



Kevin Kuhn
HIKIKOMORI

Novel

224 pages

Autumn 2012

English sample translation enclosed

HIKIKOMORI – overwhelmed by the world

“A rare and wonderful debut: powerful, resolute, brave – a fantastic novel from a young author.” Hanns-Josef Ortheil

The book

A room and a decision: close the door, finally retreat, for days, for months, even years perhaps. Kevin Kuhn’s debut novel tells of growing up without guardrails, and allows reality and virtuality to become entangled in one another.

Till is completely and utterly free: he goes to the “freest Waldorf school in the world” and his parents offer him all the support they can possibly muster. However, when he fails to make the grades for his school leaving examinations, he is suddenly thrown back on himself and begins to ponder: “What’s going to become of me?” He resolves to stick it out in his room until he finds an answer to his question. His room soon becomes a cocoon, and by withdrawing into himself Till believes he is making progress. Eventually, Till sets about creating an autocratic, self-contained virtual world – one which runs according to his rules. World 0 is a refuge for all who find the real world too demanding or restricted. And Till is their guarantor, as he fights not for himself, but for an entire generation of kids sitting in their rooms.

The author

Born in 1981 in Göttingen, **Kevin Kuhn** now lives in Berlin. He studied Philosophy, History of Art and Theology in Tübingen, and Creative Writing and Cultural Journalism in Hildesheim. Since 2010, he has been working as a lecturer in the institute there. Kuhn has repeatedly spent time living abroad, including an extended period in Alaska and three years in Mexico City.

Sample Translation

It's a blazing hot summer, but a dark one. I plunge my hand through the thick, viscid air, slowly to where my breath is coming from. Its heaviness is my only way of knowing I'm still here. It's so dark that my body seems to have fused completely with the space around me. Outside of my room, there is nothing.

I tilt my head forwards, peering towards where my legs must be. But no matter how hard I try, I can't make their outlines emerge from the darkness; as though my old body parts have lost all meaning. I touch my sweat-soaked knee, stroke my hand over my thigh. The muscles are tense, standing out clearly from the bone. It's a long time now since I've worn any socks. My toenails are jutting out, and I'm incredibly proud of the calluses. I break the nails off one by one, cracking sounds fill the room. An image from back then comes into my mind: Jan tearing his way ahead of me way through the undergrowth, hitting away the branches in sweeping motions while I try to protect my face from the rebounding boughs. The crackling of the forest floor beneath our feet, skin speckled with resin.

I'm not alone. The darkness is both meaningful and menacing at the same time. Anything could emerge from it, anything could be lurking in it, something with sharp claws and teeth, something hostile, something that senses hunger and thirst. It could attack me at any given moment, be at my throat before I even notice. I strain my ears, it's disconcertingly quiet: Anna-Marie must have put her smart phone down, there are no mother's steps in front of my door, no father's clattering-around, no cars to be heard – just the monotonous dripping of sweat onto the floor. Drops that burst in front of my feet.

The last remaining measure of time.

I grope my way through the darkness over to the window. That's where I'm stashing its food, and I want us to get along. I stretch my arms out wide in front of me; any direction will be the right one. In the small confines of the room, it's inevitable that I'll stumble into the window at some point. The darkened space is now my thought space. I will have to grow accustomed to this darkness. How long it will last, I can't say.

Between the desk and the window, I crash into the computer, run my hand over the grooved, still-warm casing and fire up the screen: I see the facade of a house, a bay window – my bay window. The camera is zoomed in so close to the glass that you can even see the individual strips of parcel tape. The whole world is watching. I could carve messages onto the wall of my cocoon, and everyone would read them. My metamorphosis is being streamed live night and day. Thanks to him. I reach for the cigarettes. We smoke. Karl and I. I'm not angry at him.

A few pages further on, Jan writes a daily status update about how he almost ran his boat aground on the corals of some kitsch Caribbean coast, how he's

swinging in a hammock between banana trees and slurping Piña Coladas through metre-long straws. He makes no mention of Kim, so perhaps he traded her in for some internet credit. I'm not angry at him either. I run the cable through my hand, yank the plug and stroke the pane of the screen. It has lost its smoothness, veiled with a heat-intensifying layer, venting itself into the cocoon.

Sitting on my office chair, I work my way hand over hand around the table -- pushing off from its edge like a swimmer from the edge of a pool -- and plunge into the depths of the room. Every stroke prompts a new noise: a rustling of paper here, the crackling of aluminium wrap, the sloshing of water. There, beneath the mountain of dirty washing, I hear it. I clamber onto the mattress to get closer to it, making a noise with my mouth as if trying to lure a shy horse. The creature doesn't react. It has ignored me ever since it arrived.

Someone on the other side of the world has written *Live Reptile (Handling with great care)* on the wooden crate. Mother dragged the suitcase-sized crate to my bedroom door and arranged with me by note that, in exchange for an increase in my water rations, I'm to give the empty box to her for the decoration of her exhibition space. Theme: *Caribbean Casual Living*. I place the crate on the desk like a relic. The bright spring sunshine streams in through the window; there are many more weeks to go before I surrender myself to absolute darkness. The crate was surprisingly light and clearly hand-made; no plank of wood was alike, even the nails fastening the planks to an inner shell all had completely different heads. Hand-drilled, coin-sized holes were distributed unevenly across the lid. The stench welling up from inside the box was pungently reminiscent of rabbit hutch and decomposing cardboard.

The casing had been stuffed with plant fibres, the contents carefully swathed. As single strands, the fibres were brittle; only as a bundle did they gain softness. They smelt of urine and refuse, and I could pick up a hint of coconut in the background: Mother's hand cream? The smell filled the entire room to such an extent that I had to fling the window wide open. The crate itself was divided into separate areas by thin partition walls. Thermal heating devices in assorted sizes and colours came into view, along with spiral-shaped infra-red light bulbs, samurai-sword length fluorescent light tubes, a device with the inscription 'Reflux UV Heat D3', and two plastic parts with synthetic marble surfaces to be assembled into a stone trough. It was only once I had cleared everything out from top to bottom, and was nearing the base of the crate, that my actual order appeared: coiled up embryonically, the dragon-like reptile.

I nudged it with a pen. Its scaly skin was as hard as stone, not relenting by even a centimetre. I swept the bundle of fibres from its motionless body and turned the wooden crate towards the sunlight. Essentially, the reptile looks like a small crocodile, with a heavy torso and sharp teeth. Its back is covered with barbs, running down the neck and along the spine. The neck is a fatty bulge, as if someone had wrapped a scarf around it for the harsh European winter.

But the most astonishing thing about it was its colour: I had ordered a green iguana, but the creature in the crate was a shade of grey, almost colourless.

Hours passed by without any sign of movement. I had no idea what to do with it. Should I complain and send it back to the Caribbean? And, assuming it survived: would it even fit in the terrarium? I decided to heave the creature out of the crate first of all, despite contemplating just burying it there right away. It deserved a better fate than that; it had found its way into my room from so far away that I owed it some special consideration. The sun had been heating up the metal windowsill for weeks now, a good place for a dying cold-blooded animal, I thought.

It weighed heavily in my arms. I teetered over to the window with it. Children waving German flags were running around between the houses next to their German-flag-face-painted mothers and 'Deutschland, Deutschland' chanting fathers. I laid the reptile on the warmed windowsill, justifiably scared that it might disintegrate into dust under the touch of my fingers. I left it there for many days, exposed to the strengthening sunlight, while I immersed myself in the Ego-Shooter. On the wall, I made the 500th line for the 500th login. Whenever nothing else got in the way, *Girl No. 1*, *The Brave Sniperess* and I met every hour in the shadow of the *V2 Rocket* to train. We stole our way into the opposing teams' servers and studied their movement patterns. We dismissed friends and family on their well-deserved, bespoke holiday tours. We ordered ourselves multi-coloured pizzas, handy sushi-trays, supply boxes packed abroad according to Father's astronaut-nutrition plans. We had drinks delivered, instructed bakeries of our choice to fulfil our breakfast needs. In the game itself, we avoided predictable moves; no step was to be the same as the one that went before it. We conquered clan after clan and recruited the next generation. We taught them that you can win without *Kills* too, taught them how the *Single Shot* works, how lovesickness and analog reality can be overcome. But none of that was enough, for even though we didn't want to be heteronomous, we didn't want to live in third-party programmed computer game scenarios either. We were seeking worlds which hadn't been developed by someone who didn't know us. We wanted to be the creators of our own worlds! We heard about a programme in Beta-Version called *Minecraft*, which provided building blocks for the player to construct any conceivable scenario. We ordered the programme at once: *Minecraft* was sure to be the tool we had long searched for. Until it arrived, we lay in wait, weapons at the ready. We can lie around in the virtual grass for hours. Until we begin to sweat out of boredom, until our hair turns greasy, until we realise that we're attracting tiny parasites which latch onto us, bore their way under our skin and lay their eggs. We play on, and inside us the larvae begin to hatch and consume everything, hollowing us out from within.

As we waited, the creature performed the miracle. It still retained the wan colour initially, even fading more in the sunlight. But some days later, as the sun rose, I noticed a yellow tinge in its scaly armour. At first I put it down to the

refracted sunlight, but when it didn't recede in the course of the day, veering towards orange instead, I knew that a metamorphosis was taking place. Its original fate should have led the creature to imprisonment within some carelessly assembled terrarium, or exposed it to permanently probing instruments or stroking hands. But here in my room, here on the windowsill, it had the potential to become something different, something much greater. And so it gradually began to transform from the inside out. It went through all the colours of the rainbow until it regained its original iguana green, overcame death, and rolled its eyes meaningfully for the first time.

I took it from the windowsill and placed it gently on the floor like a valuable prize. It sat there like that for a few days, gawking out of the window. It gawked in every direction, except over to where I was. It seemed I had a lot of making up to do. The sun reached the peak of its brilliance, the flow of people on the street swelled again as the summer holidays drew to a close. I often smoked cigarettes at the open window, presenting myself to my onlookers in a stoic, impassive pose, like a commander guarding his garrisons. Karl was extremely pro-active, and had more important things to do than stand at the window with his old friend. I was the catalyst of his thirst for action. His searching eye, the camera behind the windowpane, became the bridge to the outside world. Through it, they see me. The iguana was the first to see the lens, flashing in the sunlight. Like an SOS sign. The world is there, the world is watching.

Mother didn't comment when the rolls of parcel tape arrived. The creature was just as astonished as I when we discovered a hand-held tape dispenser had been thrown in for free, with which the layers of tape could be easily applied to the window. The room became darker. From bottom to top, row by row, I put up the tape. As though my window was a screen and everything beyond it simply an image, a long-familiar desktop background I was erasing line by line. For me, someone who has lived in darkness ever since, there is nothing outside anymore. Even my memory of it is fading. All you have to do is close the door behind you and you're already on the threshold of another world. A world you carry within you, a world suppressed by the outside world, where the air you needed to breathe was taken away.

I missed the summer, in darkness. The heating is on full strength now, the outside world has no warmth left to give. The creature hides itself away less and less. We make peace with one another when I start to leave delicacies in front of the mountain of dirty washing for it. My mother is very pleased that I've been paying attention to eating healthily. Instead of turning on the light, I switch on the computer screen. I write on a scrap of paper: *salad, leaves of the Karo plant, dandelion, sweet pea, plantain, alfalfa leaves, carrots (grated) and carrot leaves. A whole box of them, please. Also needed soon: zucchini, sugar beet, hibiscus leaves, Indian cress, a little dill, some tarragon, some*

mint, and a boiled potato. And on a second piece of paper, which I staple to the first, I add: *Don't be surprised, I'm just incredibly hungry. I'm trying all the things I never used to like. Your son.* She thinks that if she stuffs me with healthy food, my mind will slowly retreat and I'll soon leave the room. But I'm not ready yet, nor do I yet have any reason to say it's all been worth it.

A breakthrough! The creature has crawled up onto my chest for the first time. It must be hungry, because it starts to snap at my finger. I sit up on the mattress with a jerk, but it doesn't flinch away from me. It gets hold of my finger and chews around on it. It scratches its claws fiercely across the floor, as if my room was just one big transport crate into which it's been set free from its smaller one. I don't try to stop it; I feel too responsible for its situation. It chews – lovingly, it seems to me – until I bleed. I suppress a scream, in spite of the pain possessing every corner of my body and directing all of my attention on my finger. Adrenaline pumps through my nerve fibres, making the contours of the room flare up one by one.

“Everything okay in there?”

Perhaps I did cry out after all. I rub my eyes. A heavy weight on my chest: the iguana, sanding my face with its long, rough tongue. “Everything's fine, Papa” I say, without any certainty that the sound of my voice will make its way out to him.

“It doesn't sound like it” he says. “You're not trying to hurt yourself are you?”

The iguana continues to grate its tongue over my neck, over the same section again and again.

“I'm coming in there unless you stop it right now!”

Everything is okay, I want to tell him. But I can't get the words out, the creature is taking my breath away. I want to reassure him that I'm doing great, that he can depend on me. That I'm on the right track, wholeheartedly devoted to shaping my character, to making myself edgy, to doing what he regards to be essential.

“Why are you making those noises? The novelty's starting to wear off now, Till!”

My neck is starting to burn fierily; the creature seems to want to bore a hole in it, to paralyse my vocal chords once and for all. I want to tell Father how happy I am to hear his voice. How I miss it, miss him. The way he runs his hand through his hair, sits at the table and shoves gherkins into his mouth. How proud he always was of everything I've done. How he only ever smiled at the school's disciplinary measures, how, when no-one else was looking, he would

jab me in the ribs and shake his head indulgently. How he always said I should just forget about it, that forgetting was the most important thing anyway.

“Till? I’m counting to three! – One!”

I shield my neck from the blows of the creature’s tongue with my hand. I push against it, resist. I’ve earned the right to do that at least. I overcome the pain.

“Two!”

I want to tell him that I’m capable. That I’ve developed incredible resolve. That I’ve lost interest in the outside world, that I’m not going to let anyone tell me what to do anymore. That I’m in the process of building my own world. That it will be big, Papa, unbelievably big!

“Till, I’m not waiting any longer!”

That I won’t give it up, because I’ve become an important person for a group of special people. That they can rely on me, that I’m here for them at any time. That I’ll get fully involved with them. That everyday life doesn’t hold me under its spell, just like he had always hoped. That they have travelled a long way to build up this new world with me, and I provide its foundation: a server which will keep them online always.

But Father doesn’t smash in my door. The iguana lifts its head from my chest as if it had believed he might be serious for once. A siren rushes past outside. I hear Father switching on the treadmill, taking deep breaths, his steps pounding on the conveyor belt. The iguana retracts its tongue. The rhythm of Father’s steps quickens. Does he know we’re just having fun? The iguana closes its eyes, lays its scaly head on my chest. The machine makes a peeping sound after every kilometre. The iguana wants me to fall asleep and stay strong. *Three*, I whisper.

(...)

(Oskar: Till’s father, Karola: Till’s mother, Anna-Marie: Till’s sister)

Oskar is wearing a sweatband and a lilac tracksuit with yellow stripes. The apartment is lit up brightly, the Beatles’ *Yeah Yeah Yeah* blares out from the living room.

“What’s up with you?” Karola takes off her shoes while standing up, steadying herself against the wall.

“Why would anything be up?” says Oskar. “We only live once you know.”

“It’s the middle of the night. And what on earth are you wearing?”

Oskar just shrugs. Karola squeezes past him. In the kitchen, she mixes natural yoghurt with tomato puree, peppermint and ginger, then adds a pinch of salt. With her back against the sideboard, she drinks and looks out of the window into the dark night.

“Is everything sold?” Oskar stands in the doorframe like a splash of lilac.

“The packers are coming on Monday, after that the room will be empty.”

“Who was there?”

“Everyone.” She crushes the mint against the base of her glass with a spoon.

Oskar goes up to her and sniffs, she moves away from him. “You’ve been smoking.”

“Is that an issue?”

“Not if grey matter doesn’t matter to you.”

“What?”

“The part of the brain which impacts on our ability to concentrate. It shrinks, and the reward centre grows!”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That you should go to bed.”

Karola gave him a long and disconcerting stare, as if he were some indefinable species which, instead of speaking, communicated via vibrations in the airwaves.

“You rang.”

“We have to intervene. Things can’t carry on like this.” Oskar scratches his sweaty shoulder.

Karola fumbles in her bag for a cigarette. Under Oskar’s reproachful gaze, she takes a deep drag, blowing the smoke up towards the kitchen ceiling.

“I wish you’d stop that” says Oskar. “It’s my kitchen too.”

“Fine, if it really bothers you that much. But if we had a balcony I wouldn’t have to irritate you anymore.” Karola finishes her drink concoction, wiping her hand across her mouth.

“Oh, so now we’re supposed to do that too? Was everything else not enough? Now you want to conjure up a balcony out of thin air? What a great idea: we’ll punch a balcony out of the wall just so Her Royal Highness can give herself blowbacks!”

Karola crosses her arms, air drains out from her lips. *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* can be heard from the living room now. Karola smokes the cigarette hastily, stubs it out in her spoon and storms determinedly off into the living room, making the floorboards groan under her feet. She lifts the needle from the record player, a loud bang comes from the speakers.

Training mats are spread out across the living room floor. Karola stares at them until Oskar comes into the room and stands there awkwardly, out of place. Now they stand opposite one another, separated only by a training mat: “He was screaming and making noises like an animal.”

“So why didn’t you go in?”

“I threatened to kick the door in – then it went quiet. For a while. Then it started up again: the gunshots, the gunshots again! Then at the same time, and don’t ask me how, he started to scratch at the door. As if he were locked in, had grown claws and wanted to get out, but couldn’t. But he can, Karo, he can get out.” He shifted his weight from his left leg to his right. “It’s the end of October already, can you believe it?!”

“But it’s still doing him good” said Karola, a little uncertainly. “Young people need time.”

“Yes, yes, I know.” Oskar rolls his eyes. “But Till doesn’t need a symbiosis.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Young people need time, but that also means they have to cut themselves off at some point, not cling to a host and feed on it until the host croaks. It’s very simple.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you calling Till a parasite?”

“Well, the parasite can’t survive without the host. The parasite is dependent on the host’s provision of food and nurturing. And the host becomes co-dependent in the process, because the very act of providing the food enables parasitic life in the first place! Reichert called it classic obligate symbiosis.”

“Have you completely lost your mind? We’re talking about our son, not some parasitic insect!”

Anna-Marie has appeared in the living room, a tablet computer in her hand. Her hair is all ruffled, her body almost invisible within her voluminous pyjamas. In spite of that, she looks wide awake.

“Oh, Ann, did we wake you?” says Karola, in a sweeter but seemingly feigned voice.

“I did some Googling” says Anna-Marie, laying the device down on the table. Her parents take tentative steps towards her, as if the floor were fragile and

made of glass. “You look grumpy” says Anna-Marie to her mother, activating the display. A video window maximises and starts up. A very bad quality recording of a dimly lit room comes into view. It must have been taken with a smart phone, the image shakes a lot, and a dim beam of light can be seen coming out from the device. A Japanese voice is whispering a commentary, presumably explaining what there is to see. The walls are insulated with egg cartons, a vast number of cables run across the ceiling, the window is covered with creased aluminium foil. The floor is piled up with Manga magazines, scrunched up tissues and bags full of junk, so the person filming has to balance their way from island to island of rubbish. Abruptly, the video breaks off, and the screen displays the option of clicking on other videos of its kind.

“Is that all?” Karola looks at her daughter mockingly. “That could be anything: there was a time when you wouldn’t have come off much better if I’d filmed *your* room.”

“Mama, stop it!”

Oskar rubs his hand across his cheek, looking thoughtful: “And what do they call that?”

“Hikikomori” said the sister with a trace of pride. “That’s my diagnosis for Till.”

“Well, that’s a start” says Oskar. “So what are they planning? Some kind of shooting spree?”

“Don’t be silly, Papa.”

“Thank you” Karola interrupts. “Anna-Marie, you’ve been a great help. You can go back to bed now.”

Anna-Marie seems to take her seriously, clasping the tablet computer under her arm and tiptoeing away.

Karola waits until the door has almost fallen shut, with just a tiny crack left open. “What nonsense” she says. “All this internet diagnosis shit! If just a fraction of it were true we might as well shoot ourselves right now!”

Oskar shrugs and gives a long, drawn-out yawn until his jaw cracks, as if the topic was closed for the time being.

Karola has balled her hands into fists. “I’m going to talk to him right now.”

Oskar shrugs again, moving his sweat band back into place. As Karola kneels down in front of Till’s door, Oskar finishes his workout on the training mat, gasping for breath: sit-ups, press-ups, sit-ups.

“Hey, my boy.” She lays her hand on the door. “It’s me, Karo.” No response can be heard from inside the room. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m behind you one hundred percent. At your age and in such a demanding world, and a world

which really asks a lot of you young people, I'm sure I would have done the same thing. You know...closing the door behind you so you don't have to comply with the outside world anymore, that's it, right? The only thing is, your behaviour is slowly starting to have more serious consequences. Oskar says you need to think of your body. Don't forget that a human being, especially a growing one, needs certain nutrients. I know you think you're getting everything you need, that healthy food will balance it all out. But nutrients have to come from the social sphere too, do you understand? That's an ingredient you should be taking in too. I say *should*, you see? Because that's only *one* possible way of living, right? I mean, that's how you see it. Who says you have to be integrated in the world, that you have to have friends and family? That would just be one of the many possible worlds. Right? You've chosen another, Till. You've shown me that you can do it. Right?" She waits a moment, giving him time to answer. "But I think you can show us now. Everything that you've developed in your world, you can share with us; Oskar would really like it, and so would your sister! Even Jan, I mean, I'm sure he spends every day waiting for you to get in touch." She listens for a moment, her ear pressed against the door. "Say something. Or push a note under. Write down what you're thinking. Give us a sign so we know what's going to happen. It'll be winter soon. The days are getting shorter. And colder. And the wind is blowing the colourful foliage around so beautifully. Autumn, your favourite season, is right outside the front door! We could romp around in the leaves like we used to! Or do something else, anything, all that matters is that you enjoy it. A bit of fresh air, regardless of what we do, a little exercise never hurts, that's what Oskar says. Right? He's really worried. Otherwise it's going to get unhealthy before long. And you don't want us to have to call the emergency doctor, because he'll force down the door and then stand there in your room like an idiot, even though you're doing just fine and would surely have come out on your own accord at some point." She pauses, Oskar makes a noise as if he has cramp. "Maybe it's time. Yes, my boy, I think it's time. – Come on, *this* is the story of your life, right now. I mean, who else has proved themselves like this, who else has done something so radical!" She listens again for a while. "Right? Come on now, turn the key. Okay? Turn it, come out, and let's celebrate. Oskar is here too. You don't have anything to be afraid of, no punishment, nothing. Okay? Shit. Till. Till?" She knocks at the door, softly at first, then harder and harder. "Till? Till, you don't want it to end like this do you? We're still proud of you. But come out now, seriously. Okay? Till. Come out of this goddamn fucking room. Did you hear me?! Damn it, the fun is over now. Till? TILL! COME OUT OF THIS GODFORSAKEN HOLE OF A ROOM RIGHT NOW!"

She turns away, exhausted, and stares at her trembling hands for a long time.

Oskar has appeared over her. She stares up at him, her eyes glassy. He's wearing normal shoes now.

"What are you doing?" she whispers weakly.

“I’m going down to the cellar.”

“The cellar?”

“I’m cutting off his heating.”

“It’s October.”

“It will get cold soon enough.”

“Do you even know how to turn it off?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

Oskar turns the lights off after him as he pushes open the door to the stairwell. Karola stays in the dark hallway, her back against Till’s bedroom door, a cigarette in her hand. There’s only a narrow strip of light across the corridor, stretching out from the sister’s room. Lost in thought, Karola plays with her cigarette, moving it from finger to finger. The door to the sister’s room is slammed shut, the last light source runs dry. Darkness. Karola lets the cigarette drop from her hand to the floor, as if lacking the energy to hold onto it. It falls right in front of the crack beneath the door. She gropes around for the packet, pulls out a second cigarette and places it carefully in her mouth. Then she reaches out for the cigarette on the floor and rolls it back and forth for a long time, as if trying to shape it more evenly. After a while, she gives it a flick, making it disappear under the door. Karola pulls out her lighter, keeps it in her hand, waits. She waits, and is very tense, but can’t make out any sound or sign. Her fingers have begun to tremble again. The darkness seems to go on forever. Time seems to stand still. Only when heavy steps begin to echo on the staircase again does she hear a clicking sound right behind her back. Then she too turns the flint: first a spark, then a flame, then heat.

Translated by Jamie Lee Searle

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