because farmers like to share things, like coffee, equipment, tools, and stories. I began making new friends of my own through church and by participating in the local charity events. I got a library card and promised myself an outing to the lovely facility at least twice a month. At the library, I started learning about the history of our new home. I always find local history fascinating.

The View from Windyridge

Limestone was just a rock quarry and a gas station until oil was discovered nearby in the 1960s. Did you know we have oil and gas fields in Kansas? The field did not produce the same level of black gold found near El Dorado, Kansas, back in 1918, but it was enough to make two young newlyweds named Harry and Olivia Morgan very wealthy. They built a mansion on the edge of Limestone and had a son, Joseph, who arrived a little later in their lives. From the vision and generosity of those two patrons, our town blossomed. Though the Morgans weren't the town's actual founders, many folks around Limestone still consider the now deceased benefactors to be the town's most important and beloved citizens.



Lifetime city-dweller, Jillian MacSweeney, follows her husband's dream to live on a farm on the Kansas prairie. They buy Lovers lane and rename it Windyridge. hear tales of farm life while you help Jillian solve a mystery.

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