

This book covers the first ten years of my Border Patrol career. I try to keep it light and easy reading. These stories will give you, the reader, a feeling of what is involved in being a Border Patrol Agent.

A Life On The Line

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# **A LIFE ON THE LINE**

***Stories of Service in the Border***

***Patrol***

***1970s – 1990s***

**By**

**Darryl Rambo**

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## **CHAPTER 4**

### **On The Job**

I start work as a trainee in El Paso today, November 4, 1974. Actually my first day was yesterday, Sunday, November 3, but this is my first day on duty. I'm working the day shift with a guy named Lester Franks. We're covering the Ascarate Park area, and so far we've caught a few Mexicans trying to enter the United States illegally. They all just give up and get in the vehicle. We're on our way to the Paso Del Norte (PDN) Bridge, where the Border Patrol maintains a holding cell and a write-up area.

We arrive at the bridge, and Lester grabs several Standard Form I-213's. Information on the form includes name, date of birth, place of birth, height, weight, hair color, where and how they crossed the river into the U.S., mother and father's names, etc.. This speaking and understanding Spanish is the hard part. I stutter, stammer, and wrack my brain for the correct words to ask these questions.

It seems like its taking hours for me to write up my share of the aliens. We caught six, so my share is three. Lester finishes his easily, and now he's just sitting there watching me. Whenever I get really stuck, he helps me, but I have to ask for it, and even then he only gives me hints.

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I've been thinking for a while now that I'm going to have to sleep here. The situation I'm in here seems to be fun for everyone but me. For instance, when I ask the first one his name, (In Spanish, "Como se llama" means, "What is your name?" or literally, "How are you called?"), I make the mistake of asking, "Como me llamo?" which means, "What's my name?" Everybody's laughing, which makes me even more self-conscious. Even the aliens are laughing. It's a good thing that these are just simple Entry Without Inspection's (EWI's), and not smuggling cases, or I might be here for my entire career with these three aliens.

Tuesday is a post academy training day. Every Tuesday and Friday, from this day on, until the five and a half month exams are given, will be devoted to training, Spanish and law, after that it will be every Thursday until the ten month exams.

Up until now we've had minimal training as far as speaking Spanish is concerned. The Post Academy Training is devoted almost entirely to speaking Spanish; of course, there are the law courses as well. We will have exactly one month to get prepared for the five and a half month exams. I spend most of that time processing illegal aliens at the PDN Bridge.

I don't feel as if I'm getting much better at it, but I keep trying. I'm still having a lot of trouble with my hands; they're just too stiff to write fast enough, and I know there isn't anyone who would buy that excuse, so I just keep plugging away.

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Where has all the time gone? Here it is December 3, the day we all take the Law Exam. I'm not worried about law; I'll pass that with flying colors. A few of the guys have pretty low grades, but they will probably pass. I think there's only one guy that might fail the Law Test.

Sure enough we all pass except for one, and nobody expected him to pass.

December 5, is Spanish Exam day. The manner in which agents are tested goes like this: You have a couple of Chief Patrol Agents or at least one Chief Patrol Agent, and one Assistant Chief Patrol Agent that do the testing. One of the two plays the part of the illegal alien, and the other one monitors the testing and reviews the evaluations done by the journeymen agents on the trainee. The one that plays the illegal alien does not speak anything but Spanish after the testing has begun, and the other one does not speak at all. If you have any questions concerning the test, they have to be asked in Spanish and answered in Spanish.

The test itself contains forty questions, plus the jurat (an affidavit, by the officer, showing by whom, when, and before whom it was sworn to). The jurat should take about three to four minutes to read, if there are no mistakes. If there are mistakes, you have to go back and correct them, and that takes precious time.

The first twenty questions are the questions from the Form I-213, which I've explained above. These questions are pretty familiar to me by this time and not nearly as difficult as the second set of twenty questions

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that come after the jurat is read. These questions pertain to a smuggling case, and almost anything can be expected to appear in these questions.

The questions themselves are written in English and are to be translated into Spanish. The answers are given in Spanish and are to be recorded in English below the questions.

The jurat is written in English and is to be translated into Spanish. The exam must be completed in one hour. If there is one word in the question that I do not know, I will not be able to ask the question. If I'm unable to ask the question, I will not get an answer. So if that should happen I will lose both the question and the answer.

I don't suppose it's possible, but the testing seems like both the longest and the shortest hour I have ever spent in my life.

When the hour is up, I go out in the hall and wait for the testing officers to grade the test. Thirty minutes later they called me back in, have me sit down, and tell me I have failed the test.

That's right; I got a sixty eight. They tell me it will be up to the Chief Patrol Agent to decide whether I stay or go. They tell me he will probably take into consideration the grade on my Law Exam, the evaluations made by the journeymen agents that I have worked with, and the report given to him by the post academy training officers.



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There are about five of us that did not pass the test. Most of us are in about the same boat, except for Trainee Binder; he failed both tests. The officers terminate him on the spot. Binder has been a member of the United States Capitol Police Corp, and he's made the statement many times that they cannot fire him because he has already obtained journeyman status.

He's been given two weeks notice and a recommendation to the U.S. Customs Service. They tell me he will be hired right away, that it happens routinely. When the Border Patrol terminates a trainee for failure to pass the exams, the trainee is almost always picked up by U.S. Customs or by the U.S. Immigration Service.

Many people believe the U.S. Border Patrol and the U.S. Immigration Service is one and the same. They are not. They are, along with DEA and the FBI, individual agencies under the Department Of Justice.

The Immigration Service operates the U.S. Ports Of Entry. The U.S. Border Patrol covers all of the areas between the Ports Of Entry.

In other words, if you come into the U.S. legally or illegally through one of the Ports Of Entry, or if you apply for citizenship or resident alien status, you will talk to an Immigration Inspector. If you attempt to come in illegally, without going through a Port Of Entry, a Border Patrol Officer will arrest you (This is how it was in 1974, today they are all under the Homeland Security).

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It's been a week now since the test, and I'm being called into Chief Nelson's Office. I'm in uniform, with my nametag in full view.

He asks me, "What is your name?"

I look down at my name-tag to make sure it's still there, and I say "Darryl Rambo."

"Are you married," he says.

I look down again to see if I have lost my wedding ring, nope it's still there.

"Yes sir, I'm married."

"Do you have any children?"

"Yes, sir, I have four children."

"Well, Mr. Rambo, it doesn't look to me as though you're trying very hard."

I stand ramrod straight, look him square in the eye, and say nothing, but I'm thinking, You stupid son-of-a-bitch, I've dragged my family 1600 miles, put everything I have on the line, spent 5 months at the academy without seeing my family, and you say I'm not trying. You have all my paper work in front of you, but you obviously haven't looked at it, or you would know my name and know that I am married and have four children.

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He went on, "I'd think a man with a wife and family would put out a little effort to try to keep this job, or maybe you don't care if you keep this job. Is that it, Mr. Rambo?"

"No, Sir, I want very much to keep this job."

"Well, Mr. Rambo, if you expect to keep this job, you're going to have to put out a lot more effort than you have been doing."

"Yes, Sir, I've already hired a tutor to help me with my Spanish."

"If you don't show a lot of improvement within a very short time, Mr. Rambo, we're going to have to let you go. Your post academy instructor, Mr. Simons will keep me posted. Good day, Mr. Rambo."

"Good day, Sir."

OK! I'm not terminated, so it's back to work I go. My tutor's name is Mrs. Esperanza, and she was a Spanish Instructor at the U.S.B.P. Academy when it was located in El Paso many years ago. She's very good and gives me a lot more personal attention than I'm getting from the post academy training course.

I'm going to see Mrs. Esperanza twice a week now for two hours, and the post academy is still twice a week. It's getting to be a pretty busy schedule.

The job is becoming more interesting though, as I progress. The more I'm able to speak to the people, the

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easier and the more interesting the work becomes. I'm finding that almost everyone has a sad story and a very good reason for coming into the United States.

Of course, it doesn't make any difference; I still have to put illegal aliens back across the border because they don't have the proper paper work. Stepping on peoples dreams like this is very difficult for me, even though what they are doing is illegal.

When I first entered the Border Patrol, I did not believe in borders. I only took the job because it offered a lot more security than I had in the woods. I used to feel that people should be able to go wherever they want to go and not have to worry about imaginary lines in the sand. I've been having a real struggle with my integrity.

I've given it a great deal of thought lately, and I'm changing my mind. If we lived in an ideal world, there would be no need for borders, but we do not. We have all different kinds of governments throughout the world. Some governments are very oppressive; some are very liberal, etc.. If the people in these other countries want the kind of life we have in the USA, they will have to fight for it, just as our ancestors fought for ours, and we have fought to preserve it. If that means revolution in their countries, so be it; it's what had to happen here. Whatever happens, the change has to take place in their country, or nothing will ever change. We cannot continue to take these people in forever; even our country is not big enough for that.

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Another thing that should be considered is we have a very liberal immigration quota. If we allow people to come in illegally it is not fair to those who apply to immigrate legally. It takes several years, in some cases, for those who apply legally to ever get into the U.S., to even start their residency requirements. If we allow those who come in illegally to just remain here and eventually become citizens without due process, where is the justice in that?

The job is becoming a lot clearer, since I've worked those little details out. Even though it is clear, it still is not easy, and I know that if I were south of that border, I would be doing the very same thing they are doing. I also know though, that if the situation were reversed, they would be doing the same thing I am.

This whole people hunting experience is becoming a game for me, and although it is a life struggle for them, they also consider it a game. Most of them know that if they want into the U.S. bad enough, and if they will just keep trying, eventually they will make it. Whenever they are caught, many of them say, "Pues, mala suerte," which means, "Well, bad luck," and they will try again tomorrow. So let the games begin.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **First Court Case**

Nothing exciting has happened since the exams. It's about four days before Christmas, and my partner John Mohler and I are ready to go home. We are at the PDN write-up room when we get a call informing us that there is a car parked on the bank of the river just west of the head-gates area. This is our assigned area, and no other agents have relieved us yet, so we respond immediately.

We have a night vision scope with us, so we head for the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) parking lot, where we will be able to observe the area where the car is parked without being detected. We set up in the parking lot, and we can see the vehicle and the people very clearly. There are four of them, all males, and they are just milling around the car. They all seem to be drinking something. They have another larger bottle that they're passing around. We are assuming they are drinking beer and passing around a bottle of whisky or tequila.

The car is an older model Chevy, maybe a 68 or 69 model, and the door on the luggage compartment is wide open. We watch for about ten or fifteen minutes, and then we notice a couple of guys wading across the river. The river is only about three feet deep, so it isn't hard for them to do. They come up to the people with the car and seem to be talking with them and having a couple of drinks. We can't tell whether they've brought anything across with

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them, but they all keep hanging around the open luggage compartment.

After about twenty minutes the two guys wade back across the river and disappear. The guys at the car close the luggage compartment, get in the car, and take off to the east. We shut down the night scope, jump in our car, and race to intercept them. When we're almost to the bottom of the Yandell Street overpass, we spot the car we've been watching. It turns onto the Yandell overpass going the opposite direction, so we have to continue to the bottom of the overpass, turn around, and catch it. The guys aren't driving real fast, so we catch them right away.

We have them pull off to the side of the street and stop. Once they are stopped, we pull in behind them and get out of our car. My partner approaches the driver's side of their car, and I stand at the right rear fender where I have a clear view of the inside of the vehicle. I've drawn my revolver, and I'm holding it at my side just in case they're armed.

John asks them where they're from, and they all answer, "El Paso".

"Where were you born", John asks?

"El Paso", they all say. They're all United States citizens, and they are all very drunk. John asks the driver to open the trunk.

"I can't open the trunk", he says.

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"You can open the trunk, and you will open the trunk," John says.

"No sir, I'm serious, I cannot open the trunk," he says. "I do not have a key."

"Where is the key?"

"I was at a party a couple of days ago, and I lost the key".

"Well, I don't care how you open it. Just open it. Or maybe you would rather we open it. We have a tire wrench in the car that I'm sure will open it", says John.

"No, I can take out the back seat, and get in that way".

We know he can open it because it was open down by the river. We figure if he wants to make a game out of it, we'll let him.

Meanwhile one of the guys in the back seat is making quite a scene. He's a big, blond haired, blue-eyed Hispanic and very boisterous. He does not like gringos, he does not like border patrolmen, and he especially does not like gringo border patrolmen.

He comes stumbling out of the back seat of the car screaming, "I have my rights man. You are violating my rights man. I will have your jobs man".



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He comes right at me, and he is bigger than I thought. He's about six foot five inches tall, and weighs about two hundred and twenty five pounds. When he comes at me, I raise my gun up because it's the only thing I have to hit him with, and he's too big for me to wrestle with.

My partner sees what I'm doing and yells, "Don't shoot; don't shoot." Of course, I have no intentions of shooting him, but John doesn't know that. Melendez, the big blond Hispanic, doesn't know that either, so he makes a right turn and heads for John. That's a mistake because John is just as big as Melendez, and John hasn't been drinking. John stretches him out over the trunk lid and holds him there until he shuts up.

I have the other three sit on the sidewalk, so I can handle them. John tells Melendez to sit down with his friends, and he turns to go to the car to call the city police. When John turns his back, Melendez tries to attack him again, but his three friends hold him back. When John gets on the radio, Melendez breaks away from his friends and takes off running down the street. I can't chase him because I have the other three to watch, so John takes off in the car to chase him. They come back a few minutes later with Melendez leaking a little bit of blood from a small cut on his head where he hit the sidewalk when John tackled him. He isn't any quieter, but at least he's handcuffed and in the back seat of the patrol car.

We get the other three up and tell them to start taking the rear seat out of the car. It takes about fifteen minutes. The driver is able to open the trunk from the

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inside; I don't know how he does it. I guess there's an inside latch on this model car. When he gets it open, there isn't anything in it, not even a spare tire. So we tell the three guys who haven't given us any trouble to put it back together and be on their way. We tell them we're going to keep their friend, and we were going to charge him with disorderly conduct when the police arrive. They close the trunk, put the seat back in, and leave.

We wait for nearly a half hour, but the police never do arrive, so we take Melendez over to the jail ourselves. All the way up the stairs, and into the booking room, he's yelling about his rights and how we're picking on him and how he's going to sue us. When we finally get him booked, and put him in the cell, a transformation like I've never seen before takes place. When that cell door goes CLANGGGGG, he actually falls to his knees, and starts crying. I mean great big sobs. He says, "I'm sorry, mister. I'll never do that again. Please, mister, don't lock me up in here." We can still hear him crying as we descend the stairs leaving the building.

The next day we appear in court at 8:00 P.M. The judge asks us what has taken place, and Mohler, being the senior officer, tells him what happened, just as it's written above. Then he asks me if that's the way I saw it, and I say, "Yes, Sir."

He turns to Melendez and says, "What do you have to say for yourself Mr. Melendez?"

Mr. Melendez looks at the judge, who happens to be Hispanic, probably thinking he will be more

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sympathetic toward him, and says, "I didn't do any of those things they say I did. They're just picking on me because I am a Mexican. They say I was drunk, but I only had about two beers."

The judge asks, "Were you born in Mexico, Mr. Melendez?"

"No."

"Were you born in the United States, Mr. Melendez?"

"Yes."

"Then you are an American, Mr. Melendez. Were you alone in the car Mr. Melendez?"

"No, there were three other guys with me."

"Where are they Mr. Melendez?"

"I don't know, Judge; I guess they're at home."

"Were the other three guys Anglos, Mr. Melendez?"

"No, they were Mexi, I mean, Americans just like me."

"Well, Mr. Melendez, it seems strange to me that there were four Hispanic males in the car, but you are the only one picked on for being Hispanic. I find you guilty of disorderly conduct, and I'm going to fine you fifty dollars,

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or give you five days in jail. Do you have fifty dollars, Mr. Melendez?"

"No, but my girlfriend does, I think. Can I talk to her?"

"Is she in the courtroom?"

"Yes."

"Have her come forward, Mr. Melendez."

A young lady comes forward and the judge asks her, "Do you wish to pay this man's fine, young lady?"

"Yes, Your Honor." .

"Very well, case dismissed."

I guess it doesn't amount to much, but it's my first time being on the prosecution side, and I find it very interesting.

## CHAPTER 6

### Poetic Justice

Everywhere the flowers are blooming, trees are beginning to bud, and a new crop of grass is poking out of the ground. Little birds are hatching; baby rabbits and fawns are trying out their little legs. It's springtime across the land.

In El Paso, Texas, the wind is blowing about ninety miles per hour, and the back yards are filled with tumbleweeds that have blown in over the fence. It has been a long day, a very long day. Any day working with Agent Tough Boy Sanchez is a long day. He can get into more trouble by accident than most people can on purpose. We are tired, and our eyes are filled with sand. We decide that we are going to get off on time for a change, and we're headed for the station. We're working the 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. shift, and it's a quarter to four. The children are getting out of school.

We are traveling east on Alameda Street, and Tough Boy is driving. We stop for a red light at Second Street. I'm kind of scooped down in the passenger seat, blankly looking out the right side window toward the ground. I'm trying not to see anything because if I do see something, we'll never get off on time. A car pulls up in the right lane next to us. I'm really not paying any attention, but it's hard not to notice that beat-up right front fender and that right front tire that's as smooth as a baby's behind. I let my tired eyes wander back across the lines of

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that vintage model Chevy, still not paying much attention, but thinking it really is a mess. There are three guys in the car. As my eyes pass over the driver, I notice that he is Hispanic, hasn't shaved for about a week, has long black stringy hair that hasn't seen a comb since the day that car was new, and he is ugly. I mean BUTT ugly. He has a mean, surly look on his face, and the middle finger of his left hand is extended toward me in that time-honored salute. He punches it; with tires smoking he goes right through that red light.

I say, "Awww, Shiiiiit."

Tough Boy says, "God Dammit, I really wanted to get off on time".

We turn on the overheads, and the chase is on.

Tough Boy looks both ways and runs that red light right behind him. We're going about seventy miles per hour down Alameda Street, and he's pulling away from us. We don't want to go any faster because even though Alameda is a wide, five-lane street, there are children going home from school, and it's just too dangerous. I call the El Paso PD, inform them of the situation, give them our location, and ask for their assistance. About that time "Ole Ugly" makes a hard right turn onto a side street. For a minute it looks like he is going turn the car over but then it settles back down on all four wheels again. He only goes about a half a block before he makes a hard left turn into a vacant lot, still going very fast. The vacant lot is unpaved dirt with tumbleweeds and right next to a school.

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There is a high chain link fence between the vacant lot and the school.

We're becoming increasingly nervous, and "Ole Ugly" is becoming increasingly reckless. Tumble weeds and sand are flying thirty feet in the air, as Ugly makes a couple of loops around the vacant lot. We're still right behind him. He exits the lot and heads south on the side street. After about three blocks, he makes another right turn onto a very narrow street. There are cars parked all along this street, and it is impossible to tell if there's anyone between them. If someone steps out from between those cars he or she will be killed for sure. Ugly is going about fifty miles per hour and still accelerating.

Tough Boy says, "That's it. I guess he's going to get away, but I'm not going to chase him any further. If we keep after him, he's going to kill somebody."

We continue on down the street, but at a much slower pace. We see the car make another high speed right turn about three or four blocks ahead of us, and we can see the dust flying as it did at the vacant lot. When we get to the corner, we find the car upside down, smashed against a rock wall, wheels still spinning and dust just starting to settle. Tough Boy and I look at each other and shrug our shoulders, and both of us say at the same time, "Well, we got him stopped." We get out to see how bad it is.

It's hard to tell at first what the situation really is. Things are pretty well scrambled inside that car. Both of the passengers seem to be OK, but we can't tell about the

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driver. The rear seat passenger is a young man about sixteen years old, and he says he's all right.

Tough Boy asks him where he was born. This is the first question any Border Patrol Officer should ask in a situation like this, because if we are not concerned about their citizenship, then we have no reason to be chasing them.

He says, "El Paso."

"Where do you live?"

"Right down the street about five blocks."

The front seat passenger is about twenty five years old, six foot one or two inches tall, weighs about two hundred pounds, and is crying his eyes out.

He says, "I try to make heem slow down, man. I toll heem he wuss gone to keel sumbody, man. I toll heem he wuss gone to keel us, man. He woodn't leesten, man. I theenk he's crazy. Jew know what I mean"?

I go around to the driver's side.

Now this is something I didn't expect. What a surprise. The driver is just a little shrimp. I mean I don't think he's over four foot ten inches tall, and I'll bet he doesn't weigh ninety pounds. He's probably about twenty eight or twenty nine years old. He has broad shoulders, and he must have been sitting on a box or something when he was driving because he appeared to be a fairly



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large guy when he was sitting behind the wheel. Of course, he's still ugly, but he sure doesn't look very mean anymore. Just like his front seat passenger, he's crying too.

"Pleese, man. I deedn't went to hurd enybody. I wuss juss foolin arown, man. I deedn't mean anything, man. I'm sorry I fleep jew off, man".

He has a small cut on his forehead, and he doesn't seem to be able to move his legs. He's dragging himself out of the car through the driver's window. I take hold of his shoulders and help him out of the car. When he's completely out, I can see that the lower half of his body is all shriveled up. He's completely paralyzed from the waist down.

There are several empty beer bottles in the car, and it smells like a brewery. He tells me the reason he lost control of the vehicle is that he missed the brake with the stick and hit the gas pedal instead.

I say, "What do you mean, you missed the brake with the stick; what stick are you talking about?"

He says, "Thees steek," and he reaches in the car and pulls out an ordinary one by two inch stick about three foot long. He says, "Me legs don work, man, so I yoos thees steek to poosh thee paydels".

Oh lordy, am I glad there weren't any children unfortunate enough to have stepped out in front of that vehicle. Can you picture it, a ninety pound invalid, drunk

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on his ass, sitting on a box, using a stick to operate the gas and brake pedals, driving seventy miles per hour, weaving in and out of traffic, running stop signs and red lights, and school children all over the streets.

The El Paso PD shows up at that time. The officers ask us what has taken place. We tell them. They ask us if we want these guys for anything, and we tell them no. Tough Boy says, "We just wanted to ask the young man in the back seat what his citizenship is. He told us he's a United States citizen. That's all we need."

We volunteer to give the young man a ride home if they don't need him for anything. They tell us to go ahead and give him a ride. On the way to his home we give him a little lecture on the kind of company he's keeping. When we get to his home, Tough Boy tells his parents what has happened, and we leave.

As we're pulling away, Tough Boy says, "Poetic Justice isn't it wonderful".

"Yep, my granddad always said, 'Never judge a book by its cover;' now I know what he meant."

This book covers the first ten years of my Border Patrol career. I try to keep it light and easy reading. These stories will give you, the reader, a feeling of what is involved in being a Border Patrol Agent.

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