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The Consecration

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The Consecration

Abstract

The U.S. Marines have a fool-proof method of preparing Americans for combat. They start with three months at boot camp and two months on the infantry course, followed by advanced weapons training and then life in the Fleet where the culture is a combination of Sparta and the Ultimate Fighting Championship, but what works - what ultimately wins firefights in Iraq and Afghanistan-is to convince the grunts they're already dead. And while it's not easy for an American teenager to give his life away, if he can do it, he'll roll into the big fight with nothing to lose. "What's the worst thing that can happen to me," the thinking goes, "if I'm already dead?" So in the nastiest places on earth, Fallujah and Helmand Province come to mind, Marines are as prepared as any troops can ever be. But it's impossible not to wonder: what does a dead man do when he returns home to America?

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The Consecration

A Memoir by Robert Fay

The U.S. Marines have a fool-proof method of preparing Americans for combat. They start with three months at boot camp and two months on the infantry course, followed by advanced weapons training and then life in the Fleet where the culture is a combination of Sparta and the Ultimate Fighting Championship, but what works–what ultimately wins firefights in Iraq and Afghanistan–is to convince the grunts they're already dead. And while it's not easy for an American teenager to give his life away, if he can do it, he'll roll into the big fight with nothing to lose. "What's the worst thing that can happen to me," the thinking goes, "if I'm already dead?" So in the nastiest places on earth, Fallujah and Helmand Province come to mind, Marines are as prepared as any troops can ever be. But it's impossible not to wonder: what does a dead man do when he returns home to America?

I don't know if the Marines told Ray Wozniak to picture his death when he landed in Da Nang in 1965. The Vietnam outlook in in the early days was upbeat and gung ho. The Marines weren't anticipating a long campaign. After all, they were only there to defend the airbase. This wasn't Korea in 1950 or the volcanic sands of Iwo Jima. The politicians called Vietnam a "police action," but to anybody who suffered there, it was a war as viciously contested as any before it.

"Ray served three tours in Vietnam," my mother used to say whenever his name came up. That was the first time I'd heard the word tour associated with war. It sounded recreational, even high-minded, like The Grand Tour aristocrats enjoyed on the continent.

When I first met the Wozniaks Ray held one of the highest enlisted ranks in the Marines, Master Gunnery Sergeant. In his illustrious career he had survived 39 months as a combat engineer in Vietnam. He'd been a "tunnel rat" who had fought the Viet Cong underground. He had his jump wings, and later, served as both a drill instructor and a recruiter, positions reserved for the most squared-away Marines in the Corps. Yet on Easter Day 1988, Ray's military career, like the bonds within my own family, had flamed out forever, leaving nothing but reflection and a chance to measure out regrets.

*

Ray expected us. He was loitering on his front lawn with a rake as we cruised down the street. I was with my mother and sister. I was 16 and the only man left in the family. My father had moved into a grungy apartment near Boston and my 11-year-old brother Aaron was in a foster home–such were the fruits of divorce in those days. And though it was Easter, a cherished holiday when I was a boy, it had stopped meaning anything to us without morning Mass and family visits.

Ray's lawn was hay-colored and beaten-down after five months of snow, but it was free of the branches, pine needles and stripped bark that marred his neighbors' yards. Linda, Ray's wife, was still in the house finishing her preparations for dinner. All morning she'd been stomping back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room fretting about place mats and gravy consistency. Linda was an ICU charge nurse and her nervous system had been programmed in an environment where carelessness made trouble. It was a professional conviction she shared with her husband, who'd seen mistakes take men's lives on battlefields and training grounds. This grave outlook put them at odds with the civilian world, which is to say the world of their 9-year-old daughter Courtney. Naturally little Courtney didn't imagine sucking chest wounds around every corner and she didn't comprehend that she was so beautiful that one day the world would storm her like a castle. Even at the age of nine, you could discern the schematics of a leggy high-fashion model. Courtney had white-blonde hair and slate-colored eyes and Ray and Linda knew she'd fire the passions of men one day, so they were hell-bent on penning her in as long as they could.

Ray waved to us as he sauntered into the center of the road. He was one of those men who gained something more than wrinkles and girth with age, something like ripeness, or more accurately, a fine patina. Ray's hair had grown out since his retirement and he wore pressed chinos and a flannel shirt, and though it was still March, his face was fiercely tanned, as if three years in Vietnam had seared darkness onto him.

A crimson Buick was coming from the opposite direction and he slowed the car to a halt and directed us into the driveway. “Is he a card or what?” My mother said as I craned my neck and watched him wave the Buick on with such authority that no one would have questioned his right to direct traffic.

Ray strode up to our driver’s side window. “What are you clowns laughing at?” he barked, his arms akimbo, as he reprised his role as Parris Island drill instructor.

“Well I can see Linda’s got you on holiday duty there, Ray,” my mother said.

“It’s not even one ‘o clock and I’ve written five tickets and impounded two vehicles. The whole town is going to pot.”

Ray peered into the car and winked at me. This world, he seemed to be saying–the one of feminine overreach and trivial occupations–was something of a joke to men like him.

On the drive down my mother told me Ray had just begun working as a mail sorter for the U.S. Postal Service. The Marines had recently forced him into retirement and a postal job meant robust health benefits and continued stability. It was distressing to picture Ray in front of a mail sorter. It was the job that had given birth to the “going postal” phenomenon.

*

I was 13-years-old when I first met Ray. My sister Maureen had befriended Courtney in a tap class when they were both six. The two mothers became friends too, and the Wozniaks eventually came to our house for a cookout. It was in 1985 before the great dismantling, before my parent’s divorce and Ray’s expulsion from the Service, when everyone in my family was under one roof and Ray was still chief of a Marine recruitment office in Brockton.

Long before I met Ray I had developed a fascination with the military and stories of war. I played with plastic Army men and my friends and I waged war with toy rifles in the woods and cornfields. My grandfather’s Time-Life books had introduced me to World War II, and then a set of children’s books with colorful sketches on the U.S. Civil War had stirred my interest in war even more. One sketch I’ll never forget was of the Battle of Shiloh. I hadn’t known the word *Shiloh* was from the Old Testament, but even then, the word sounded holy to me. The blue-coated Union soldiers were in the prone position, firing at unseen Confederates off the page. There were dozens of dead soldiers on the firing line and everyone was covered with pink blossoms from the surrounding peach trees. This contrast between the brilliant fallen petals and the bloodied, navy-blue tunics was almost beautiful to me.

My father had no particular interest in war. He had served in the peacetime Navy and he had a Quaker-like aversion to firearms. But he did like war movies and we'd watch them together comparing notes on their strengths. The film that galvanized my interest in Vietnam, above all other wars, was John Wayne's *The Green Berets*. The film was an inaccurate and mostly silly affair. It tried to simplify the complexities of the war for a public still thinking along World War II-lines, but it was my first exposure to the war's quirky nomenclature: Punji sticks, Huey helicopters, Charlie, sappers, firebases, AK-47s and claymore mines. Later I saw more sober-minded Vietnam movies like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. In *The Deer Hunter* I recognized the adult men I knew. The parochial Pennsylvania steel workers reminded me of my father's boilermaker friends and my neighbors' fathers, men who watched football in dark taverns and then went to Vietnam to hunt men at close range. It wasn't a distant war to me. It was a war still being turned over in the minds of men I was growing up around.

Before my father fired-up the grill the adults settled in at the kitchen table, drinking beer and chatting. Ray and my father were both fishermen and they exchanged observations about the area's lakes and useful lures. I studied Ray carefully. He was the first active-duty Marine I'd ever seen and I waited for conversation to swing toward his military experiences. My father talked about everything from his sub-pump problems to the town's water ban. Ray seemed happy to let my father do the talking. He enjoyed great authority in his professional environment and could easily afford to be deferential when socializing.

I soon got impatient with my father's home improvement stories and non-sequiturs. I glared black at my mother as if to say, "He's your husband. Do something!" But she and Linda were engaged in one of those face-to-face female conversations with a lot of nodding and signs of mutual understanding. I was on my own. How could I move the conversation along? My father loved to drone on about his Navy days. I considered his stories tedious and bereft of the kind of action–shooting and bombing–that made military stories worthwhile to begin with. But if I encouraged him to talk about the Navy, Ray would clearly have to chime in about the Marines.

"Hey Dad, hey Dad," I said pulling on his sleeve and banging on the table by his beer mug. "When you enlisted in the Navy were you scared?"

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My father stopped in the middle of a sentence and said, “Oh, scared? No. Me and Bobby Murray from Medford went into the buddy program, you see,” he said, glancing at Ray who nodded in recognition. “It meant you and a friend went through boot camp together…” And so my father was off: he described his first day at the Great Lakes Naval Base in 1962. He recounted breezy tropical days in Cuba while stationed at Guantanamo Bay or “Gitmo” as he called it. He remembered a Chief Petty Officer in Norfolk who pulled rank on him about some nonsense regulation. On and on it went and Ray listened patiently, even amusedly, to these tender-hearted reminiscences of the peacetime Navy. My father’s nostalgia-trip eventually swung back to his first days in the service. I saw an opening. “Marine boot camp is the toughest one though, right?” I said.

My father pinched his lips, paused and looked at Ray.

“They’re just different,” Ray said, shifting in his seat and patting his shirt pocket for his Kools. “Marines and sailors have different jobs.”

“I’m reading this book on Parris Island. It says the guys who go to boot camp in California are called Hollywood Marines.”

“It’s true! He’s reading a book on the Marines,” my mother interjected with a mixture of pride and astonishment, as if I had decided to skip high school and go straight on to Harvard. “He saw it reviewed in *The Globe*, and he made me drive him right down to the mall to buy a copy.”

“Let me see that book,” Ray said before lighting a cigarette and winking at my mother.

I thumped the paperback on the table in front of him and he paged through it with a cigarette dangling from his lips. He scanned the index then the photo section. His eyes narrowed as smoke wafted across his vision. “Know him. I know this guy. Heard of him. He was with me at 29 Palms,” he looked up at Linda for a second. “Marty O’Callaghan. Remember him? He’s in here.” Linda managed a smile, but she was clearly done with the Marines and their parochial civilization. Two decades of combat tours and cross-country moves had wrung the curiosity right out of her.

“In the book, some guy complained the M-16 was no good,” I said, gaining confidence while I had the floor. “One Marine said it was junk: that it jammed when mud and water got in it.”

Ray eyeballed me and then looked down at the ashtray as he extinguished his cigarette. “It’s not the rifle that matters, but the man behind the trigger.”

Ray said this simply and without effect. He wasn’t trying to impress anybody. He was just making, from his perspective, a banal observation, something like: “Yeah, generally it doesn’t snow around here until late November.”

I would spend most of my adult life foisting opinions on people, but Ray had known something true, and he got it the only way you can–by risking everything to know it.

*

Linda had prepared Easter dinner with the same mixture of personal responsibility and terror that she brought to the ICU. Endless platters filled with lamb, glazed ham, fish fillets, stuffing, yams, green vegetables and simmering sauces and gravies rounded the table for what seemed like an hour, filling the room with the sound of utensils clinking against dishware. During dinner there were only a few deadening silences, including one where Linda filled the void by berating Courtney’s table etiquette. When she was done with her, Linda mentioned that Ray’s Marine retirement party had been a great success. “The commanding officer of Camp Lejeune flew up–a colonel–just for Ray,” she said. “That doesn’t happen for any retiring Marine you know.”

“Is that so?” my mother said, her eyes fixed on the porcelain gravy bowl she was delivering to Linda. “A colonel. Imagine that.”

I sensed a plan was afoot to elicit conversation from Ray. Linda must have wanted him to talk about his feelings surrounding retirement. But Ray didn't bite. During the meal he acted less like a father and husband, and more like a man enduring house arrest. In the finished basement he had his gun room and deer taxidermies, known quantities all of them. But upstairs with his wife and daughter and the customs of family life, he was strictly a resident alien. It wasn't that he was distant, as much as he was categorically confounded.

My mother made another attempt to draw Ray out. She told him about our family trip to Washington D.C. that included an unplanned side trip to the Quantico Marine base in Virginia. Her father had been a sailor and a Boston police officer and she had a fascination with men in uniform. We got lost several times in the back roads of Virginia, and when we found the base, the Marines turned us away.

"I tried to sweet talk the guard at the front gate," my mother said. "But he was like, 'Sorry, Ma'am. No visitors allowed' . . . I was expecting a bit more southern hospitality from your Marine buddies there, Ray."

"Yeah, I warned them a bunch of yahoos from Boston were coming down," Ray said, and then without missing a beat, he turned to Courtney and laid into her as if finally identifying the source of his irritation. "Did you clean that room like I asked you?"

Courtney hesitated–she'd clearly forgotten–and hesitation was fatal both on the battlefield and inside the Wozniak family.

"You're excused from the dinner table," Linda said, now really laying into her. "March right in there and get busy: the closet, the bed, *under the bed*, everything. And Maureen," she said, seizing my sister's wrist. "You stay here, sweetie, because she'll rope you right into helping her."

Linda and my mother began clearing the table after Courtney marched off to her room. Linda announced there'd be coffee, Boston creme pie and rhubarb pie, but it would be later, once she'd squared away the kitchen.

Ray kicked at the leg of my chair. "Come on. Let's take a drive. I'll show you my truck."

Linda heard Ray as she swept into the room with a stack of Tupperware. "So where are you going now?" she asked him.

"I was thinking . . . China."

"*Ray!*"

"A drive," he said looking at me. "Bobby's had enough table talk and fussing. Poor boy is probably dying of boredom."

"Don't be long though . . . Anne," she said following my mother into the kitchen. "What time you guys planning on leaving? The guys are taking–"

We didn't wait around for any more discussion. Ray hustled me down the stairs and we were out.

As we drove through the town Ray pointed out local landmarks: Forge Pond, the junior high school, the gambrel home of his buddy Sully. The windows were down and his left arm dangled out languidly. He tuned the radio to Oldies 103. It was strange, but I didn't feel the pressure to make conversation the way I did with most adults. I felt like an equal. Just a buddy out for drive.

Ray pulled into a White Hen Pantry convenience store. It was one of the only places open on Easter day. "You want anything?" he said, pausing before climbing out. I shook my head.

Ray returned to the cab with a pack of gum and a hard pack of Kools he was pounding against his thumb. He gave me a little grin as I glanced at the pack he'd tossed onto the dash. "Don't say anything about this," he said. "She'll kill me if she found out." Linda was an ex-smoker, a zealot reformer type who, apropos of nothing, had launched into an invective that afternoon against smoking. I laughed. I was an accessory to Ray's rebellion. This was the secret world of men–I'd finally been ushered in–and it smelled like menthol and diesel fumes.

Ray turned onto a wooded back road where the branches were still bare and leafless. He lit another cigarette and as he sped up he shifted the truck into fourth: he was going to drive and chain-smoke while he had the chance.

"I read all the black guys in Vietnam smoked Kools," I said, fearing I sounded like a silly child.

Ray smirked and nodded as he took a long drag. He was loose and easy for the first time all day. "You read a lot," he finally said. I shrugged my shoulders.

The sun gleaned down through the naked branches and settled onto the earth with a still and silent grace. The late afternoon light splashed off beech, oak and poplar, promising long days ahead, blossoms and the resurrection of summer.

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I got up the courage to tell Ray I was thinking of joining the service after high school. I felt ashamed as soon as I'd confessed it. I was skinny and bookish and nobody's idea of a soldier. I said I was leaning toward the Army, because the Air Force–according to my father–was too cushy, while life in the Marines was punishing. I figured Ray would snuff out my enthusiasm, but he didn't. He took me seriously. He told me to forget the Air Force, but when it came to the Army, he was diplomatic: "It depends on what unit you're with," he said. "They have some good outfits like the 82nd and 101st Airborne–they're real pros." Ray's assessments of the service branches were frank and full of insider knowledge. But what Ray couldn't do with me, despite his years as a recruiter, was pretend it all had nothing to do with war. He didn't explain how I could earn money for college; the military was about fighting, and fighting is what won wars.

"How come you went to Vietnam three times?" I said. "Guys only had to go once."

Ray pressed the cigarette lighter into the dash. The spring sod out the window was still wet and moss-like. I could smell it in the breeze.

"I asked to go back."

Apparently everybody had got it wrong about Vietnam vets. They wanted to talk.

"Were you scared?" I said instinctively.

"The Marine Corp is small. It's not like the Army," he said. "When people get hurt you feel it . . . I couldn't stay home while my friends were catching hell over there."

He glanced over at me for a second as if to say: "You follow me?" I nodded, but I didn't understand sacrifice. With my father gone, my brother sent away, all my grandparents dead and my own creeping depression, I believed courage wasn't something you gave away to others. It was something you barred up tightly inside yourself.

*

Linda and my mother were still washing dishes when we got back from our drive. Ray said there was a Celtics game on. I flopped into a recliner just off the kitchen. "Wait here. I want to show you a few things," he said, before tossing his keys onto the hutch and striding toward the bedrooms.

Ray returned and laid out several worn photo albums and a dented shoebox on the carpet in front of us. The albums contained sixties-era Kodak color snapshots, the kind with white borders and the date stamped at the top, like "Jul • 64". I immediately identified a much younger Ray wearing his tan Service Bravo Uniform and standing alongside two women with beehives, short skirts and clunky handbags. He smiled and nodded. There were two pages dedicated exclusively to olive-green Chinook helicopters at various stages of ascent over swerving field of Vietnamese elephant grass. Ray identified the occasional friend or place as I flipped the pages, but he was mostly content to marvel right along with me. The Marines were usually naked at the waist and clutching cans of Budweiser. They had their arms slung over each other's shoulders and they enjoyed the free-and-easy manner that comes from shared hardship. It was hard not to envy how they loved.

I pointed to a yellowing newspaper clipping from 1965. "My fifteen minutes of fame," he joked. It was a photo of Ray with an extended caption from his hometown newspaper in Maine. It mentioned that "local boy" Raymond Wozniak was serving in Vietnam with the 9th Marines. It showed him crouching next to the tread of an Armored Personnel Carrier and clutching the old M-14 rifle with its wooden stock. The old rifle and black and white photo gave the scene a timeless look, like Ray might have been fighting at Guadalcanal in 1942. The chinstrap on Ray's helmet, curiously enough, was fastened and secured tightly to his face. It was odd. You can look at a thousand photos of Marines and Soldiers in Vietnam, and you'll never see a guy with his chinstrap fastened. You just won't see it. It conjured up a forgotten time in the war when we had expected to win by flooding the country with hardware and money, compiling body counts and wearing our chinstraps into battle.

Ray went on to show me his service ribbons, rank patches and awards from his retirement ceremony. When he was opening the box I glanced up and saw Linda elbowing my mother and mouthing the words never before. My mother was giving me an admiring look too, as if I'd surprised her by making the honor roll or holding the door for an old woman, but I knew I hadn't done anything praiseworthy. It was simple communication. I knew how to speak the language of war, and war was the idiom of Ray's youth.

Driving home that night my mother said, "Linda nearly had a stroke today–what *did* you say to him?–Ray's never showed anyone his Marine stuff before–not even her."

"I just asked him about it."

"Well, she's grateful . . . She really is . . . She said Ray needed that–to open up about everything. She hopes it's a beginning. She just wants everything with Ray to be normal again."

*

A year later an Army recruiter visited my home. It was too late for him though. My childhood romance with the military had waned. I'd discovered the bass guitar and punk rock, and college looked more and more attractive as I contemplated lonely basic training at Fort Dix. I wanted to swagger around in a uniform, but I didn't want to deal with life in the Army.

In next few years I got sporadic reports on the Wozniaks. With each passing year Courtney had grown more and more beautiful, and more rebellious, and her adolescence played out *exactly* as her parents had feared. Ray soldiered on at the Post Office, but occasionally the tedium became too much and he'd disappear for several days. The episodes weren't suspicious disappearances per say–Ray was always fishing in Maine, not cheating–but he never gave Linda the courtesy of a head's up. He just got in this truck and took off.

In January of 1991 I returned to Framingham State College for the second half of my freshman year. I came back with a hamper full of fresh laundry and a 12-inch black and white TV with rabbit ears. The U.S. was about to launch the ground phase of the Persian Gulf War and each night in my dorm room I watched *The CBS Evening News* with Dan Rather, wondering what it all meant. The Pentagon had called up Army Reserve units and was ordering them to Saudi Arabia for the buildup. If I had enlisted a year earlier I might have been deployed. In the romance of youth it was hard not to regret my generation's war popping off without me, but I was 19 and geo-politics played very little part in my thinking. This new war stirred up memories of Vietnam for the Baby Boomers, and small numbers reenacted their college years by arranging sixties' style war protests. My girlfriend took me to a "Peace Night" at a Buddhist center in Cambridge. Nearly a hundred people gathered in a sandalwood-scented basement where we chanted and meditated, sending our "energy" to Washington and Baghdad. I was skeptical of the old hippy guard in Cambridge, who preened and glowed as if it was 1968 again, and they were off to disrupt the Democratic National Convention.

Ray was less sanguine about another American war. Linda said he'd followed the buildup of U.S. forces in the fall of 1990 with increasing dread. His drinking got worse and he even phoned a Marine big-wig requesting a dispensation to return to active duty. He was a combat engineer and a Vietnam tunnel rat, he reminded them. He could help the Marines in Kuwait when they encountered Iraqi bunkers and tank traps. The authorities denied his reenlistment request.

Fighting in the tunnels had been last the thing we talked about during our Easter day drive. Ray didn't go into many details. I knew the Viet Cong had used underground tunnels and bunkers to hide troops and supplies and launch surprise attacks. In the early years the Americans didn't even know about their existence until they stumbled upon them in Cu Chi. Exploring the tunnels was one of the few jobs in Vietnam that was volunteer-only. Officers could tell men to walk point or jump into a hot LZ, but *nobody* ordered men into tunnels. The job was simply too dangerous. A man was lowered headfirst into a dark hole with .45 at the ready, a flashlight and a rope tied around his ankle so he could be retrieved if shot. Exploring tunnels had an almost esoteric aura to it and most of the grunts–already a superstitious lot–were too spooked too even contemplate such duty. Only a few select men had the courage to plummet into the black echo of the tunnels. Success required cultivating a white-knuckled détente with panic. You had to accept that you were alone, the passageways were as narrow as coffins, and there were men around dark corners who wanted you dead. When you felt the tug of panic, you had to return to your breathing, wipe the sweat from your brow and without reservations, calmly give your life away. Ray had plugged into that drama so many times it was second nature to him.

Ray got in his truck before the ground war began and drove south along the Atlantic seaboard. He didn't tell Linda he was leaving, and this time, with the war on television every night, she decided it was time to notify the State Police he was missing. He wasn't on the lamb long. Two days later South Carolina state troopers called in his plates; they'd picked him up on one of their beaches. He'd driven onto the sand and rammed his truck straight into the surf just miles from his old billet at Parris Island. The troopers found him passed out behind the wheel. There were beer cans in the cab and waves crashing over the running boards.

My mother believed it was an attempt to complete the circle, and return home where it had all begun for him. I thought of the film *Coming Home* where a troubled Marine officer and Vietnam veteran strips off his uniform at the shore and wades into the ocean to commit suicide. But this wasn't how it worked in real life. Marines weren't life-intimates-art kind of guys. Ray was part of a warrior elite, and when you hear gunfire, your job is to move toward the sound of the bullets.

Ray didn't earn any commendations for ramming his truck into the Carolina surf that morning. The whole episode was sad and embarrassing for Linda and Courtney, but the stunt proved Ray hadn't given up yet. Despite his failures at the post office and inability to communicate with Linda, he was still someone with the will of a warrior. Underground in the tunnels it had been black and preternaturally still–like being in the belly of a fish–but he'd given it away like he'd been told, and instead of loss, he'd felt something akin to *expansion*. The Padre in his Marine battalion would have called it grace.

After two sleepless nights and too many beers, I can imagine even a piddly South Carolina wave might have resembled a mighty Pacific specimen: one with a barrel so large you could drive a truck into it. So like Jonah, Ray begged to be tossed overboard, to placate the sea and save the men. For all along he believed the fish would be sent for him–the great one they'd spoke of since the beginning–the one they send for the men who are already dead.

Robert Fay is a monthly contributor to *Full Stop Magazine*. "The Consecration" is taken from his recently completed memoir. His website is robertfay.com.

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