

CHAPTER 1

The Departed

Just what I needed, is a college boy. . . . What's your degree? . . . Sociology? You'll go far. That's if you live. . . . Just don't let your college degree get you killed.

—*Clint Eastwood as Harry Callahan in
Dirty Harry, 1971*

Most days I don't miss being a cop; being a professor is a better job. But I do miss working with people willing to risk their life for me. And as a police officer, I would risk my life for others, even for those I didn't know, and even those I knew I didn't like. That's part of the job. As a professor, my colleagues are great, but there's not a single person at John Jay College of Criminal Justice I would die for. It's not that I wish teaching were more dangerous, but there is something about danger and sweat that makes a beer after work particularly cold and refreshing. You can't learn this in a book.

Danger creates a bond. Most police retire in one piece, and other jobs, at least statistically, are more dangerous. But policing is unique in that injury and death come not just from accidents but from job performance. When a police officer is killed, criminals don't call time out. For police, the show must go on. At a police funeral, no one composes eulogizing platitudes of "never again." It will happen again—just hopefully not to you or anybody you know and love.

The shared experiences of police work help overcome many differences, but the so-called Blue Brotherhood is not a monolithic entity as much as a tent under which a diverse

clan of cousins constantly feuds and squabbles. Elite colleges should envy the true racial and economic diversity of an urban police academy. Police identity is not so much a unifying force as a tool that allows effective functioning in spite of differences.¹ As one police academy instructor said, “When you put on that uniform, you’re not white or black. You’re blue. We’re one big happy family, right? Dysfunctional as hell. But what family isn’t?”

Police culture is actually less mysterious and exotic than outsiders believe. There is no secret handshake. Social isolation comes not from corruption or brutality but from the grind of daily shift work combined with doses of unfiltered and politically incorrect reality. Being police is working-class and not particularly intellectual. This is more a matter of selection than one of initiation. Much of what is perceived as police identity—socially conservative values, a rejection of lower-class culture, a resentment and envy of the professional class—is present before officers enter the police department.² Many potentially good police are turned off by a shamefully low starting salary, others by the pseudo-military environment of the academy. Standing at attention, saluting, and doing sit-ups are terrible methods to teach the needed police skills of problem-solving, independent thinking, quick action, and the ability to articulate everything. The tricks of the trade involve knowing which corners to cut and why, what form to fill out and how, and when to modulate your radio voice so backup starts heading in your direction before trouble starts.

Fresh out of the academy, police are usually placed in high-crime districts because these areas are the least desirable to work. And besides, you learn fast in the ‘hood. You learn about the importunate demands of the dispatcher, the

futility of rapid response, and the persistence and harms of the drug trade. It's unfortunate that the ghetto becomes a real-life training arena. Mistakes are made. High-crime areas are where the best and most experienced patrol officers are needed. The enthusiasm of the young is no substitute for the wisdom of the old. And the on-the-job education of police officers is not all productive. Criminals don't want to work with the police any more than police want to coddle criminals. But when drug laws criminalize so many, the police and public inevitably coexist in barely disguised mutual antipathy. Young police learn that the job has more to do with public control than with public service.

Citizens call 911 and expect the police to do something. So police fall back on arrests. And arrest they do. The drug corner is bursting with criminals and addicts seemingly waiting to go to jail. But drug dealers aren't stupid. There are rules of drug dealing that protect most drug dealers. Usually a kid is left holding the bag, literally. The child comes from an overwhelmed and dysfunctional home. The father, very likely, has already been locked up for a drug crime. The child needs many things, but none of these is provided by police. Uniformed police patrol does little but temporarily disrupt public drug dealing.

I know, because for eight and a half hours a night, I policed East Baltimore, one of the worst ghettos in America. "Worst" is a horribly judgmental term. So is "ghetto," for that matter. But in terms of violence, drugs, abandonment, and despair, East Baltimore certainly holds its own. Originally my goal was not to be a police officer at all. I was an Ivy League graduate student planning a comparatively mundane one-year study of police socialization. I do not come from a family of police. None of my friends were police. My

parents were teachers. I had few dealings with police. I was part of the liberal upper-middle class raised with the kindly lessons of Officer Friendly. As a high-school student, the few times I could have gotten in trouble, Chicago police officers always cut me a break. I'm very polite. And white.

As a sociology graduate student, I took to heart the argument that prolonged participant-observation research is the best and perhaps only means of gathering valid data on job-related police behavior. Because data on policing are iffy at best and cops, like everyone, love to tell a tall tale, the best way to see what happens on the street is to be there as it happens. As an institution, police have been labeled insular, resentful of outsiders, and in general hostile to research, experimentation, and analysis.³ Official police statistics are notoriously susceptible to manipulation.⁴ And as most police activity has no official record at all, the nuances of police work are difficult if not impossible to quantify. Professor and police researcher Maurice Punch wrote, "The researcher's task becomes, then, how to outwit the institutional obstacle-course to gain entry and . . . penetrate the minefield of social defenses to reach the inner reality of police work."⁵ I wanted to become an active member of an academy class and follow in the footsteps of MIT professor John Van Maanen, who did this thirty years earlier in Seattle.⁶ My plan, after a few rejections from other cities, was accepted in Baltimore, Maryland.⁷ I moved to Baltimore knowing the city only from the movies of Barry Levinson and John Waters. I was given a police-officer-trainee uniform and reported at 07:39 hours for day one of the fifth academy class of the year.

On day two, I was pulled out from some mindless military marching drill and told I could not continue as a re-

searcher. The police commissioner who had approved my research, Thomas Frazier, was out. The interim regime was not friendly. Suddenly my research was ex post facto disapproved. In a matter of minutes, I was in a very tense meeting with the acting commissioner of the police department. During this rather unpleasant half-hour, he asked me, "Why don't you want to become a cop for real?" Previously I had taken and "passed" the police civil service exam in Massachusetts, but I was never called back.⁸ I wondered aloud who would hire me *knowing* I would quit after a year and write a book. He said that he would, if I could meet all the hiring requirements. My research could continue provided I successfully completed an expedited hiring process. I needed to become a fully active and paid police officer.

I passed the battery of tests and ran one and a half miles for the first time in my life. I was hired in two months (a record time) and managed, barely, to stay with my police academy class of "99-5." Meanwhile the acting commissioner was pushed out and Edward Norris from New York City was appointed commissioner. Perhaps I was lost in the shuffle, but I had no further problems continuing my research. As an employee, the research advantages were tremendous. For starters, I was paid.⁹ While such pecuniary matters are not supposed to influence objective academic research, a meager paycheck can go a long way to advance the noble pursuit of knowledge, especially since none of my grant applications had been accepted.

Going into the academy, I didn't know what to anticipate. As I looked around at my classmates, I thought, "I may not be the best cop in here, but I certainly won't be the worst." I thought I could handle the job, but not because

I knew what to expect. I'm good at improvising. And even if policing isn't the best job, there are certainly worse.

On the street, new police officers learn quickly because they have to. And what do they learn? That they're to patrol in their cars, respond to 911 and 311 calls for service, take reports, and make arrests by sending drug users and sellers through the justice system's revolving door. Police officers learn that they're on the streets to serve the needs of the larger war—and to make it look as if the battles are being won. Over time, the connections between the war on drugs and the demands placed on police officers became crystal clear. Police attack drug corners as if they were brush fires, stomping out one only to see it flare up again as soon as they move on to the next. People's desire to get high and a stubborn national commitment to drug prohibition provide the fuel. Drug dealers and users are just the kindling. As police cannot get at the source, they do what police do best: lock people up. Our nation's poorest and least wanted are swept off the streets, sorted by the courts, and collected in our jails and prisons. But sooner or later they all come back, ready to burn again.¹⁰

Some will criticize my unscientific methods. I have no real defense. Everything is true, but this book suffers from all the flaws inherent in ethnographic work and some, perhaps, of gonzo journalism.¹¹ Being on the inside, I made little attempt to be objective. I did not pick, much less randomly pick, my research site or research subjects. I researched where I was assigned. To those I policed, I tried to be fair. But my empathy was toward my fellow officers. Those next to me became my friends and research subjects. My theories emerged from experience, knowledge, and understand-

ing. In academic jargon, my work could be called “front- and backstage, multisited, participant-observation research using grounded theory rooted in symbolic interactionism from a dramaturgical perspective.” But I can’t even say it with a straight face. And if I wrote that way, very few would read it.

My notes varied greatly in both quality and quantity. Ultimately they filled about 350 single-spaced, typed pages. But I should have typed more. Some days I felt I had nothing to say. Other days I had a lot to say but was too tired to say it. After a long night’s work and a few beers, it was too easy to convince myself that memory would suffice. Whatever I didn’t write down is gone forever. Just one example: on May 28, 2001, I helped guard the crime scene of a twelve-person shooting. I remember being there, talking and whiling the night away, making tasteless jokes about the blood-spattered remains of the food spread. Out of boredom, I smoked a cigar another officer gave to me. I don’t even like cigars. Six years later, when I looked back to my notes, the entry for the night was blank. Perhaps I had nothing insightful to say. It’s still more likely that I thought I would never forget the details of a twelve-person shooting. Well, I have.

Most police officers—whether out of a desire to express themselves or the simple boredom of being confined in the intimate space of a squad car for eight hours—speak extremely candidly. Usually I would talk to my squadmates parked next to me in the classic police style: driver’s-side window adjacent to driver’s-side window. Undoubtedly my greatest sources were those with whom I became friends. Given time, I had the luxury of being able to wait for sensitive issues to come up naturally. When such topics arose (or

when I could bring them up), I would ask extremely pointed and personal questions. More often than not, I could spark candid conversations. Except when noted, all quotations come from personal conversations with police officers, mostly my squadmates.

As a group, police officers are not inclined toward heady discussions of academic theory. Like everybody, police officers talk about personal relationships, sports, hobbies, and plans for days off. Perhaps more unique to police, conversations frequently veer toward the sick humor of the most recent call-for-service; ineptitude in the police organization; and sexual matters true, false, and fantasized. In the day-to-day routine, the inner working of a big-city police department resembles a bureaucratic Kafkaesque nightmare more than the latest installment of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*.

When taking notes for a book, it helps that pen and paper are required for police officers. Usually I jotted a few things at the scene and expanded my writing when I returned home from work. I reconstructed quotes as quickly as possible and to the best of my memory. I experimented with, and then decided against, tape-recording police interviews. Data from recorded interviews were less revealing than what I could gather through casual conversation. While accurate transcripts are extremely useful for quotes, I found that when the tape recorder is running, police officers remain on guard, talking in a stilted and formal style reminiscent of police officers on the TV show *Cops*. (I loved the show *Cops* before I was a cop. But as a police officer I learned to dislike it. Partly I didn't want to watch work videos when I wasn't working. And without a doubt, police conversations are far more revealing when the camera isn't rolling. But

even more than that, I don't like watching bad policing. To the outsider, good policing should appear boring. It is only when things go wrong and mistakes are made that policing becomes entertainment.) A few times I brought a small laptop computer and could write detailed notes during slow periods on the midnight shift. But the steering wheel gets in the way of the screen.

Because of the nature of the work and the cultural background of most police officers, language is very sexual, scatological, and personal. The concept of "political correctness" is simultaneously understood and mocked. One officer said, "[People in the Eastern District are] drugged-out, lazy motherfuckers. These people don't want to work. They want to sit on their ass, collect welfare, get drunk, and make babies. Let them shoot each other." After a brief pause he turned to me and said with faux sincerity, "I think the problems here are caused by social conditions, which can be solved by better education. . . . That's so when you write down all this stuff for your book I don't come out like an asshole." While quotes selected naturally emphasize the extreme over the mundane, I believe they represent the collective views of most police officers I worked with.

I never intended to write a "kiss-and-tell." There's better kissing-and-telling out there.¹² The only real scandals I saw were living conditions in the ghetto and a general lack of support for hardworking police officers. There is no culture of corruption or brutality among Baltimore City patrol officers. Police love *talking* about beatings, but I did not see any police commit criminal acts. Good behavior, while not universal, is the norm. This is not to say that police, myself included, are angels. Police violate departmental regulations all the time. Like any other public employee

with bad working conditions, obnoxious customers, and excellent job security, police get pissed off and can be assholes. I tried not to be.

I happily worked midnights, generally the least desirable shift. I've always been a night owl. Unlike day police work, midnight shifts usually quiet down after a few unrelenting hours. Other officers like midnights because of steady work hours, faster commutes, an almost nonexistent upper-management presence, and less conflict with daytime family or work responsibilities.

I wasn't a police officer for long, just six months in the academy and fourteen months on the street. But you learn quickly on the streets of the Eastern District. As one veteran police dispatcher said, "You handle more kinds of calls by the end of field training than other cops handle in their careers." With less than two weeks on the street, I was the primary officer responding to a shooting. Officers with thirty years in a safe suburb might wonder if they can handle East Baltimore. My squadmates and I know we can handle anything. Given my short tenure, early on I decided not to seek a transfer within the department. I knew I could never know the entire police organization. I wanted to learn one part very well. Plus, I had a good sergeant.

The Eastern District is one of nine police districts in Baltimore City. Roughly the boundaries are E. 25th Street and Sinclair Lane on the north, Orleans Street and Pulaski Highway on the south, Fallsway on the west, and Erdman Avenue on the east. Landmarks include Johns Hopkins Hospital, Dunbar High School (home of the Poets), the Old Town Mall, the Northeast Market, and the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum. I generally policed the middle of the district, straddling Broadway from Orleans to

North Ave. The area suffers from crime, drugs, and blight. Ninety-seven percent of the district is African American. The poverty rate is 37 percent. Once a working-class area with a variety of ethnic groups, the district lost most of its population, first through white flight and then through working-class black flight. The 2000 Census counted 45,081 residents, almost one-third fewer than in 1990.¹³

The Eastern District police station, under the command of a major, has about 260 police officers. Approximately half the officers are assigned to uniformed patrol. Each eight-and-a-half-hour patrol shift has about forty uniformed officers, three sergeants, and one lieutenant. A patrol sergeant is in charge of a squad of twelve to fourteen officers, five to eight of whom are working on any given day. Every squad is permanently assigned to one of the district's three sectors, which is further divided geographically into four to six "posts" (i.e., beats). Though posts vary greatly in size throughout the city, all fourteen posts in the Eastern District are small geographic areas (thirty-five to one hundred small city blocks) containing 3,000 to 6,000 residents. When a squad has enough working officers and functioning police cars, one or two officers will be assigned to work one post.

A squad is expected to collectively handle all the calls within its sector. Ideally post officers handle all the calls on their post. But officers are routinely assigned to any call in their sector. While officers typically do not work outside their squad or police outside their sector, the three squads of the Eastern District go to the same roll call and are on the same radio frequency. Being on the same frequency, officers will assist others as appropriate. Except for a "Signal 13," a call to help an officer in trouble, policing outside one's district is extremely rare. Unlike some cities and all

police TV shows and movies, Baltimore police usually patrol solo, without a partner.

Though almost all names have been changed in this book, pseudonyms aren't enough to guarantee anonymity for those familiar with the people involved. Not only is the protection of individuals who trusted me an institutional requirement, it is also a matter of common courtesy. Personal identifiers, although always accurate, are intentionally vague and not always consistent. A "female instructor" in one chapter may be a "black sergeant" in another chapter. My squadmates can likely attribute many quotes based on style of speech. But my goal is to allow plausible deniability. I am less protective of those who have retired and given me permission to quote them. Characters, as a nonfiction literary device, are kept to a minimum. Admittedly the results—disjointed, sensational, out-of-context quotations—are a handicap to writer and reader alike. Such sacrifices are necessary for the approval of universities' Human Subjects Committees. Much research suffers when academics are prevented from observing and conversing like normal free people.

Beyond the obvious nature of administering questionnaires, I would not mention my research status unprompted. One does not endear oneself to police with talk of one's privileged educational background. But word of me spread vaguely through the grapevine. When the subject of my research came up in groups, others often described me as "writing a book." This usually proved an adequate answer. I would sometimes add that I was writing a book on policing in general and not police officers in particular. More often than not, sociology was confused with social work or psychology. When questioned, I tried to explain my research

goals as clearly as possible, a task made difficult by the fact that I really had no clear research goals.

On the street, my squadmates were at first suspicious about my literary intentions. Initially my presence was greeted with skepticism, especially from supervisors who believed, probably accurately, that nothing good could come from my writing. One lieutenant told me: “Moskos, I like you. But I don’t want anything to do with your book. I don’t want to be in it. I don’t want my name in it. I don’t want any part of it.” Outside of this reference, he’s not. Another officer asked me rhetorically, “You know how many times people have come up to me and asked, ‘What’s with the Harvard guy? What’s he doing here?’” But police officers are primarily concerned with staying safe, staying out of trouble, and not jeopardizing their pensions. Policing is certainly a job like no other. But by and large for most police—day in and day out and for better and for worse—the job is just a job.

By doing my job, being personable, and drinking after work, I was accepted for who I was: a police officer using the department as a stepping-stone to something better. This stepping-stone attitude was encouraged by many officers. Ultimately I felt I was judged as all police are: on work performance and personality. On the street I received no hazing and had no problem receiving backup. As far as I know, coworkers did not mind riding with me as a partner. Police officers wished me luck on my book and urged me not to forget them. I haven’t.

Toward the end of my time I could ask about my acceptance, especially during the early period. I was told by a squadmate, “Before you got here [in our squad], Sarge said to watch out: ‘He’s writing a friggin’ book! He’s going to

put all our names in it and give it to I.I.D. [Internal Affairs]!’ I told Sarge you were going to change all the names.” The wife of my sergeant confirmed this, “I’ll never forget when [he] came home and said he had some guy writing a book or something. He doesn’t like to admit it now, but he told the whole squad to watch themselves when you were around. Because who knows what you would say.” My sergeant added, “I didn’t know who you were or what your motives were.” I asked him why he would be so worried since nothing really bad was going on. He gave me a tired and quizzical look before saying, “It depends on how you define ‘bad.’” One partner told me, “Everyone said I should watch out. But I didn’t think that. I just wanted to know if you were going to do your job.” Another officer was more blunt: “I don’t care what you’re going to write. What’s the worst you’re going to say? That I sleep on the job? Oh well. Yeah, I do and so do you.” On a quiet midnight shift, who doesn’t?

Certainly, as in any situation, I was accepted by some more than others. While writing a book wasn’t a problem per se, being college-educated and politically liberal did affect some people’s attitude toward me. In the police station one young, conservative, white police officer asked me, “How can you be a cop and be a liberal? . . . Oh that’s right, you’re not a cop, you’re just here to get your PhD.” In the academy one instructor confronted me by saying, “You’re probably one of those smart cops who hangs in those fancy coffee shops wired to the Internet. [You] think you’re too good for Dunkin’ Donuts!”

At times, colleagues went out of their way to help my data collection. One African American colleague proposed a working title for my book: “The Pits of Hell of East Baltimore.”

The same officer got on the radio once to announce a foot chase. After the dispatcher's repeated prompting, it became obvious that the officer, panting and exhausted, had no clue where he was. Finally, between gasps for breath, the officer earnestly responded with a description so useless it was hilarious: "I'm in an alley, it's dark, and there's a lot of trash." A colleague wrote this down and gave it to me later so it wouldn't be forgotten.

My work style, influenced by my aversion to court, was not to go out seeking adventure or arrests. I saw my strengths in dealing well with people, calming situations, and writing good reports. As my sergeant put it, "Pete's not a fireball on the street, but he's got his act together." My arrest totals—between zero and eight per month—were lower than those of many rookies but higher than most veterans'. I could handle action but looked forward to slow nights. Bad weather keeps people inside and the radio quiet. I was more than happy to get paid to read the newspaper. My primary goal, as with most police officers, was to return home safely every day.

Living in Baltimore City, I was required to carry my gun both on and off duty. I never fired a shot outside of training. Only rarely was my service weapon—a charged semiautomatic nine-millimeter Glock 17 with no safety and a seventeen-round clip—pointed at somebody.¹⁴ But in my police duties, my gun was very routinely removed from its holster, probably every other shift. I did occasionally chase people down alleys and wrestled a few suspects. I maced one person but did not hit anybody. As a police officer, I tried to speak softly and carry a big stick. The department issued a twenty-nine-inch straight wooden baton just for this purpose. I brought it along to all my calls.

In any account of police work, inevitably the noncriminal public, the routine, and the working folks all get short shrift. Police don't deal with a random cross-section of society, even within the areas they work. And this book reflects that. The ghetto transcends stereotypes. Families try to make it against the odds. Old women sweep the streets. People rise before dawn to go to work. On Sundays, ladies go to church wearing beautiful hats and preachers preach to the choir. But if you're looking for stereotypes, they're there. Between the vacant and abandoned buildings you'll find liquor stores, fast food, Korean corner stores, and a Jewish pawnshop. Living conditions are worse than those of third-world shantytowns: children in filthy apartments without plumbing or electricity, entire homes put out on eviction day, forty-five-year-old great-grandparents, junkies not raising their kids, drug dealers, and everywhere signs of violence and despair.

As a middle-class white man policing the ghetto, I should address the charge of "exoticism," that I use poor residents for my own advantage.¹⁵ I plead no contest. If you're not from the ghetto, and though it may not be politically correct to say so, the ghetto *is* exotic. One field-training officer accused me of being "*fascinated* by the ghetto." I am. There are very few aspects of urban life that don't fascinate me. But it is not my intent to sensationalize the ghetto. This is a book about police.

If you want to read about the ghetto, good books are out there.¹⁶ Ghettos are diverse and encompass many cultures and classes. Some object to the very term "ghetto." I use the word because it is the vernacular of police officers and many (though by no means all) of the residents. If you really want to learn about the ghetto, go there. There's probably one

near you. Visit a church; walk down the street; buy something from the corner store; have a beer; eat. But most important, talk to people. That's how you learn. When the subject turns to drugs and crime, you'll hear a common refrain: "It just don't make sense."

Twenty months in Baltimore wasn't very long, but it was long enough to see five police officers killed in the line of duty. And there were other cops, friends of mine, who were hurt, shot, and lucky to live. A year after I quit the force, my friend and academy classmate became the first Baltimore policewoman killed in the line of duty, dying in a car crash on the way to back up another police officer.

Crystal Sheffield patrolled opposite me in the Western District. Occasionally I would switch my radio over to the Western District channel to see what she was up to. When she died, I returned to Baltimore, hitched a ride in a police car from the train station to the funeral, and stood in the cold rain at attention in my civilian clothes with my uniformed fellow officers. Police funerals are one of the few events that bring together law enforcement personnel. Funerals give meaning to that often clichéd concept of Blue Brotherhood. At an officer's funeral, police-car lights flash as far as the eye can see. Thousands of police officers wearing white gloves and black bands on their badges stand at attention. Guns are fired in salute. Bagpipes are played. A flag is folded. The coffin is lowered into the ground.

At the end of a police funeral, a dispatcher from headquarters calls for the fallen officer over all radio channels. The response, of course, is silence. After the third attempt the dispatcher states the officer is "10-7." Ten-seven is the rather unsentimental radio code for "out of service." Ten-seven usually refers to a car, an officer handling a call, or an

anonymous murder victim on the street. To hear your friend and colleague described as 10-7 is heartbreaking. In this way the few officers left working the streets know the burial is complete.

A few seconds later a routine drug call is dispatched or one bold officer reclaims the radio airwaves for some mundane police matter. A car stop. A warrant check. A request for a case number. The show goes on. *Sometimes it just don't make sense.*

CHAPTER 2

Back to School: The Police Academy

Do you find yourself being slowly sucked
into the oppressive right-wing conspiracy?

—*Eastern District sergeant to the author*

Just before I started at the Baltimore police academy, as I unceremoniously collected my first installment of police uniform and equipment in two large black plastic garbage bags, one quartermaster officer warned me that everything I would learn in the academy is “bullshit.”¹ The second quartermaster officer said it was a shame to see kids raised by parents who couldn’t raise them, with chicken bones and garbage all over the house, and have it all paid for by the taxpayer. He said, “I don’t want to name any ‘nationalities,’ you can figure out what I’m talking about.” “You ain’t going to change them,” the first said. “Just make sure they don’t change you,” I responded. Both officers were older white men and very burned-out. I wondered what they had done to end up working in the windowless basement of police headquarters.

Such was my introduction to the police academy. For those visiting Baltimore, the police academy can be associated with the amusing sight of pained trainees chanting politically correct cadence while jogging in formation through the Inner Harbor. Yet even the blandest cadence (Everywhere we go/ People want to know/Who we are/So we tell them/We’re the P.D./The mighty mighty P.D./The Baltimore P.D.)

COP IN THE HOOD

My Year Policing Baltimore's
Eastern District

PETER MOSKOS

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON AND OXFORD

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