

Letters Never Written

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The form of this autoethnography is a set of letters that were never written. The letters tell a story of personal experience to convey content, underlying perspectives, and overarching topics. This story positions you to be an active reader, thinking and feeling on your own stories and experiences. If you have loved. If you have struggled. If you have questioned. If you have wanted. This story is intended to evoke, provoke, or unsettle.

Dear Reader,

The letters you are about to read depict a one-way conversation between my father and me. The events are real, only the conversation never took place, as you will come to understand. These are my *letters never written* and they tell parts of my story. You have your stories too, dozens, maybe even hundreds of them.

These are letters I never wrote and they are words I'll never speak. I have created them here as an autoethnography that combines the scientific methodology of ethnography with personal experience and storytelling in ways that are creative and aesthetic, in order to reach people on multiple levels of consciousness (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

The pages of each letter you will read are crinkled with the struggles of attempting to apply the emotional and analytical demands of this form of writing. I have written two letters to you, dear reader: this one at the beginning, and a second one at the end in order to situate this work within existing literature and to help you know how I made certain decisions. The aesthetic choices behind these letters are in part to ensure that I do not clutter or disrupt your reading experience (McNiff, 2017).

The following letters, never written, are stacked like unopened mail; the newest on top, the oldest at the end, and you are invited to scrape away at the truths and complexities that may reveal themselves to you. I have intentionally written these letters using my own natural way of speaking while using the first-person voice to prevent an "emotional distance" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 82). As you read the letters never written, I hope you will feel my use of vulnerability with purpose (Leavy, 2017) and also discover your own.

Sincerely,
The Author

Dear Dad,

Guess what? I'm back in school! Just one more time, and if things go right we'll have a doctor in the family. Okay, not the kind of doctor you care about, but then you never really believed in medical doctors either. I've moved to a new city, further away from the family again – the East side of the country this time. It probably seems to you like I'm always moving, but I like it. I don't mean to say that it's easy, because it's not. The faces are different, the streets are a jumble, the whole rhythm is off for a while. But then you get to know some of the faces, the streets all start to have names, and the rhythm comes. Before long it even gets to be too familiar and it's time to move on, to new people and places, and new challenges. This stop will definitely be a challenge. I know you can't understand why I don't come home, you've said as much many times before, but home doesn't mean for me what it did for you.

Maybe everything I've just written feels like an insult to you and your experience. I always got the impression you didn't want to leave your home and your family when you did. How old were you, 16 or so? That's pretty young, not even finished school. From the couple of stories you used to tell me, I know they needed you to leave because it cost money to feed you and your family couldn't. You went and apprenticed in the capital city and after that, you started working because you had to. Then, when you had to leave the country, well, sometimes I felt that having to escape your country made you angry and having to come to this country made you resentful. Yet I come and go as I please. I wonder if that makes you angry or resentful, or both. These experiences we have, you and me, are so very different, and yet still very familiar. It's too bad how late I noticed our similarities.

I'm really excited about school. That feels eerie to say because I've never really liked school, but I'm working with people who believe I have good things to offer, and now it's finally all about topics that matter to me: it's about stories. If everything goes as planned, I think I'll be able to do some of my research "back home", as you often called it, in the country you were born. I'll get to hear stories from young people who live there now, stories about personal struggle and about social justice. You used to tell me life isn't fair. You would say it just like that, with little explanation except the look of accrued experience on your face. Now I have a chance to make people think and start conversations about fairness, and equity, and inclusion, and caring about each other. I don't know if it makes you proud or anything, that I'd want to know more about your home country, where you grew up, but that's my plan. I think the stories that come out of there will teach me and other people a lot, especially when I compare them with my stories from here in Canada, where I've grown up. This will sound weird, but in some ways I feel like we've never had a better relationship than we do now. I think I might even be a more understanding and kinder person, the sort I wish I had been all along. I want my stories to be my way of showing you that I'm not giving up on you.

I'll let mom know we talked.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,
Your Son

Dear Dad,

I had the chance to speak to people today about my stories. I say *my* stories, but I really think it's about our stories, or at least I try as hard as I can to make my stories represent something of your stories. The job I have puts me in a position to work with whole communities while focusing on health and education and the complexities that come with those fields, like the structures in place that prevent people from thriving. I was invited to speak about stories to the group and I thought I could tell you about it.

I'd been preparing for a long time, not because I wasn't ready, but because it's always hard for me to tell my stories. I try to be thoughtful about what I say about you, I want the audience to understand our interactions and I want them to feel something for you. I want them to see the ways we are both neither right nor wrong. I want them to find my experiences relatable, not as a plea for pity or a cry for help, but as real life that happens to people while they try to figure things out. I still try to figure things out. Talking about our circumstances didn't happen when I was a kid and I carried that practice into adulthood. Talking about it in front of an audience makes me unsure, even though I'm sure I want to. Today I made certain not to have anything in my hands, in case they were trembling. I could feel the tension in my legs and I wondered if the people in the crowd could tell that what I was doing was difficult for me. I kind of hope they could. I hope they could feel the struggle that went into every word as a way of honouring your struggles.

I told the audience a little bit about you and me, our relationship, and some of the challenges. I talked about feeling alone, like something is wrong, like there's something wrong with me, or something wrong with you, and nobody can help and nothing will change. I told a story from when I was little. The five o'clock shadow on your face has always been coarse. On good days you would playfully work your scraggly jaw line against the unblemished cheeks of my small face and I would wiggle with laughter while I tried to escape your playful but powerful arms. I would look forward to seeing you on these days. On the bad days, your face felt like sandpaper against mine and the smell of your breath would choke my senses when it came near, and there was a notable absence of laughter or play as I sat still and quiet, as though in the arms of a stranger. On these days I would learn to keep out of sight and hope for tomorrow to be different. Eventually most days become like these days. And after that I stopped hoping. I've never told you that story before.

I told them what it feels like to be voiceless. I told them because I already know that they understand what that feels like, they might even be feeling it in that moment that I'm with them and I just want them to hear me say it out loud. I want them to know that they aren't alone, that there isn't anything wrong with them. As I talked I saw their heads nodding, their circumstances might be different, the people involved unique to their own lives, but their understanding is just the same. I told them the value of a story. The way we each have them, dozens, maybe even hundreds of them, and they offer a way of understanding who we are and how we interact with the world. They provide us with a voice and we can choose how to use our voices. To say these things feels good, a relief, a release, a reason to let go. I continue by saying to the audience that we can offer stories in empathy and care for one another, we can use them to identify and call out injustice that we see or experience, and we can use them to discuss creating conditions for people and communities to thrive. My legs were strong when I said these things, the weight gone from my shoulders.

A man from the audience came up to me after I finished speaking. He offered his hand and remarked only that what I said took guts, and at that moment I realized why I felt exhausted. He thanked me and

walked away. A woman approached and talked to me of her relationship with her father. A moment later she was replaced by another woman, who offered me a hug and told me a story about her extended family. Still another person came to me and asked a question about you. A close friend who was in the audience approached me when the others had cleared and I felt relief to see her smile and feel her reassuring hand on the back of my shoulder; she knew I was exhausted too, but invigorated by the audience response.

It's already been so many years for you and me, and it can be really easy to forget. The stories I tell are in part a way for us to stay connected, a way for me to intentionally think about you and just maybe make some things right between us.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,
Your Son

Dear Dad,

It's been a while since I've written. I started back at school just recently. Yes, again. For the first time, I want to be in school. I'm studying education, but not the brick-and-mortar type of education that most people think of when I say I'm studying education. I'm interested in what the purpose of education is in society, how we go about it, and how it is connected to other aspects of society, like culture, history, health, economics, and equity. More than that, I want to explore how education might be a tool to make life better, to ask for and receive the best out of humanity. I think humanity was never a big interest of yours, maybe because you thought humanity never cared much about you so why care about it? I know you cared about individual people, often the ones who most needed someone to care. And really, I believe in that, too.

I want to help other people, especially young people, tell their stories about their lives; their struggles, their suffering, their hopes, their families, their friends, their schooling, their difficult choices, their relocations, anything they want to talk about, really. I bet you can relate, and if you wrote down your stories I think other people would want to read them. They might see themselves inside them, or the stories might shake them into seeing themselves through fresh eyes, or even understand the world in a more involved kind of way. That's my hope anyway. To connect people to their own stories, their stories to the broader culture, and then connect people to a vision for a better future. I don't know if that sounds impossible to you, but I learned from your example to appreciate a challenge.

You've always had to work really hard physically to make a living and expected the same for me, which made it seem like the kind of work I do wasn't really work in your eyes. I can remember a long-ago Saturday, when I was still in high school and you enlisted my help for the day. I did mostly odd jobs of carrying things and cleaning around you as you functioned, and by the end of the work I could feel the day's labour seeped into my skin, filling my nose, and making my teenage muscles ache. Still caked in effort, we sat to dinner having washed only our hands when mom asked us how it went. Your uncovered response was that I had worked hard and the pride with which you said it was unfamiliar to me. All I could think was how fleeting I knew the moment would be.

I want you to know I'm really inspired by the work I do. When I first started my career, I thought I could just solve peoples' problems, one by one. Teach this kid to read, be a mentor to that one, create a safe space for these ones here. I felt like I was telling them in what ways they needed my help as if there was something wrong with them, and that got tiring for everyone. It caused me to think about who I am and who I want to be as a person, I would think about you and me, and I would think about the communities I've been part of, and the complicated lives we lead. All of us have our stories, I would think to myself, and those never seem to get told. I'm going back to school to work hard and spend time thinking about how we can tell more stories and how we can share those stories in ways that can contribute to real change. I wonder what might be different if someone had been around to help you tell your stories.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,

Your son

Dear Dad,

I just wanted to let you know that the funeral went well. The casket was nice, well-built and heavy. I helped carry it. Mom and the girls were strong, and people were good to them, respectful and kind. There were so many people there. A few of them, people I didn't recognize, stopped me once they recognized me as your son. They told me stories about how you helped them and their families, especially in the early days, coming over to this country and getting settled. Some of them you helped to learn the language, some you helped with finding their way around town or finding a job, some you helped with money even though you had little yourself. They talked to me as though I'd probably heard these stories before, but I hadn't. There are likely dozens, maybe even hundreds of them that I'll never hear.

We buried you today and I'm curious if you were able to hear the things I said at the service. I did my best. I don't know if it's right or wrong, but it felt like the most respectful thing I could do was to tell both sides, the love and the struggles. I've never talked about either before. Not out loud, to other people. Two nights ago, I lay restless in the middle of the night, thinking about what I might say. An old song played in my head. It was one that I'd recognize from the very first downbeat every time and always reminded me of you. Like most songs this one told a story. It rhymed of home, and struggle, and loneliness, and courage, of growing up, of falling down, and of carrying on. That's the story of you and me that I tried to tell today.

It was pretty hard to do, but it helped me, and I hope that maybe what I said helped a few other people. I can't help but think maybe I could have said something over the years that would have helped you too. So long in the making, and yet it all ended so fast. I hope it didn't hurt too much. If there's anyone who would have put up with the pain without complaint, I know that you would have. I'm glad you don't have to put up with the pain anymore.

I could make it seem like I held my composure, but in the quiet moments when I thought no one was looking the complicated sadness leaked out and sometimes felt like it would never stop. Catching me in one of these private moments, someone said to me that if each of us carries a little piece of the grief then we'll all find our way through it. I hope they are right.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,
Your Son

Dear Dad,

Sitting in the chair next to you today, while you lay there drinking juice through a straw, in the bed we set up for you in the living room, I had already decided that I would not do anything in the remaining time to intentionally make this more painful for you. I can't even begin to imagine what you're thinking or feeling, and I want to know so badly what this is like for you. I think that the best I have to offer is just to be a caring son while I still can, that maybe if I can sneak in this memory of me into your mind it'll replace some of the other memories we've built over the years. Just a few months ago I lived a plane ride away and in some ways I'm grateful to have this fragment of time in person. Just a few months ago neither of us imagined that we'd be sitting here with this hospital bed in the middle of the living room, drinking juice through a straw.

There might be a small part of me that wants to say, *see, I told you so! How did you not know this would happen?* But that is just an emotional way of saying that I wish things were different. I wish a lot of things were different. I'm sure no one wishes that more than you so who am I to say it. I can't tell if you are in any pain, your face remains as square and stoic as I remember it, and you don't say a lot. I see my face in yours, not only for the shape and contours, but for what it reveals and conceals. Sipping your juice looked like a chore and made you seem small and exposed. Maybe a part of me didn't want to start an in-depth conversation with you because I don't want to know for myself the kind of son I've been in your eyes. Taking a sip from the straw, you worked hard to barely move so there must be pain. Maybe pain everywhere.

Your eyes widened for a moment to prepare to speak. You told me matter-of-factly that I was wrong to move away from home and within an instant, I felt myself getting ready to fight, bed and straw and sickness be damned. We argued for years at the top of our lungs and yet living at home involved participating in silencing ourselves, pretending that tomorrow will be different. In one way, it's the solitude and the self-dependence that gives me the strength to take on new challenges in new cities whenever I feel the need. In another way, it's the isolation and acceptance of circumstances that drives me to rove to new communities so that I can interact with others with a sense of purpose and meaning. I might never stop moving. But today I held on to the promise I made myself; I will not intentionally make this more painful for you than it has to be, so I deflected. Maybe I'm kidding myself and the promise is just my way of giving up on you again. A relief, a release, a reason to let go.

I wish for some ability to bring you peace because we haven't much time, but no such words come when they might be helpful and instead we revert to what we do best, sitting mostly in silence and hoping that tomorrow will be different. Despite my intentions I feel I've broken my promise and caused you more pain.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,
Your Son

Dear Dad,

I know we don't talk much anymore, you usually pass the phone to mom right away and I don't call very often, but I wanted you to be the first to know that after all these years away I'm finally moving closer! Okay, it's not exactly close, still a six-hour drive, but at least I'll be able to make the drive for those family events that I've missed so many times. And it's the capital city, you know what it's like to move to the capital of a country. Don't tell my sisters, but part of the reason I decided to move closer is because I know they're thinking about having children soon and I'd like to spend some time with them both before their lives start to change beyond recognition. When we were kids we spent a lot of time together, but we really didn't get to know each other that well as people, and it has just gotten harder and harder as adults. Sometimes I think all of us, the whole family, is stuck in the relationships we had with each other decades ago. I don't know why, I just think maybe things can be a little different now. Maybe I am different now.

I start my new job as soon as I get into town. I know you call my work "babysitting" but I like it. I work hard, and I do a good job. I get to meet a lot of people, families especially, and help them however I can. I'll be down to see the family before long. Plan on early Spring sometime, around Mom's birthday. You didn't seem yourself when I saw you over the holidays and I hope you're feeling better.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,
Your Son

Dear Dad,

I wanted to let you know, now that I've finished university I'm moving to the West side of the country! University was an okay experience mostly, and it was good for me to be away on my own, but I'm glad to be finished with school forever! At least that's what I'm telling myself right now. I'm thankful for the opportunity, but school never seems to lead me anywhere that I want to go. I'm eager to get a job and start making a living for myself. While I was in university I began working with children. First volunteering to help them learn to read, then paid work in recreation programs, then working with kids who have special needs. Turns out, with a little bit of patience, I'm pretty good at what I do. It feels nice to be good at something. I don't know what it is, maybe that I genuinely care about the people I'm working with. Sometimes it's a lot easier to care about strangers than it is the people who are supposed to be closest to you. I like helping people, and I want to be able to help children and teenagers wherever I go and whatever I do. Maybe it sounds a little corny, but I want to see if I can make a difference in peoples' lives, help make their lives a little less difficult. I can't wait to see what things are like out on the coast! It might be a while before we see each other again.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,
Your Son

Dear Dad,

Today is my birthday. I'm 16 now. You and I talked in the backyard last week, and it was weird because we never talk. When we do talk it usually grows into arguing pretty fast, but lately we seem to understand this pattern and so we mostly just avoid each other. It was weird too, because I could tell you were there – maybe not all there, but our eyes could connect and the things we were saying were heard and understood. It's been a long time since that's happened, and so when you asked me what I wanted for my birthday, I thought I'd take my shot. I haven't celebrated my birthday since I was nine. Somehow birthdays, or any events for that matter, never seemed like they went right in our family so I stopped having them. I never felt much like celebrating. But you remembered that my birthday was coming so I told you what I wanted. If you can't remember now, I said that what I want, all any of us in the family want, is for you to quit drinking. It doesn't take a genius to know that was a stupid thing to ask, and unfair for me to put you in that position, to make it all seem so simple, so easy, and all on you to do or not do. But when you shook your head from side to side, it was hard to handle and I took it personally. I had to ask you another question to make sure you understood what I had asked and maybe to give you a chance to give what I thought was the right answer this time. It is my birthday after all, isn't it? I asked loud enough so I'd know you could hear me clear, *aren't I more important to you than alcohol?* It was another unfair question, maybe more than the last one, but I just wanted to hear you say, yes, of course I'm more important to you. It was dark outside when we were talking in the backyard, nobody around but you and me, and quiet as could be. It only took you a second to reply. No, was all you said.

I think it's only right for me to tell you that in the silent and awkward ending of our conversation, I made a decision. I have to give up on you, dad. I'm sorry to say it, but it also feels good, a relief, a release, a reason to let go. The thing is, I believe you. I believe you when you say that you're not going to stop drinking, and I believe you when you say just how important it is to you. I respect you for being honest, as much as I hate it too. What I see now is that there's nothing for me here, and nothing that I can do for you. There are no arguments we can have, no reasoned discussions to work through, no hidden stashes of alcohol to take and pour down the drain, no fact sheets, doctors, or helpline numbers, no grades or jobs or accomplishments I can achieve to make you proud by, none of it will change anything. I don't believe anymore that tomorrow will be different. I have to give up on you, I guess the family too, and I'm leaving. I'm 16 today so you'll still see me around. But I won't fight with you, I won't be surprised by anything anymore, and I won't give you any more trouble, you'll hardly even notice me. I'm tired of high school and I don't belong there, so I'll finish up as fast as possible, and after that the first chance I get I'm leaving. This isn't an easy thing to admit to you, that I'm giving up, but you were honest with me, so I thought that I should be just as honest with you, you know, man to man.

These are the letters never written, the words I'll never speak,
Your son

Dear Reader,

The letters never written share what it was like for me to live certain experiences as well as my before-and-after evolution as a person, while I worked to make sense of life and arrive at who I am now: still a work in progress (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I have styled my writing with the purpose of ushering you further into each scene. Through the telling of complicated relationships, isolation, and struggle, I gain agency over the experiences and communicate them with you as a means for connection about the physical world and how life is lived (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). By opening the densities of each situation to you, I am welcoming you to see pieces of my perspective while also applying your own.

The letters never written are meant to help expand available narratives by providing what Muncey (2010) calls “the missing story” (p. 6) of everyday lives, of struggle and resistance that challenge accepted dominant narratives. For me, autoethnography is a way “to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764) because we find solace and new directions within them.

Autoethnography simultaneously looks outward at the world and inward at the lived story with the intention of inviting the reader and evoking a response (Schwandt, 2014). It blends autobiography with ethnography by “reflexively writing the self into and through the ethnographic text” (Denzin, 2014, p. 22) in a way that “critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710). The process “puts meaning into motion” (p. 106) through shared experiences that move beyond the page and into dialogue about broader society (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I like autoethnography because part of what drives me is to evoke, provoke, and unsettle (Leavy, 2017). Let me explain what I mean.

To evoke is about me. Autoethnography evokes self-reflection (Leavy, 2016) and is part of a shift toward the hard-to-look-at aspects of our lives: the suffering, injustice, trauma, subjectivity, and feelings of loss (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). These letters never written are part of an ongoing pursuit of meaning and purpose through a return to scenes of my life that left a mark (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I want to invite you in, to let you peek at the world through my eyes. I want to evoke a connection between you and me, a conversation between reader and author (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Looking together at how I’ve tried to steer my lived experience might be a starting ground for us to continue the conversation we’re only just beginning.

To provoke is about you. Autoethnography helps me to know myself, but it also helps me to know others. I hope that you will be able to seek meaning and empathy within the human experiences of suffering and trauma (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), and that my stories may provoke in you the freedom to believe that you have stories worth telling (Ellis, 2004). Our bonds, person-to-person, thicken when we see ourselves in each other’s experience.

To unsettle is about us. We start with introspection and self-reflexive storytelling: first me, then you, but then we step forward together with the thoughtful examination of humanity and the promotion of social justice (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Together we can disrupt or unsettle accepted norms, practices, and prejudices of culture, and prompt self-reflection, social awareness, and social change (Leavy, 2017).

Part of the purpose of autoethnography is to touch peoples’ hearts (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and indeed it has touched mine as both a reader and an author/researcher. Sharing stories of our lived experiences demands showing the struggles and the successes, including considering how people in our lives might be impacted (Ellis, 2007). This ethical burden is not lifted when writing about people who have died, and

in fact can amplify the dilemmas faced because there is no one from whom to get permission, or clarify experiences or meaning from experiences (Ellis, 2007). My letters never written are therefore coated with the tension between maintaining trust and respect for my father and writing what I feel is necessary for my own construct of self, as well as for the most complete artistic presentation for your needs as the reader (Ellis, 2007; McNitty, 2017).

To navigate these tensions, I have employed Ellis' (2007) *relational ethics* (p. 4) that calls for researchers to be true to themselves while also taking responsibility for impact they may have on others. I have performed role taking (Ellis, 2007), putting myself in my father's role to gauge my ethical responsibilities. I have followed the research precept to write for participants as much as about them (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), writing with that "double perspective" in mind (Denzin, 2013, p.7), attempting to honour my relationship with my father as well as to report my experiences.

The letters never written are meant to capture what could be in the future, rather than focusing only on what was or was not (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Jardine, McCaffrey, and Gilham (2014) suggest that suffering is a key part of authentic and meaningful acts of teaching and learning, and so I have tried to convey threads of struggle and pain in the letters never written. The self-expression I've employed has been carefully and primarily constructed as a mechanism for inquiry in the purposeful avoidance of self-absorption and triviality (McNitty, 2017). My attempt has been to name and to ease collective burdens within the stories and implicitly point towards a future that can be different.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) suggest that evocative autoethnography should resist conventional social science or storytelling writing and structure, urging authors to take risks that embrace messiness and incompleteness of lived experience. At times, I have provided detailed descriptions to allow the particular rather than the general to evoke a response (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), and at other times, I have chosen to reveal details in layers while also leaving you with ambivalences and mixed feelings in order to mirror the lived experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Throughout this work I have aimed to take artistic freedoms with formatting while using simple and concise language and descriptions in order to deepen your interaction with the story that navigates complex and imperfect human experiences (McNiff, 2017). Clear and accessible format and language are especially crucial when part of the intention is to instigate change (Quaye, 2007). I have prioritized the standard McNiff (2017) calls "trustworthiness" (p. 33) within arts-based research that demands research design and presentation to be useful, influential, and convincing, while also aesthetically pleasing.

I have considered carefully what I want you, dear reader, to take from this work (McNiff, 2017). By writing and sharing with you the letters never written, I want to practice the process of autoethnography, and to offer this one example as an invitation to also find your own stories (McNiff, 2017). When we give space to the difficulties and we name the challenges of being alive, we remove them from their hiding spots and we take authorship over stories in order to progress forward disruptively (Jardine, McCaffrey & Gilham, 2014). Autoethnography provides a tool to thoughtfully connect the experience and analysis of the vulnerable self with observing and revealing the broad effects of that experience (Ellis, 2007). Ultimately, "autoethnographies show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). I will continue to struggle with these same challenges and invite others to join with me (and my dad) as we evoke, provoke, and unsettle together.

Sincerely,

The Author

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