

A cross over novel for readers of all ages. This mystical epic adventure traverses not just the world, but, indeed, other worlds as seen through the eyes of eleven year old Annie O'Gorman, deaf by birth, destined by spirit.

MIDNIGHT and the MAGICAL PRAIRIE SCHOONER

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MIDNIGHT AND THE MAGICAL PRAIRIE SCHOONER

by
DENIS GESSING

ONE

Long before she was Mrs. Maggie O’Gorman, and a mother herself, she was Maggie Magonigal, daughter of Mary Margaret and Sean Patrick Magonigal of county Donegal and, a miracle. For while the third child conceived, Maggie held the dubious distinction of being the first Magonigal child to live.

She was born October first, eighteen thirty seven during the time when the Irish still squirmed under the thumb of the English and eight years prior to the great potato famine that would drive a million Irish to America. Today the sun and rain fought with one another. The sun determined to break through and the rain bent on holding it back.

When Mary Margaret, the young wife with sad black eyes and red hair, knew it was her time, she said nothing to her husband. After he had gone to the fields, she wrapped her shawl tightly about her thin shoulders and made her way alone through the biting wind and cheerless drizzle, down to the sea cave where her mother lived.

They say a girl is more likely to take after her grandmother rather than her mother. Such was true in the case of Mary Margaret and her mother Kate. However, today Mary Margaret’s feet were given wings by her mother’s words: “There’s hope from the ocean, but none from the grave.”

The pale skinned Mary Margaret was not unattractive. She was simply unaware of having any appearance whatsoever. If and when she did speak-up, it always surprised people as though they had forgotten she was in the room. It was impossible to say if she was shy, standoffish or simply scared of borrowing trouble. Today would be one of the very few times in her life she would step out of character. She would indeed borrow trouble by defying her husband.

While she loved and respected the man and most always abided by his wishes, Mary Margaret was determined not to deliver another dead or dying baby.

Sean Patrick McGonagall had forbidden his mother-in-law, Kathleen McCarthy – whom he had deemed – “Crazy Kate, the witch” – to midwife Mary Margaret’s first two babies, both of whom died. The first was stillborn. The second lived but a few hours. Mary Margaret was

taking no more chances with the village doctor – whom she had deemed the “village idiot” – or another midwife. Nay, not this time, this time her own mother would serve as mid-wife. Witch or not, her mother had never delivered a dead baby.

Sean Magonigal was not a fisherman of the sea, but rather a shepherd and farmer. A man of the land looks differently at the world than does a man of the sea. No other person on that tiny island was so set in his ways. His beliefs were no more flexible than a black thorn walking stick. Worse, he seemed devoid of imagination, an uncommon curse if there ever was one for a man born in Donegal Ireland. But certainly he was not lacking in pride, nay, far from it.

Sean – unlike his mother-in-law Kate – was very much of this world. To him everything was as it appeared. There was no mystery to life. Any mysteries were the business of holy mother church. It was at her door step one took their questions. He did not hold with the old ways of Kate McCarthy and thought her worse than a witch. And so, even though she had the reputation of being the finest mid-wife in the entire county, he had forbidden Kate from being midwife to their first two children, both boys, both lost. Will of the wisps they were; children who died before they could be baptized.

Sean Patrick Magonigal was intolerant of any behavior beyond the norm. Equally, Kate considered Sean’s narrow-mindedness very strange behavior indeed. “The man leaves no room for laughter,” she lamented. “Tisn’t natural.”

For all of his admirable ways (indeed he had some), Sean Magonigal was governed by a sharp edge of righteousness carefully honed by and for himself. Convinced he was that as long as he followed the laws of church and state, all would be right in his world and God’s heavens. With the exception of the parish priest and the village magistrate, Sean cared not a wit for what others thought.

The old women of the village were dismayed. The man had never welcomed Kate McCarthy back into her own home once she had left it. Some whispered Sean Magonigal was so unforgiving, it was the only way he could live with his ill-gotten luck. But, not being welcomed under her own roof was of no consequence to Kate McCarthy. She was much too busy with the ancient Shaman ways and ventures into the other world to

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be bothered with earth world concerns and petty grievances. The birthing of a grandchild, however, ah, now that was another matter indeed.

While Kate was more than capable of caring for herself, she appreciated the food Mary Margaret brought each day. The day prior, along with the meal, Mary Margaret brought her request that Kate serve as her midwife.

Mary Margaret's first two childbirth tragedies had caused village tongues to wag. Was it possible the young mother was somehow cursed? Had her own mother, angry for being shunned, actually put a curse on her daughter?

Mary Margaret neither believed in nor feared any such curse. She knew such foolish gossip for what it was. She trusted her mother's midwife skills more so than those of any other. Her husband had been a fool to forbid Kate from attending the first two births. Now he would have no say – let alone the final say – when it came to the business of birthing this child!

Although some might have thought it, few in the village would ever call Kathleen McCarthy "Crazy Kate" – let alone a witch – to her face. She looked anything other than the quintessential, toothless old hag depicted in story books of manufactured legend. Although most women wished she did. For a strong woman possesses an undefined attractiveness.

Her hair, long and loosely tied back, shone bright steel ribbons streaking through a sunset of fading crimson. Her oval face was an open welcome. A smile had taken up permanent residence in eyes that looked out from another world, finding this one both sad and amusing.

Only the mole on her sea-weathered-cheek might be considered a witch-like characteristic. What Kathleen McCarthy was, was a Shamakin – the female form of a Shaman, a seer – one who could travel between worlds.

Kate had been the maiden and the mother and now gracefully donned the cloak of the crone. The teacher destined to pass on her knowledge of the ancient ways. Today she was mostly happy and proud to have been chosen to be midwife to her only daughter.

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Now, Kate had not always lived in a cave on the rocky beach. She moved there only after her husband, like her sons, had been lost to the sea.

It was but a week after her marriage that Mary Margaret and her mother – aye, but not Sean – were awakened by the cry of the Banshee, the ghostly precursor of death. In the morning Kate received word her husband's boat had been lost in a fierce storm. All on board were taken by the same sea that fed them.

A funeral mass was said, glasses were raised and a wake of sorts was held for Mary Margaret's father and all who perished with him. Later, after everyone had left, Kate put her house in order and called Mary Margaret and Sean together.

Without explanation, fuss or fanfare, Kate signed over the deed to her house to them. Mary Margaret protested, but arguing with her mother was as futile as discussion with her husband. Kate gathered up only what she could carry in a knapsack, and made her way down to the lavender blue cave carved by waves and time where, she said, she was expected. The door had barely closed behind her when Sean found his voice and gave his mother-in-law- the moniker – "Crazy Kate."

Once Kate had left her home, Sean never welcomed her back. "Twas her choice," he reminded his wife. "The way the woman wants it." But what really set his jaw against her was the way Kate shamelessly clung to her Celtic female ancestry, hearkening back to ancient times when women co-ruled Ireland as mothers of its chiefs.

"Shameful. The woman doesn't so much as set foot inside in a church! Instead she talks to the sea and the trees! Doomed the pagan is and so are all who associate with her."

Mary Margaret came to realize the death of her father had been her mother's release from a life thrust upon her. She was free now to live the life destined for her.

Mary Margaret was only permitted to associate with her mother when she brought her daily ration of food, which, sadly, was all right by Kate. Not being welcomed in what was now Sean McGonagall's home was of no consequence to her. Kate had done what her daughter was unable to do, she had let go. Mary Margaret expressed her regret by way of complaint.

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“Mam, ‘tis mad! Yer livin’ in a cave just feet from the sea,” Mary Margaret protested. It wouldn’t take a ship—stealin’—storm to reach in and snatch ya.” When this argument drew no response from Kate, Mary Margaret tried another tack.

“Have ya considered yer probably occupyin’ the home of some sea lions who surely one day will evict ya.” When there was still no reaction, Mary Margaret’s eyes would sweep over the poor cave and determine: “Why there’s not room to swing a cat by its tail in this pitiful notch of beach cliff. Come home now, tis your house after all.”

While it pleased Kate to hear her daughter express herself, she cared not for the chosen subject matter. “Now why would any sane person want to do such a thing?” Kate asked dismissively. “Swing a cat by its tail that is?” Her daughter couldn’t help smiling. Her mother’s answer to any pressing matter was to find the humor in it.

Studying her Mam, Mary Margaret imagined what a flirt she must have been as a young maiden. How pretty and, unlike herself, confident she was as a mother. What a handsome crone now stood before her. Time had graced her eyes with a mysterious light that both beckoned to and scared away Mary Margaret.

“And as for the sea lions,” Kate continued, “they said I could stay for as long as I’ve a mind to. For certain it won’ be forever, besides they prefer the jutting rocks and incoming waves. And as for the sea reclaiming me, I’ve no doubt she will, once this particular affair in the forever is done and ‘tis time to move on to the next.” When she spoke like this Mary Margaret wondered if her mother weren’t in fact a Selkie herself.

Selkies were Seal people. The legend says they marry the man who steals their skin so that they might get it back. In human form, Selkies have a slight web between their fingers, rough palms and slow breathing. They love swimming, can foretell the future and have knowledge of medicine and midwifery. They never lose their love for the sea and return to it after regaining their skins. On full-moon nights it is said they dance on the shore of rocky beaches.

“Foolishness,” Mary Margaret chided when she caught herself having such thoughts. Finally, she gave up trying to understand the mother who talked to sea lions and simply accepted her. Still, sometimes

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the daughter would try to steal a closer look between her mother's fingers.

By late afternoon the sun came out, but still a light rain continued. "Devil's beating his wife and laughing at her," Mary Margaret said, of the chameleon like weather, upon entering the cave. Suddenly, Mary Margaret, who had heard and used this expression all her life, realized her mother never really believed in such a thing as the devil. How much more didn't she know about the woman who had given her birth?

Kate looked up and smiled: "Just finishing me thanks to this piece of drift wood for giving its consent to be used in our birthin' ceremony." Mary Margaret needed no explanation. She knew that in all Shamakin ceremonies nature was always called upon to provide elements necessary to a ceremony.

"How ya know that's what brings me here?"

"'Tis yer time."

Before Mary Margaret could say anything, before she could change her mind, her water broke. "Aye, tis time," Kate said and sat Mary Margaret down. "Deep slow breaths now darlin', there's nothing to fear. Yer Mam's here. We're all are."

Mary Margaret looked about. Surely they were alone, so who did her mother mean by "we?" Perhaps Sean was right about Mam having gone 'round the bend. But 'tis too late now, isn't it?

Using the piece of driftwood, Kate drew a circle in the sandy floor and lay out a clean sheet and pillow in its center. Then she placed seventeen stones, five of which were larger than the others; around the circle. "At any time you may reach out and touch these mysterious whispering threads which bind the universe together," she said, easing her daughter down onto the birthing bed.

Kate stood and turned to the east which she said was representative of new beginnings, and asked the air and sun for inspiration. Then turning to the south she asked fire for humanity and growth. Turning to the west, she asked the sea for inner purpose and creativity and the ability to grow wise in ways old and new. Turning to the north she bade the blessings of earth and Mother Moon for strength and wisdom.

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“All welcome the child with love, Mary Margaret. You’ve only to lie back, relax and let go.”

But Mary Margaret was not used to letting go and old fears began to surface like a lost penny. Och Aye, have I too strayed from the safety of church and husband?

As if reading her thoughts, Kate whispered, “’tis the poor luck of men to never know the mysteries of birth.”

The contractions, a murmur before, now began in earnest and Mary Margaret had no other choice but to lie back and trust her mother, the Shaman, and her unseen “assistants.” Her shaky hand found one of the stones. It was cool and comforting and warmed at her touch.

“Find yerself a place to stare at darlin’. Hold it with yer eyes and don’t let it go.”

Soon the contractions were coming closer together. Looking up, Mary Margaret found what appeared to be a small starfish encrusted in the ceiling of the cave. Though barely visible, it fascinated her and she easily focused on it. Only once did she turn away with a particularly painful contraction. When she re-focused it appeared the starfish had grown larger and about it was a soft pink glow.

Kate smoothed back the damp hair from off her daughter’s forehead. She smiled, remembering the day this child had entered the world and laid Mary Margaret’s other hand on another of the smooth stones where she found new comfort.

Breathing in the salt air, Mary Margaret resolved to leave her body behind, to entrust it to her mother and let her mind take refuge in the starfish which was growing larger.

Mary Margaret was doing a fair job of it when she heard her mother (Shaman, Midwife) instruct her it was time now to push and the real work began.

Outside the rain forced the sun out of its way and argued with the sea, whilst the wind teased the white caps. From inside the cave, heard only by the sea and sea lions, came the Shaman’s controlled instructions.

One minute it was push and the next it was stop. Stop and go, stop and go. Mary Margaret was growing quite anxious. Her breathing became all raggedy and she couldn’t control it for trying. As a matter of fact, the more the poor woman tried, the worse it got.

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Sweat pouring off her, Mary Margaret fell back exhausted. The strong smell of fish oil filled her nostrils. "What's wrong Ma? Why won't this baby come out?" She was answered by the sound of soft chanting. Mary Margaret turned her head to see her mother dipping her hands in fish oil. Where'd that come from?

The midwife smiled and said, easy as you please, as though merely noticing a change in the weather. "Baby's turned. She's bottom first that's all."

That's all? Me baby's in a breech position... could die, and all she can say.. It was then Mary Margaret realized she now saw her mother only in silhouette. It was then she became aware of how bright the light around the Shamakin had grown. Must be the candle shadows, the sun or...

Then the silhouette spoke in an even calmer, yet more decisive manner.

"Breathe deeply and concentrate. See the wee one turning ever so easily. See it Mary Margaret." Then, looking up to the starfish.. "I could use a help settin' the right course for the wee one's introduction to the hard beauty of Donegal."

Is that the sun or the moon? Who ya speakin' to Mam, Mary Margaret wanted to ask. Instead she took a deep breath and allowed her head to fall back on the pillow. As she did, Mary Margaret caught a glimpse of the mid-wife's hands. They looked strange, smaller with catching webs between the fingers.

Focus! Find the star fish.

And so she did. But to her surprise the star fish had grown considerably and was barely recognizable as it opened, revealing the vast sky itself. It struck her that she was looking into another world. A door to the sky has been opened. Surely now I'm hallucinating. When a tiny but growing cloud appeared she decided she didn't care if she was hallucinating or not.

"Aye, same as when I was a wee lass, laying on me back, watching the clouds change into figures and cloud talking. Take me away," she thought. And just like that her wish was granted.

That one fine cloud quickly gave birth to two others which grew larger and larger, taking shape in this manner:

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In the center was a young mother with a child at her breast. On her right sat a young maiden and on her left an old crone.

Even if she had wanted to, Mary Margaret couldn't tear her eyes away from this new focal point. Even when she felt her mother's hands, tiny and webbed, disappear inside of her.

More figures appeared from the clouds. Figures she remembered from childhood imaginings. The female legends her mother told her of and whom Mary Margaret had seen in her mind's eye when she was a child and knew nothing was impossible.

There was Rhiannon, who rode between the worlds and Deirdre of the Sorrows, The Morrighu and Emer, loyal wife of Cuchulain and all were singing and chanting around the figure of the mother, the maiden and the crone. They sang mightily as Mary Margaret felt the child, gently, being turned and leaving her body.

"Tis a girl," she heard her mother say.

"Tis over," and yet they continue to sing their encouragement, why? It was then Mary Margaret became aware she had not yet heard her child cry.

Sitting up as best she could, her eyes scanning the cave, Mary Margaret cried out: "Me Baby, Ma! Why isn't she crying?" And when the midwife did not immediately answer, Mary Margaret fell back in despair, certain she had birthed but one more will of the wisp.

Mary Margaret wiped at her eyes, ready to die herself. However, when she looked back to the place in the ceiling, she found the picture had not disappeared as she had expected it would. Instead it had grown into a much larger picture. Now not only the legends from before surrounded the figure of three, but hundreds and thousands of mothers, maidens and crones in a circle that spread to infinity.

The Mother kissed the child lightly on the head and handed her to the Maiden who also kissed the infant then gave the child to the old Crone. Mary Margaret tore herself away from the picture and sat bolt up right.

Outside the setting sun pushed its way through the clouds casting a last, soft light on Kate who stood at the cave's entrance holding the silent, unmoving infant. The light shifted allowing Mary Margaret a clearer view.

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Kate pinched shut the infant's nose, took in a deep breath of salt air and filled the wee one's lungs with it.

Of a sudden there was a whisper of a cough, a wee tiny cough. Then a sputter, a louder cough, and finally the wail of new life echoed loudly off the cave walls.

Kate held the child up to the west and bade the sea. "Let this child know love. Turning to the north, she bade the earth, "Let this child know wisdom." To the south she asked fire for humanity and turning to the east, where her daughter lay, Kate asked that that this new life might know inspiration, kissed the child and gave her over to Mary Margaret.

Through tears of joy, Mary Margaret whispered thanks to God and mother and lay back. When she looked up she could barely make out only the tiny figure of the encrusted starfish.

Outside the wind was but a flirting breeze on the incoming tide. Mother-moon rose slowly over Donegal and the sea lions called out as one to Kate who waved back at them. She paused, as if listening. "Call the child Maggie, after the best part of yerself."

Maggie's birth brought great joy to her parents and to most of the villagers who had grieved the Magonigal family's previous losses. However, not all could bring themselves to acknowledge Kate's work as being a good thing.

Word quickly spread throughout the village. Opinion varied considerably as to whether Kate interceded or interfered. For surely the Magonigal child would have been returned to heaven had it not been for Nana Kate. There were those who believed she had stolen wee Maggie from heaven. And what right did she have to interfere with God's plan?

Sean Magonigal, though grateful, allowed pride to prevent him from ever thanking Kate, let alone defending her.

Now most all the villagers were convinced Kate possessed the powers of a Shamakin: "One who walks between the worlds." However, few were inclined to speak of such things in the presence of either the parish priest or Sean Magonigal. Once, while passing through the village square, he overheard two women debating Kate's rumored abilities and powers.

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“A Shaman possesses a very special vision indeed which recognizes how all things are linked together,” said one, a Mrs. Coogan. “That’s the way I heard it growing up.”

“’Twas told me by my mother and hers before her they can travel to the “other world” and are capable of changing their shapes to those of animals,” contributed the other, a Mrs. Flynn.

“Ya think they are truly soul healers,” whispered a hopeful Mrs. Coogan.

“Bunk! Blasphemous bilge,” bellowed Sean Magonigal from behind them, frightening the two poor souls to where Mrs. Coogan dropped the flounder she was holding. “Sheer old world fantasyin’. Ya should be ashamed of yerselves, the both of yas! If yer souls are in need of healin’, then off to church with yas.” And with that he stormed past them without so much as retrieving the fallen flounder for the frightened Mrs. Coogan.

“Jealous old fool,” fumed Mrs. Flynn.

Other fearful Nay-Sayers whispered “Crazy Kate” was a witch of the worst order. Some went so far as to gossip up the notion Kate might even be a Banshee – the precursor of death. Of course this was a stretch for even the most ignorantly fearful; a silly tactic mothers used to scare uncooperative children. For although there were many theories as to the origination of the Banshee, all agreed she was not of this world. But then was Kate?

While most of the villagers believed in such things as faeries, the power of the Shamakin, the other world, the Banshee and such, they kept those beliefs under thatched roofs. Eventually most of the villagers looked upon the mysterious, old crone with a secret sense of awe and a public sense of fear or contempt.

Her first year on earth, Maggie bathed in the sunlight of being special. The light of uniqueness dimmed when her mother gave birth the following year to her brother and the next year to a sister. By the age of nine Maggie was the oldest of eight children. Being the oldest, Maggie was the child with the most responsibilities. The same role had been conferred upon her father, also a first child.

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Donegal a small, mountainous county in the northern most part of Ireland is bounded on the north and the west by the Atlantic Ocean. Growing up, Maggie loved its many small lakes and rivers where often her mind would wander and wonder (“wool gathering”, her father called it) while fetching water and herding sheep or siblings.

At just nine years of age she might just as well have been considered an adult, given the way she was expected to care for the younger ones. When not looking after her younger siblings, then surely she was in the pastures tending the sheep. Oh, the countless sheep; more of them in Ireland than people. But the chore she most secretly delighted in was helping her Da.

Each season after the salmon had mated; the adult salmon followed the fast running fresh water back to the salty Atlantic. That was when Maggie and Da would do their best fishing. That was when Maggie discovered her father for the riddle he was. Da knew all of the best streams in Donegal and fishing them was taken as serious business. But oh, how Maggie looked forward to trailing after him.

“A quick learner she is,” Sean would brag. “Sun in her eyes, she can still spot a hole, and, through the haze, lay a line directly onto it. Between the two of us we might just take all the salmon in Ireland in one good season. For me, Maggie has the eye of a great fisherman ... just like her Da,” Sean would laugh. And Maggie would glow with pride as Da showed off her full creel to her mother.

But especially, Maggie loved hearing her Da tell stories of their Irish ancestors.

To Sean Magonigal, Irish history was as real and tangible as it was regrettable. Its tragedies were something that could be proven and so believed. Those warm days on the river, he would simultaneously cast a history lesson along with his line. Maggie absorbed both of his teachings with equal zeal.

“’Tis not enough, the knowing of your history, yer also responsible fer the passing on of it, fer tellin’ yer children one day what I am telling ya today. Especially the terrible realities of English rule since the year 1155. Otherwise the English landlords have won and bloody King Henry the Second may just as well be running things!”

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On and on he went, this keeper of Irish history, incessantly teaching and quizzing his daughter who listened just as intently, promising never to forget, pledging to do her part by one day retelling his lessons to her own children.

So many promises easily made in Ireland to be forgotten in America.

Most other children would have found this to be worse than school, when it was fishing you were supposed to be doing, but not Maggie. She truly loved hearing the history of the clans. But more so it was the time alone with her Da she loved.

For that short period in her life Maggie had her Da all to herself. She lived for the mornings he would wake her with the news: "Rise and shine, for the salmon are a jumpin' and they're yer's and they're mine."

Maggie never understood how Da knew when it was the first day of fishing. She had tried guessing herself but was never successful. "Och aye," her father would tease. "My first and smartest, one morn' you'll awake and just know and then it'll be you who wakes me. And if I am not in me bed, then surely you'll know ta meet me at our secret hole, for certain the season will be upon us."

The only other person Maggie enjoyed listening to more than her Da was her Nana Kate. A secret, the only secret, she kept from Da and everyone else.

ELEVEN

(Twelve years later)

Where is it I go when I sleep?

Every night before she began reading, Maggie O’Gorman offered a toast to her children: Annie, now twelve, her brother, Conor, age ten and the child in her womb, with a cup of her steaming Mugwort tea. “To the fairies, leprechauns, kings and queens of old and to all children new. May we share a cupa now, a dream later and never end up in the troll’s stew.” Maggie’s tea wasn’t the only place where she used Mugwort.

According to Maggie, Mugwort protected one from poison, wild beasts and sunstroke. Hopefully its powers also included protection against savage Indians. The flowering stalks she had gathered at blossoming time were already carefully packed for the family’s journey west.

Seamus O’Gorman did not hold with his wife’s beliefs in the herb’s powers and therefore neither did Conor. Neither was ever likely to credit the Mugwort root over the door for keeping away elves and trolls. Maggie, who had held on to some of the old ways, paid no heed to their indifference. Long ago Nana Kate had shown her how powerful the herb could be.

Since first learning of Annie’s deafness, Maggie had made certain Annie’s pillow always hid a packet of fresh Mugwort leaves. Not for the healing of disease. No, Maggie knew deafness wasn’t a disease. Just as she knew Mugwort produced prophetic dreams and, possibly, gave the dreamer the ability to leave the body and travel to other worlds. Whether husband and son believed it or not.

While Conor drank his glass of warm milk and Maggie and Annie sipped their Mugwort tea, Maggie read from her thick book of Celtic fairy tales. Conor hung on every word while Annie searched for meaning and waited for the pictures to emerge; pictures in the book and later, in her dreams. Pictures were what she understood.

For Annie O’Gorman, every day was a puzzle; a mystery to be solved. Most mornings she preferred to stay in bed and return to her

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dreams where things made more sense than the daylight workings of the hearing world.

“Careful with that, wee one,” her mother instructed, as Annie copied her mother’s way of wrapping the china cups. Copying was one of the ways Annie understood what was expected of her. If Annie didn’t see how something was done, she could not be expected to know how to do it. Moreover, Annie, who was always eager to help, wanted to do things right. But this morning her attention to the moment was in direct conflict with lightning flashes from last night’s disconnected memories.

Where is it I go when I sleep?

The dream that followed her into this morning’s dawn was especially difficult to let go of, for in it Annie was able to chase a sunbeam in flight. This dream took place in a lush green forest and included characters both familiar and new.

The familiar was so only by its continued reappearance. Actually it wasn’t clear at all just what it was. But something, obscured by the fog, sat at the base of a tree. Since first having the dream and each night thereafter, Annie longed to know what mystery lay shrouded by the mist, rising up from the roots of the grand tree.

New to Annie’s dream was a miniature man no bigger than one of her Da’s thumbs. He wore a peaked cap and pointed toe shoes. Smaller than even the funny man was the tiny, creature who flitted about on translucent wings.

Both looked exactly like the creatures in the book Mam reads to me and Conor.

Annie loved it when, each morning, Mam combed out her long auburn hair and tied it back with the colorful pleated ribbon she had made Annie for her twelfth birthday. The silent girl had big, curious brown eyes that liked to play. Eyes that had even more to say were anyone to look closely enough, but seldom was that the case.

“You’ve the dickens and the angels in those eyes,” Mam said. “Surely they are the eyes of my Nana Kate. Aye, and the ears of your Nana Molly.” She started to laugh when guilt stole her smile. Instantly her face went from bright to dark. A sudden change in expression like this always left Annie confused.

What happened when I wasn’t looking?

Annie's ears were big but still she never heard her mother's instructions. Annie was born profoundly deaf so she never heard anything... nothing. No matter how loud the sound, no matter how loudly people yelled at her. Not the sound of the birds singing nor waterfalls rushing, bells ringing or other children laughing. However, she did feel the hurt when they laughed at her.

She felt the embarrassment of being different, the shock and then flush of anger when her brother would sneak up from behind and scare her. She felt the ever increasing uneasiness of her father around her. While the whole family might live in the same house, Annie lived in a different world. A world of silent pictures, where meaning was hardly ever clear.

Annie didn't understand and not because she was deaf. Not being able to hear nor speak didn't mean she was stupid – far from it. It only appeared that way to most people who never looked closely. Annie was twelve years old, and twelve-year-old people understand a lot more than adults think they do. No, she didn't understand because no one had properly explained it to her. No one explained how they were leaving their home and migrating to parts unknown. It seemed easier to explain Maggie was pregnant.

Naturally, Annie was confused when Maggie began packing all of their dishes and household things. For the first several days, Annie stomped around and complained in her shrill, irritating voice as she put the things Maggie had packed back in their proper place.

Why is everything out of order? I go to sleep at night and in the morning everything is changed around again.

Annie's contrary actions annoyed Seamus. Maggie tried hard to make clear to her they were moving. This long and tedious process, required a great deal of patience, still another reason why explanations from the hearing world were hard to come by for Annie, and incomplete when they did.

First Maggie tried showing Annie the crude map Seamus had drawn. At one end was a big letter "M" followed by the smaller letters "i-s-s-o-u-r-i". Under the letters, Annie and her family — as stick figures — stood in front of their small home. This part she understood. On the opposite side of the drawing, not quite directly across from the "M" was a

big letter “O” followed by the smaller “r-e-g-o-n”. In between the letters, there was nothing except a big arrow. Seamus hadn’t drawn in anything else. To be honest, he wasn’t sure himself what they would find between “M” and “O”. Seamus O’Gorman had no idea of what lay in store for he and his family once they ventured out from the familiar to the unknown. However, his drawing did include rough, sharp angled lines representative of the great Rocky Mountains they would have to cross over to get to “O.”

It made no difference how many times Maggie showed the map to Annie, the questioning look accented by furrowed brows remained. The idea of moving across country just did not register. Then Maggie had another idea.

She moved the map across the table so the large letter “M” was closest to Annie. Reaching over, Maggie picked up Annie’s rag doll and “walked” it across the map from “M” to “O”. Something registered in Annie’s eyes. She got up from the table and went about the room setting a hand on different objects. With her fingers indicating she was picking them up, Annie moved each one over to where Maggie sat. She placed each imaginary object on the map’s large “O”. Maggie smiling broadly nodded her head up and down in confirmation.

Pictures. That’s what I understand best. Still, why are we moving?

It really didn’t matter. Even if she was afraid of the unknown, Annie wasn’t sad to leave Missouri. She was tired of children laughing at her. She looked forward to going to this place “O”. Perhaps there her ears would hear. Wouldn’t that be grand? She reasoned if she could hear, then she might also be able to speak. Annie rightly figured the mystery of hearing was the key to unlocking the mystery of speech – that thing hearing people did with their mouths – which meant something to everyone except Annie.

When we get to “O” there will be children who won’t make fun of me. For that I’m willing to cross the highest of mountains. Even rushing rivers. Well, no not that. Not rivers. Not water.

Once Annie understood the idea of moving, she became a great help to Maggie with the packing and preparing for the journey west. Annie’s fear of the unknown took second place to the excitement of

going someplace new. Her mother wondered if Annie would be so fearless if she could hear.

There was always someone who knew someone, who had heard from someone else, terrible stories of savage Indian attacks on helpless white pioneers. Annie didn't even know what an Indian was (but then neither did most hearing folks in the East). Rightly, Maggie also reckoned not hearing gave Annie one certain advantage: she never had to make up her mind about a person, place or thing until she saw them with her own eyes.

The first morning of spring, Annie awoke, as usual, to the smell of coffee. It was her favorite morning smell. Sometimes her mother would fix her a special cup with heavy cream and lots of sugar.

Excitedly, Annie jumped from her bed and gave a quick look for her button-eyed- brother. But Conor wasn't in his bed. She ran to the door, motioning to her dog. *Come on, SamDog, maybe this is the day we leave!* At once SamDog was at her heels. The loyal ragamuffin never allowed Annie to get more than a few steps ahead.

Save for the boiling coffee pot, Annie found the kitchen empty. *Where is everyone?* She called out in a voice hearing people considered strange, shrill, and irritating but which of course didn't bother Annie because she had never heard the sound of any voice let alone her own.

When there was no response to her calling, Annie stomped her foot on the wooden planks of the kitchen floor. She wasn't angry, that was just the way Annie called her mother; the same way her mother called for Annie's attention. She stomped her foot and felt the floor vibrate upward through her body. Still, no one appeared.

I hate starting a day like this – waking up and not knowing where they are. Maybe this time they really have disappeared.

Annie turned from the stove and was entering the parlor just as her father came in the front door. Annie's Da was a tree of a man. The biggest man Annie had ever seen. He had to duck his head to get through the doorway and his shoulders almost filled the doorframe, blocking the light from outside.

"Annie," Seamus O'Gorman' called out. Catching himself, he stomped his big boot on the floor. Instantly Annie stopped and turned.

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“Come look, child!” her father said, motioning to Annie as though she was late.

Annie ran toward him but Da turned back outside. Her eyes downcast, the old hurt re-awakened, Annie followed after. *How I wish Da still scooped me up the way he used to. The way he did when I was small.*

Annie also wished she had an older sister. But there was no one who came before to show her how to grow up. In this matter, like so many others, Annie was alone and not too darn happy about it either.

SamDog jumped up into Annie’s arms and licked the sleep from her eyes, causing her to laugh with glee and feel warm inside out. It was SamDog’s gift; making Annie feel good. He may not be able to read her mind but he could always read her heart.

Outside, the air was charged with anticipation. Growing numbers of immigrant pioneers trailed past Annie’s house heading into town. They brought with them all their wagons could carry and every spring more of them came here, to Independence Missouri. Here they would take on supplies and await the wagon master’s call of: “Westward, ho!”

In the past, the O’Gorman family could only watch and wonder. What new life waited beyond their door, beyond the river, and far across the endless sea of grass? No pioneer could say for sure, just as none could wait to find out. Today the O’Gorman family would join them at last and become another pioneer family themselves. Had she all the information, Annie might welcome the idea of being included in such mutual discovery.

Annie’s father stood blocking her view of whatever it was he, Mam, and Conor were looking at. As Annie moved to see past Da, he moved to block her view. And when Annie tried to see around his other side, he moved still again.

“Ah, for the love of Mike,” Maggie said, arching her back for relief from the discomforts of pregnancy. “Stop teasing the lass, Seamus,” she scolded. “And ya wonder why she acts the way she does.”

His joke gone sour, Seamus moved aside. Annie squirmed past him. Her eyes squinted against the sunlight to see what everyone else had already seen. At first only bright, shimmering white filled her eyes, but when they adjusted a form came into focus.

“They call it a prairie schooner,” announced Seamus, giving each word a distinct accent of reverence. And indeed it did look like a huge ship built for sailing over land. Of course, Annie didn’t hear him and Maggie had no home signs for such a strange mix of words. It didn’t matter. Annie just knew it was the vessel that would take them to “O” and that made it special. If not magical.

The heavy, white canvas stretched four feet wide and twelve feet long. The wheels were made of iron with wooden spokes shooting out from the center hubs like spider legs. The back wheels were larger than the front ones, which Annie reckoned to be taller than her squirrel-headed brother.

SamDog followed Annie around to the back of the wagon where Maggie helped her up so she might see inside. Looking in from the rear opening reminded her of looking down the long, mysterious tunnel of her least favorite dream. Except this tunnel felt good, like it would lead to a place unfamiliar yet wonderful.

Annie stepped over the wagon bed and inside the rectangular wooden box. Tilting her head, she saw the canvas cover was supported by a frame of hickory bows and tied to the sides of the bed. Annie was thinking she had never seen such a magnificent wagon when her mother tugged at her nightgown to get her attention. Annie looked at her mother who pointed and, using home signs, gestured, sleep here.

“Have a good look-see child, though I suspect you’ll get your fill of this thing long before we reach Or-e-gon — as will we all.” Maggie sighed, leaned down, scooped up SamDog and deposited him inside. “As for you, Mr. Ragamuffin, consider this your first and last look.” Maggie headed back into the house, “I’ll be startin’ breakfast. What time’s Mr. Davenport deliverin’ the other two oxen Seamus?”

“Nine-thirty,” He answered, putting a hand on Conor’s shoulder and beginning his instructions. “This here is the grease bucket.” He pointed to the bucket dangling from the rear axle. “Your most important job will be to make sure ‘tis always full.”

Inside the wagon, a wide-eyed Annie made her way to the front. SamDog followed, his curious nose leading his head this way and that. Annie noticed how the floor was made of oak, the same as the floor in their house.

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“Da,” Conor asked, “what’s this it hangs on?”

“That’s the axle. Get down here, lad, and see how this all works.” Father and son crouched low beneath the undercarriage. Conor was short enough to stay in a crouching position, but his father had to lie on his back. “This here, where the iron tires, or wheels hook up, is called the axle assembly.”

“Axle assembly,” repeated Conor, secretly hoping he would be able to remember everything his Da was telling him.

“There’s another axle assembly at the front, and this piece in between that connects the two is called the reach.”

Annie, sitting quite still, fingered the grain of the oak flooring. All her senses were awake and at work now, exploring, taking in. The smell of new canvas, the sun warming it, blended with the smell of the hickory support bows and the grease on the iron tires wafting up from under the flooring. Looking out past the wagon bed, Annie imagined how the town would get smaller and smaller as they left “M” and traveled to “O”. A tingle of anticipation ran through her, like the one she felt on Christmas Eve or her birthday.

Looking about, Annie wondered where she would sleep and decided it didn’t matter. She already loved every part of this big, wonderful vessel. Feeling happier than she had in a long time, Annie hugged SamDog close to her.

Best friend, SamDog never minded Annie’s sudden displays of emotion. Most times she never hugged him too tight and he was always happy to give her his full attention. Except now, something else sought his attention.

He squirmed from Annie’s arms, cocking his head. He didn’t bark, only stared, as if in recognition. It was then Annie first saw the light, a tiny circle, resting on her hand.

Annie moved her hand and the light circle disappeared. She moved her hand back and it reappeared. She traced the beam to its source from above. Craning her head all the way back, Annie could see the light came from where the canvas tightly arched between two hickory bows.

She traced the beam back to her hand where tiny flecks of dust danced. *This looks like the dust in Mam's book. The kind surrounding the tiny creature with wings. Like in my dream...*

Annie's fingers danced nimbly with what, if she had language for it, she would call fairy dust. Wondering if such tiny creatures really existed, Annie began counting as Mam had taught her. Each finger was a number and, in turn, stood alone in the circle of light. *One, two, three, four, five*, Annie counted to herself. When she came to number six she realized she would have to turn awkwardly to use the fingers on her other hand.

Not willing to break the spell of the light show, Annie wondered how she could continue using only one hand to count. She thought of backing up in her count, but then how would she know if she were on number one or number ten? Suddenly an unusual answer to her dilemma presented itself when the circle of light began to bounce on her finger.

She touched her thumb to her finger: number six? As if excited by her correct answer, the light circle immediately bounced over to the finger next to it. *Number seven?* Annie moved her thumb to her fourth finger, eight, nine. Landing on her thumb, the light circle wiggled back and forth, prompting Annie to wiggle her thumb. *Number ten!* The circle of light danced about excitedly as if...applauding. *What a wonderful way to count and I only need one hand!* Suddenly the circle of light disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

Below, under the wagon, Seamus explained to his attentive son how the hounds fastened the rear axle to the reach and the front axle to the wagon tongue.

Inside the wagon, Annie discovered the circle of light had moved to the corner where it rested on SamDog's wagging tail. Overcome with excitement, Annie jumped up and stomped her feet as hard as she could on the oak flooring, calling it back to her. SamDog helped using his loudest bark as he chased his tail.

Now, Annie's sudden stomping on the flooring scared the beejeebers out of both Seamus and Conor. Seamus bolted upright, cracking his head painfully on the reach. "Ye-oooh," he shouted.

"Run Da, 'tis falling in on us!" Conor shouted, rolling out from between the iron tires.

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Inside the house, Maggie heard all of the shouting and dropped the bowl of flour she had been sifting. The flour flew up into her face and covered her swollen belly. She ran out the door, wiping at her eyes with her apron and shouting: “Saints in heaven, who’s been killed?”

Rubbing his head and trying to control his tongue, Seamus rolled from under the wagon just as one of the other immigrant wagons passed by. Its driver didn’t see the deep mud-hole in the street. His front wheel hit hard, sending up a geyser of mud which freckled Seamus’ face and shirt. The final insult was Conor’s laughter.

“Dadgumit!, Dadblasted! Dagnabit!” Seamus shouted, cutting short Conor’s good time. Struggling to get up, he caught one of his boots in the wheel spokes and went face down in the mud hole. Rising up and spitting out both mud and a string of blue-air-cuss-words, Seamus found his footing and stomped around to the back of the wagon where he pounded angrily on the bed.

Startled, Annie turned from scolding the disobedient light circle to see a very strange sight indeed. There was Da, his face black, wiping at his eyes, and Mam who looked like a ghost. Annie’s own face burst into a smile of unexpected delight and she began to laugh. *What new game is this?* Then she saw Conor’s angry face.

As the three of them began moving their mouths all at the same time, Annie sadly realized: it’s not a game. Profound confusion replaced momentary happiness.

As he spoke, Da pointed down with one hand and rubbed his forehead with the other. Mam wiped the white mask from her face. She scolded Da and Conor at the same time she questioned Annie. Conor’s prune-like face contorted in disbelief. “Me, me? She’s the one to blame,” he said, pointing at Annie.

What’s happened to upset them? Annie looked at SamDog. *He must understand. He has his paws over his head, covering his ears like he does when... But SamDog has been with me all the time and done nothing wrong.* Bewildered, Annie could only guess that somehow she was to blame for her strange looking family being so upset. As her bewilderment gave way to sadness, Annie wished she and SamDog were five minutes back in time, alone, with the mysterious circle of light.

DENIS GESSING

Annie never got used to being sent to her room following an incident like today's. It was a cruel and unjust punishment: this being confined, cut off from family activity, just because no one knew how to make themselves understood and their feelings known.

Not fair!

Annie had never been more resistant to discipline. She wanted, needed desperately to return to the prairie schooner with its magical light. She stomped her feet, shrieked, and tried getting past her father who blocked the bedroom doorway. This drew the threat of a spanking before Mam intervened.

"I need ya to finish packing yer things and sweep out the room. 'Twill be a big help to me darlin'. Can ya do that fer yer Mam?" Annie knew what punishment was. And this was it; being excluded from the rest of the family, left behind, alone, while the world went on without her. *Where will they lock me up when we are on the trail to 'O'? How will they be shut of me then?*

It was only when Annie looked out the window and saw the prairie schooner was still there that she settled down. Her temper tantrum subsided and eventually, so did her tears.

Alone, Annie confided in SamDog while carrying out the instructions her mother had illustrated.

Why was Da so mad? What did we do except laugh at the funny way they looked?

Mam's face was the most confusing of all. What message was she sending Annie? Her expressions changed so fast, never staying long enough for Annie to make sense of them. Hearing folks would say: "Slow down. I can't understand you. You're talking too fast." But Annie wasn't hearing folk. She only understood what she saw.

One instant Mam would look very upset with Annie and the next as if she were pleased with her. And an instant later her look was as confused as Annie herself felt. The only thing that remained constant was the pain in Mam's eyes. It seemed that part of her expression puzzle never completely left her. Even when the message in Mam's expression was clearly love, Annie still saw the pain in her eyes, lurking like a shadowy figure, forever present.

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Ever since Annie could remember things like today were happening. She was always somehow, for reasons she seldom understood, in trouble. The hearing world had rules for behavior, social etiquette, standards and guidelines to follow. Tools they used to make sense of their world. Annie's world was one of trial and error.

Annie's peers, school girls, didn't bother with closed doors, chanting as they jumped rope: "Annie O', Annie O', call her name and she won't know. Annie O', Annie O' where's she going, she don't know." But the hearing world of the self-assured gave pause in their judgments when confronted by Annie's open face.

When Annie's eyes read theirs, uneasiness would overtake them if not down right spook them, make them feel like she was trying to crawl inside their head and read their mind. Which was exactly what she was trying to do – trying to understand. Annie needed to read not only their facial expressions but the truth in people's eyes. It was usually then fear of Annie's deafness turned into impatience, or worse, intolerance, or worst of all – dismissal. Oft times misunderstanding quickly gave way to fear and anger, ending in a row; some of which got pretty ugly.

Brother Conor was slow to learn he shouldn't start something with his sister he couldn't finish. By the time she was eight, Annie, though small for her size, had grown fiercely intolerant of teasing. She wouldn't take guff from any kid. By now only a dunderhead (like her brother) or a new kid was dumb enough to take Annie on. But then the opportunity to do so was limited by the fact that Annie no longer attended school.

Annie had been mistaken; thinking today was the day they would leave. But it seemed to her she was always wrong about most everything.

FIFTEEN

It wasn't hard for Annie to stay awake until the rest of her family fell asleep. *Was last night just another dream?* She paused on this but for only a moment. *No. It wasn't a dream. It truly happened.*

The circle of light, it came from outside and into me, I am sure. At least that's how it felt. I know it came from some place other than the hole Mam mended.

Was it fairy light? Was I meant to follow it? I should have. I wanted to. It felt so strange to leave my body. But then it felt so good to float like that. Until I got afraid. That was when I fell back...

I wonder, what would have happened if I hadn't been afraid?

Annie waited until long after Da had blown out the lamp before she crawled through the window and out to the wagon.

The Prairie Schooner, bathed in the moonlight, appeared all the more magical. She lifted SamDog up and into the bed and crawled in after him Holding SamDog close to her, Annie snuggled in, looking about for the light. *Think it will return, SamDog? Think you'll be able to go with me this time? I wonder how high we can go if we don't get afraid. Think we can go all the way to heaven?*

SamDog made no reply. Finally, Annie decided to let go of all her questions, relax and wait for whatever was going to happen. She gazed out at the patchwork of stars and took a deep breath, remembering how good it felt to do so. She exhaled slowly and took in another breath, recalling, as she exhaled, this was how it began. Eyes closed, she took in another breath and felt like she inhaled in the whole night sky; as if she was becoming the sky and beyond. As she breathed deeper she felt it.

In the center of her chest, a power pulled at her. Annie opened her eyes, looked down and there it was – the circle of light. *When did you ... I didn't feel ... Never mind. I am just happy you're back.*

Something invited her to take another deep breath, and so she did. Once again the light grew inside of her with the same tingling feeling as before. Annie felt she need only trust the feeling for the light to take her up.

Don't think. Just breathe and let go. This is how to you overcome your fear.

Continuing to take slow, deliberate breaths, Annie closed her eyes and felt herself move upward.

With each breath she took, Annie rose higher. Rising above SamDog, it became clear to her that he was to remain watch over her 'other self', who looked to be merely asleep. See you later SamDog...

The canvas felt like a cool, clean sheet to Annie as she easily passed through it. Once again she was above the prairie schooner, the trees, and then the town and her house below. As she turned her head for a better look, her second body up-righted itself so she was now standing as she ascended higher over the woods.

I think I can go higher without falling ... if I trust myself and follow the light... maybe even past the stars.

And with this decision, Annie rose even higher as if challenged by the circle of light to do so. The higher they ascended, the brighter the stars stood out from the black velvet sky. *Is it the moon where I am ... It's smiling like I remember Da smiling the very first time he saw me ... the day I was born. Wait. I can't remember that... but I do...*

Now Annie tried hard (too hard perhaps) to conjure up more details from her baby-memory. But the harder she tried, the quicker all remembrance faded. Annie caught herself, as if coming out of a daydream, when she realized the moon was not her destination after all, only passing scenery as she raced eastward.

Annie closed her eyes and took a deep, reassuring breath. When she opened her eyes she found herself headed out over an incredibly large body of water – the Atlantic Ocean. Oh no!

While Annie didn't want to be, she had always been afraid of water. Now her fear began hissing at her in icy mockery. Then the hiss turned into a cold booming voice. "Foolish child! You have gone too far and are sure to fall! This time you will drown!" Annie looked up and realized she had completely lost sight of the circle of light. In its place a portion of sky had shaped itself into a living gargoyle.

Its ugly, distorted features presented an undeniable intent to descend upon her, pushing her into the depths of the sea below. *Who are you?*

"Didn't your grandmother ever tell you of the great Atta O'Tude, cousin to Timothy O'Tude," demanded the voice made of ice.

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Fear overtook Annie when at once, another, smaller voice interjected: “Don’t be afraid. You’ve only just begun your journey,” it assured her.

I won’t be afraid!

Just then, as if summoned by her declaration, another figure made of night moved swiftly past.

Annie turned to see a magnificent horse which it seemed, had appeared for the sole purpose of chasing away the monster. The mere presence of this powerful stallion was enough to return the beast to thin cloud wisps, which then quickly evaporated into pure night.

Before Annie’s savior-stallion also disappeared, he slowed enough for Annie to take in his fine detail.

He stood some seventeen hands high. His shiny coat was as black as, midnight, save for one white stocking on his hind leg. His long mane flowed like corn silk half way to his tail. The wind blew back his mane from his forehead, revealing a perfect snow-white star in the center. As he gracefully loped past Annie, their eyes met and Annie breathed, *Midnight*, as if in recognition. Instantly the vision was once more only a part of the night-sky-canvas, leaving Annie to wonder if she had seen anything at all.

A cross over novel for readers of all ages. This mystical epic adventure traverses not just the world, but, indeed, other worlds as seen through the eyes of eleven year old Annie O'Gorman, deaf by birth, destined by spirit.

MIDNIGHT and the MAGICAL PRAIRIE SCHOONER

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