



Do Not Trust Appearances: My Visit to Deep Springs College

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

The first time I visited Las Vegas was in 1988. The city was far different back then, with an old Western vibe--not at all like the modern strip with all of the new casinos and so forth. Las Vegas, in the late 1980s, was more tired and run down; it was by no means the exciting city it is today.

I am officially changing my license today and becoming a Las Vegas resident. Last night I found a condominium here. There is a massive amount of activity in Las Vegas, which makes it a very exciting place. There are high rises all over the city; there is a great workforce; there are great shows, and there are just so many interesting things to do. I am very impressed by everything going on in the city and think that a lot of work is going to be generated out of Las Vegas in the future. In fact, I think that with all the shows, people, and activity here, the place is likely to rival major cities like New York at some point in the not too distant future.

In the next few days I am planning on moving to Las Vegas and spending at least half my time here starting up a few companies. In these last few days in Las Vegas I have realized exactly how much progress has been made here in the past 20+ years. The city is a completely different place and has become more of a modern metropolis than ever before. The Las Vegas I remember was a place where people went to gamble out West, which had *some* fun elements to it--but it was much different than the current Las Vegas.

Back in the late 1980s, I had come here to visit Deep Springs College. This college was really a commune of sorts, which was in the middle of the desert, a few hours outside of Las Vegas. At that time, the school boasted the highest SAT scores of any college in the United States and it was very small. In fact, if I recall correctly, there were only about 25 students in the entire school, which was itself supported by an endowment. Tuition was free. In order to attend the school, the students were required to take on various jobs on a farm that the school had established in the middle of the desert. There, the school was supposed to teach its students important *real world* skills such as self-reliance and resourcefulness, among other abilities. According to the school's website:

Deep Springs is an all-male liberal arts college located on a cattle-ranch and alfalfa farm in California's High Desert. Electrical pioneer L.L. Nunn founded the school in 1917 on the three pillars of academics, labor, and self-governance in order to help young men prepare themselves for lives of service to humanity. The school's 26 students, along with its staff and faculty, form a close community engaged in this intense project.

Deep Springs operates on the belief that manual labor and political deliberation are integral parts of a comprehensive [liberal arts education](#).

Each student attends for two years and receives a full scholarship valued at over \$50,000 per year. Afterwards, most complete their degrees at the world's most prestigious four year institutions.

The experience I had with visiting Deep Springs College was very entertaining in many respects, and it is something I will never forget. Everything about the school was so unusual, so different from any other place I had ever been.

Since the school was a *two year college*, students were required to transfer to other schools at the end of the two year period. The list of the schools that people went to after those two years was incredible: Caltech, Yale, Stanford, Harvard, and so forth. From my perspective, this made the prospect of attending the school extremely attractive. To hang out on a farm for two years and then transfer to a really good college, sounded like a great long-term experience. In addition, the sheer experience sounded incredible, if not magical. To top it all off, not having to worry about getting into real schools for the next couple of years sounded even more appealing.

In order to get to the school, I needed to travel to Las Vegas from Detroit, and then take a bus to a place called Lida Junction, where I was told I would be getting picked up by a student and then driven for another hour out into the desert. Prior to visiting the school, I had filled out a very long application that required me to write something like 50+ pages of essays. The essay I spent the most time on was pretty bizarre. It had something to do with examining how to reform criminals in society, and I hypothesized in a long essay that a very effective treatment would be to lock them in a room and play subliminal music with all sorts of hypnotic suggestions, which would change their minds and force them to think like good people instead of criminals. I estimated that several years of this sort of treatment would be enough to permanently alter the criminals and make them fit to reenter society.

Strangely enough, the people who read this essay at the school thought my idea was *groundbreaking*, and when I arrived at the school, they were eager to discuss this theory with me. As it turned out, they had actually spent a few days prior to my arrival, researching hypnosis, subliminal suggestions and so forth, and they all seemed to think I was some kind of an expert on these subjects. At least once or twice I walked into areas where a couple of guys were hanging out, and they had been discussing the theory I had come up with as a small group.

As a high school student in my last year of high school, taking a trip to Las Vegas and then a series of bus rides had offered an exciting prospect. I could not believe my good fortune. My father had bought me an airline ticket and gave me \$500 for hotels, buses, and other expenses. Plus, since I was taking the trip during a school vacation, I did not even have to worry about all the school I was missing.

When I got to Las Vegas in the afternoon, I had taken a taxi to the bus station, and I also needed to purchase a ticket to Lida Junction—which was about a five or six hour ride. Las Vegas was so different back then. The bus station was a place where vagrants, workers from Mexico, cowboys, and others gathered. The town had a real Western flair to it and felt much different from how it is today, in all respects. I sat next to a cowboy when I finally got on the bus, after a few hours of waiting.

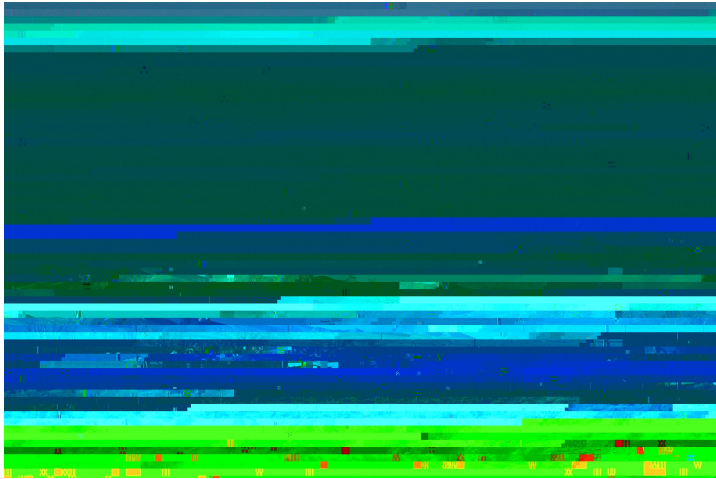
The bus ride was a lot of fun. We meandered through the desert in areas where there were literally no other cars. Every hour

or so, the bus would pull over at a small restaurant or store on the side of the road for everyone to use the bathroom. Many of the restaurants had small casinos inside them and were run down with tired looking dealers. There was a lot of smoke everywhere. Cowboys sat at a table with some beers and a few other people, leisurely placing their bets. You could tell that most of the people were local and just passing some time at the casino.

Since I was relatively young at the time and I was traveling alone, several people spoke to me on the bus and they were all very friendly. When we got to one stop, I was standing out by the bus with a cowboy while he was chewing his tobacco. He had asked me where the heck I was going. I was wearing a blue blazer and khaki pants, trying to look as respectable as possible for the people I was going to visit at the college. I really stuck out and I knew it.

"I know exactly where you are going. It's a rodeo college," he told me matter of factly. I never even knew there was such a thing as a "rodeo college," but he apparently seemed to think that was where I was going.

At around 2:00 in the morning the bus finally stopped at Lida Junction. To my astonishment the only thing there was at Lida Junction was a brothel, the Cottontail Ranch. The brothel consisted of a series of mobile homes that were all connected with various passageways going between them. It was quite a sight. As the bus pulled up I noticed a Suburban with its lights on. It was the only vehicle in the entire parking lot. As I walked up to the car, the driver smiled and let me in. His name was Steve.



He was about a year older than me and he was drinking a hot coffee. Since there did not appear to be anything else around for miles, I assumed that he had gotten the drink in the brothel. His hair looked a little messed up as well, and he looked a little nervous.

The drive to Deep Springs College was over an hour long. We took a two lane highway through the desert and Steve was going over 110 miles an hour most of the way. As a passenger, I found the speed to be terrifying; however, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that there was nothing around that we could possibly hit. We were surrounded on all sides by stark desert. We finally arrived at the college at about 3:30 in the morning. The campus was very dark, and it consisted of nothing but a set of small buildings in the middle of the desert. I was led to a room with a bunch of bunk beds and sleeping students, where I quickly fell asleep.

At about 7:00 a.m. a kid with a giant beard came up to me and woke me up. He told me it was "time to work" and pointed me towards the showers. He then told me to put on jeans and a tee shirt. Once I was dressed he led me to a mess hall where a bunch of other kids were sitting around, eating. The group of kids looked like they were all followers of the Grateful Dead. Most of them had beards and they had all let their hair grow extremely long. Everyone seemed a little pissed off at each other and at the world--but I could not really tell for sure; I was not introduced to anyone. I found myself a seat at what looked like a picnic table, where I ate my lunch. None of the kids I was sitting near seemed all that friendly, but after a few minutes everyone started to loosen up. They all had to go to class, do work, and various chores and so forth that day. I was just there to play and have fun and see the school. Or at least that was what I thought.

After breakfast, the guy who had woken me up walked me to a little Toyota pickup truck and started driving me towards what he called the "work site." We drove for several minutes. During the drive he told me how much he had enjoyed my essay about the subliminal criminal training. He seemed very enthralled by it. Finally, he stopped the truck in the middle of the road and told me that I needed to spend the day digging along the side of the road to create an area where water could go during rainstorms. He told me to dig as much as I could and as far as I could. Then he told me that this was a test to see what a hard worker I was. He seemed to be inferring that a large part of my admission to the school would be determined by how well I dug a ditch. He left me several jugs of plastic milk containers that were filled with water.

I imagine it was around 8:00 a.m. when I started digging. I was already exhausted because I had not gotten any meaningful sleep the previous night. I worked as hard as I could, digging a ditch about two feet deep along the roadside as quickly as I could. The work was completely fatiguing and I had no clue where I was. Several hours into the project, it was really hot and my hands were starting to blister. The guy who had dropped me off came to check on me.

"Looks ok, not bad. C'mon, it's time for lunch."

When I got to the cafeteria, there appeared to be an argument underway. A guy wanted to leave the school for three or four days to go visit his girlfriend and the students were debating whether or not he should be allowed to go. If he were to go visit his girlfriend, he would be missing out on various work chores he was responsible for, and many of the other students were not confident that they should allow him to leave. In addition, this student had apparently left a few months previously to visit his girlfriend, so the students were not sure whether allowing him to leave again would be fair to the other students.

As I watched this argument, it occurred to me that I probably would not enjoy this incredible amount of oversight in my life. These guys were being very closely micromanaged by other students, and they did not appear to have much say at all in terms of what they did with their own time.

After lunch I was taken to the road and forced to shovel dirt and dig the culvert some more. However, after an hour or so I was picked up, told to take a shower and invited to a class. It was a literature class, but I do not remember much about it.

I spent the next few days at the school not doing much of anything. I was not asked to do any more work and I spent my days wandering around the campus and climbing the surrounding hills. Most of the students were so engrossed in various

work pursuits and classes, that they did not appear to have much time for anything. Most of the kids I had met seemed very quiet and for the most part, pretty withdrawn. Nevertheless, they were interesting kids. Most of their activities outside of studying and work seemed to involve self-governed activities relating to the farm and the campus. The evenings appeared to involve long, drawn out meetings about one thing or another related to the school and work that needed to be done around the campus. These meetings often dragged on for hours and I found them extremely boring and uninteresting. Moreover, many of the students seemed to take their various arguments quite personally.

On my last full day at the college, I was told that I would be interviewed by the admissions committee at 2:00 p.m. and that I should report to a classroom at the school at that time. In the morning, someone came and told me that I should spend "every spare second" reviewing each of my essays prior to my interviews with the admissions committee later that day. At the request of the school, I had brought my essays with me.

When I went into the classroom at the appointed hour, the 25 students were all there ready to interview me. They were all gathered around the classroom and each of them had portions of my various essays in front of them. They proceeded to dissect the essays, everyone going over one part of the essays or another with me. The questions that they asked me were very difficult and I really did not do very well in the interviews. One of the most embarrassing moments came when they asked me a question about Carl Jung, whom I had quoted in one of my essays. I had included a few lines about how Carl Jung believed this or that.

"Have you ever actually read any books by Carl Jung?" one of the students asked me.

"No, I've never read a single thing by him," I answered truthfully.

"Then how can you possibly have a large quote from him in your essay, base an essay around his teachings and also lead us to believe that you know what you are talking about?"

It was a really good question and he had a point. The rest of the experience and all of the questions went basically like this: I would say one thing and they would contradict me and accuse me of not really understanding what I was talking about.

Several years later, I remember I was interviewing for a Rhodes Scholarship in front of a large committee and this entire procedure was much easier than the interviews with the Deep Springs kids. I simply did not fit in with this crowd; they were different sorts of kids from what I had ever encountered. For example, none of them were athletic, they were not clean cut and they all had a whole lot of intellectual arrogance. It seemed as if the kids going to the school had grown up in environments and attended schools where this behavior was accepted. In the high school I attended, this sort of arrogance would not have been tolerated, and it would have probably been beaten out of the kids.

When I left my interview, after around 4 hours of questioning, one of the students said something I'll never forget: "I have one final question for you: Did you like the food?"

The way he asked the question was layered with subtext. What he meant was: "Hey, we fed you for four days and do not like you. You were here on vacation and we hoped you enjoyed the food." The guy was a complete dick and I did not understand his need to say something so obnoxious. I did not realize at first that he was being rude; however, after he delivered the line I saw a lot of the students looking at each other and snickering, as if they were sharing an inside joke.

My final thoughts about this place as I prepared to leave were that because I did not have perfect SAT scores, because I was not extremely intellectual, and because I was more of an athletic type than an academic type, I did not fit in. I had felt uncomfortable the whole time I was there. I did not understand how some guy could tolerate a 3 hour debate about whether or not he should be allowed to go visit his girlfriend. This just seemed intolerable. It really made the place seem like a prison. Another strange thing about the school was that it was several hours away from the nearest hospital. For this reason, they had to keep an airplane on the property at all times, in order to fly people out in the case of an emergency; the school was literally in the middle of nowhere.

The bus that took me back to Las Vegas was passing through Lida Junction and was scheduled to pick me up from the front of the brothel at 4:00 a.m. There was only one bus that passed through each day. Steve woke me up at around 2:00 a.m. that morning and told me it was time to go. I had packed all of my bags and was ready to go. Five minutes later I was sitting in the Suburban.

Steve seemed a little bit too excited to be hitting the road. He had just taken a shower, I could tell, and he smelled like too much cologne. Since these kids seemed so moral in many respects, the last thing I expected was that this guy might be interested in going to the brothel, but it was in the back of my mind.

While Steve drove, I started asking him a lot of questions about himself. There was nothing that would be more interesting to me at the moment than getting him to talk about himself, and to find out his various likes and dislikes. I was also curious about his background. Steve was from a suburb outside of Palm Springs, California, from what I remember, and he had come to the school in a roundabout way. He had graduated from high school where he had not done all that well and then attended a community college for a year. He knew someone, or had a relative, who had some involvement with the college and they had urged him to apply when he was in high first year at the community college. Steve said he felt very grateful to be there and that, had he not been invited, he might have been an auto mechanic or something along those lines. I figured that he must have gotten really good SAT scores since the school seemed to emphasize the test so much.

"Oh, I did horribly on that test!" he said. "I do not think I even got in the 50th percentile."

As we zoomed through the desert at over 100 miles an hour, I asked Steve what he thought about the fact that the closest sign of civilization to the school was a brothel. He proceeded to launch into a long tirade about how prostitution was evil and how it exploited women. He seemed to feel strongly about this and he started reciting all sorts of statistics and random facts about the damage that prostitution does to people.

We pulled up in front of the Cottontail ranch a little before 3:00 a.m. and it appeared to be completely open for business. It was pretty unusual that we were there so early. I was also pretty thirsty and after around 20 minutes or so I said, "Let's go in and get some coffee." We saw a guy in a semi truck go by and stop the truck for around a minute and walk out with a coffee, which looked pretty good. Steve argued with me for a few minutes about how buying coffee from the establishment was akin to supporting prostitution; however, after a few minutes he agreed to go in with me.

When we got inside, we came upon this bar. An older woman was standing there, looking pretty tired. She looked like she might be in her 60s and she was wearing a sweat suit. When we asked for coffee, she told us to hold on and then disappeared in the back.

We could see a kitchen area from where we were, and as we were standing there, a girl who did not look more than 25 walked by and checked us out. She stopped and looked directly at Steve:

"Bulldog!" she exclaimed, running over to Steve with a hug. "You look so cute. You got a haircut and I love it!" she said.

I could not believe what I was witnessing. "Bulldog" apparently knew this girl very well. He looked incredibly embarrassed, but started talking with her, eventually taking a seat at the bar. The two of them began talking and acting as if I were not even there.

A few minutes later the woman walked out with our coffees.

"You kids must be from Deep Springs College," she said. "I got a letter from the headmaster there a few days ago and he was very upset. The letter contains a lot of untruths. I am thinking about calling my lawyer."

For the next several minutes, the woman explained that the headmaster had sent a letter to the brothel about a serious outbreak of a sexually transmitted disease, which a substantial part of the student body had gotten from frequenting the brothel. The headmaster had threatened to report the brothel to the Department of Health in the letter or something along those lines and had also requested that the brothel not service the students anymore.

"These kids come here all the time," she said. "But they did not get their sex infections here. One of them must have gotten it somewhere else and infected the rest of the boys there. God knows what must go on there. My girls are clean. They are inspected by a doctor. You go back there and tell him my girls are clean!"

The woman was holding a letter on Deep Springs stationary and I sat there speechless. We went back to our car and sat there in silence for a few minutes. Steve then said some intellectual crap about how he was morally justified in having sex with prostitutes instead of having sex with men at Deep Springs; after all, he was at his sexual prime. It was complete bullshit and I knew it.

"Yeah, at least 12 or 13 guys who went to the brothel got a bad infection," he said. "The doctor has come out a few times and given them shots and stuff but it is not going away. There's a lot of pus involved and its pretty painful from what I understand. I think there was some talk about disciplining them, but how can you discipline half the school?"

I sat there in silence not really understanding or comprehending the whole situation.

For the past several years I have read one mention or another about Deep Springs College in major magazines and newspapers. Every article I read talks about how great the school is and how special its students are. A September 2006 article in the New Yorker relates:

ABSTRACT: ANNALS OF THE WEST about Deep Springs College. L. L. Nunn was a short man with a stiff-collared Victorian habit of dress. A lifelong bachelor, he started investing in Western mines in the late 19th century, and grew rich from hydroelectric power. With his brother, P. N., he built the power station at Niagara Falls. Though Nunn, who died in 1925, never graduated from college, he devoted the last 20 years of his life to a novel form of education, a mix of Christian mysticism, imperialist elitism, Boy Scout-like abstinence, and Progressive era learning-by-doing, with an emphasis on leadership training and the formation of strong character. In 1917, he created a small men's college called Deep Springs College, on a working ranch in Deep Springs Valley, California. He limited enrollment to 25 men and restricted contact with the residents of Bishop, a town 40 miles away. Deep Springs is 5 hours north of L.A. The property, hemmed in by mountains, is 50 square miles. There are two basic rules: observe isolation, and abstain from alcohol and drugs while school is in session. The school is year-round and free, and it requires students to do several hours of manual labor a day. [Mentions the cattle operation] As a two-year institution, Deep Springs is technically a junior college, but its success in placing students at prestigious universities puts it in a category of its own. In recent years, about a fourth of each graduating class has transferred into Harvard, a fourth into the University of Chicago, and a few students have gone on to Oxford, Yale, and Brown. At the college, a committee of students, along with faculty members and the dean, hires teachers, based on their proposed syllabi. Unconventional subjects, such as the Lusophone language, the writings of Ivan Illich, and auto mechanics, are offered alongside Shakespeare, Proust, and Marx. [Describes a small class on Emily Dickinson, taught by Katie Peterson] The Deep Springs boy is deliberate, thoughtful, studied. [Mentions dairy boys.] Most of the students are white, suburban, and upper-middle-class, and it's been a struggle for the school to diversify. The typical look—full beard, bandanna, half-unstrapped dungarees, dirty nails, etc.—is an emblem of retreat from mainstream society. The *outré* is accepted without hesitation and students generally detach themselves from knowledge of the outside world. Most of the ranch work is done without modern machinery and an exaltation of the past can create conditions for absurdity. [Describes Nunn's "homosexual problem"] His probable attraction to young men has been a source of some anxiety at the college. In 1911, he created the Telluride Association. The reactionary strain in Nunn is the one most evident at the school today. "Every major change at Deep Springs has been opposed by the students," said Christopher Breiseth, former college president. Deep Springs's all-male self-enclosure allows its students to feel wildly, hedonically free. The shock of returning to the world of social norms can be profound. In 1994, the college voted against coeducation, but the controversial subject has created a fissure in the school's relationship with the Telluride Association, where women have been members for 45 years. The Association lent the college \$1.8 million in 1988 to renovate its main building with the catch that if it hasn't changed its all-male policy by 2019 it will have to start repaying the loan. [sic] Some fear that adding women to the mix might upset the college's already delicate balance. [Mentions Gareth Fisher and Dan Bockrath, student cowboys at the college] Bockrath said that being at Deep Springs was about "the last ages of youth, playing in the woods a little longer, being a cowboy."

With much relief I finally got on the bus to head back home. As I rode away I looked out the window and saw Steve pull forward; then I saw his brake lights turn on, the Suburban coming to a complete stop. The last I saw was Steve getting out of the truck and walking back toward the brothel. This was about my last and final contact with the school.

The school never sent me either an acceptance letter, or a rejection letter. I imagine that Bulldog went back and related to the other students what had happened, and that they were all simply hoping I would forget about the whole experience and never tell anyone. However, visiting the school was one of the most interesting experiences of my life. When I did go to college, I worked hard and did well. My experience of being humiliated in a four hour interview really showed me how little I knew and it taught me to always be ready to back up my facts and everything I said. I don't really consider myself an intellectual sort; however, I went into college at the University of Chicago with a tremendous amount of confidence because I knew and *accepted* that there were people out there who might try to shoot down any idea I had. I had the same understanding when I got to law school.

The most important thing the school taught me, however, was that when you scratch beneath the surface of even the most prestigious people and institutions, you will find reasons not to be intimidated. I had no business going to interview at a school

where the students had all perfect SAT scores (or at least said they did) because I was simply not in that league academically. But I did it anyway. When I got beneath the surface of the school, I found an environment where kids could not make decisions for themselves, where men let themselves go, where half the student body had caught a sexually transmitted disease, and where people portrayed themselves as being better than the rest of society. But in the end they all screwed around with hookers.

Over the years as I have read about one sex scandal after another. Whether it has been former President Clinton, Eliot Spitzer, or others, I have come to realize that the models we have in society, who supposedly stand for something great--often when you scratch beneath the surface, they do not really stand for what they say. I watch intellectuals complain about the environment, complain about capitalism and so forth, and then, when I sit down with them and ask questions, I realize that they are mostly pretending to stand for one thing--while in reality they do not. My visit to Deep Springs College taught me, in no uncertain terms, to be extremely careful about trusting anyone. Whether it is trusting a leader, trusting the numbers an institution claims, or trusting someone who is making an argument to you about this or that. A substantial majority of the people, institutions, and others we encounter in our day-to-day lives are completely full of shit. Everything is a facade and you really do not know what is real and what is not. Everything is sort of like Las Vegas out there.

Major financial institutions have crashed recently due to financial numbers not being what they once were. People have lost billions of dollars to people who they thought they could trust, such as Bernard Madoff. People have put faith in real estate and all sorts of other investments that turned out to be completely illusory. People have gone to work for companies they thought would support them forever but did not, and they are out of work.

When I graduated from [law school](#) at the University of Virginia, the commencement speaker was Jesse Jackson. His commencement speech was titled "Can You Be Trusted?" For an hour or so Jackson gave one example after another about how various people in society including politicians and others simply could not be trusted. He stated that the measurement of trust came down to whether our families could trust us and whether our coworkers could trust us, and he defined trustworthiness as the most important virtue. He must have said the phrase "Can you be trusted" 100+ times during his speech. It was one of the most powerful speeches I have ever heard.

5 years later I picked up the paper and saw there was a giant story about how Jesse Jackson had had a long-term extramarital affair. When I read the story I thought back on the Reverend's speech and realized that *even he* could not be trusted (at least not by his wife). These sorts of contradictions are everywhere.

I have met [people in business](#) before, who appeared to be extremely powerful, and who acted as if they were better than me; they ended up going to prison for various reasons. I have seen one example after another of the inherent conflict between what something appears to be or *wants to be* and *what it really is*.

In the end, what Deep Springs College taught me as a visitor in those few days was actually far more valuable than what I might have learned by actually attending the school as a student: Do not be intimidated by, or trust appearances. No one is better than you. Everyone has secrets. Go forward in your life like you belong anywhere you want to be. You can do and be whoever you want to be. *It is your life.*

THE LESSON

You should neither trust outward appearances, nor let them intimidate you. There is always a discord between the appearance that a person or organization projects, and their actual nature. For this reason, always be careful about the people and organizations in whom you place your trust.

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