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(pp 7-14)

Surprise

It was on the first Sunday of summer vacation, seven days before my fourteenth birthday, when my parents announced that they were separating. Right now, as a matter of fact. This instant. They stood before me in the hallway, lightly dressed; they had taken each other by the hand like two schoolchildren, and as through from one mouth they said: “We’re separating.”

At first I was tongue-tied. I was simply shocked. And a number blazed before my eyes: thirty-three. By my latest calculation, exactly thirty-three percent of my classmates were children of divorce, not even counting the ones who were left back or had skipped a grade. I had spent quite a lot of time keeping a record of the divorces in my grade and questioning the affected parties in detail. After all, you ultimately have to know what’s going on around you.

But only now did it dawn on me that I’d never thought it could one day happen to me. I felt like an explorer in Africa who examines poisonous snakes day after day, and is not afraid for one second that he could get bitten. In desperation, but even more out of shame for my naïveté, I turned beet-red. Or at least my face felt beet-red from within.

And it seemed my thoughts were written on it. “It’s not what you think!” my mother said quickly. “There’s no question of divorce. Papa and I get along splendidly. We’ll surely stay together our whole lives.” She paused briefly. Then she said: “We’re merely separating from you.”

“Oh.” I didn’t say anything more, because at that instant I learned what it means to have words stuck in your throat.

“Your mother and I,” said my father, “have decided to focus more on ourselves from now on. We want to deepen our relationship. We’re getting older. The time has come to get closer to each other. And the thing that most interferes with this is you. That is why we’re separating from you.”

Aha! So I would become not a child of divorce, but – what? An orphan by abandonment? Was there even such a thing? I tried to envision my future without

parents, but at that moment I didn't have the imagination for it. And the many words I wanted to say had now finally obstructed my windpipe from below so that I could no longer get any air from above. I wanted to convey this too, because I thought it was important, but could only get out a sort of whistle, like a bicycle tire that would like to burst but can't.

Papa seemed to notice this and gave me a light, therapeutic slap in the face. The word jam in my throat cleared, I said "Thanks," and got some air again. But it was not much, and when I then said things like: "Have you gone mad?" "What is this nonsense?" and "But you can't do that!" it didn't sound at all reproachful but rather a bit squeaky and silly.

Mama raised an index finger. "Get control of yourself. And grow up as fast as possible! You get the house, of course. As of now, you live here alone, so you'd better be calm and responsible, as is proper for people who live alone."

"And you should finally learn what real life is about," said Papa. "But don't worry! We've left behind a basic course in life-management. We've stuck notes on the most important things. They explain everything. How you operate the washing machine. How you separate the trash. How you change the bag in the vacuum cleaner. Indeed, all you need to know to be responsible for yourself."

My mother looked at her watch. "But there's unfortunately no more time for long explanations." And then my parents pointed to the suitcases that they had managed to pack and get into the hallway unnoticed – or at least unnoticed by me.

"And we don't have much time for emotional goodbyes either," said my father. "We're beginning our new life with a tour around the world. And our flight to the Caribbean takes off in two hours." At that point, my mother said "Oh!" and kissed my father in such a way that I urgently had to look away. "How much I've been looking forward to this," she said, when she was done with the kissing. "Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica. And after that New York, London, Rome, Paris. I think it will be wonderful!"

I thought only: Neustadt.

That's the town where we live. Sorry: where I would now spend the rest of my life in solitude. For if my parents' travel itinerary was accurate, I might not even live to see their return.

To take this opportunity, and for all who don't know, our Neustadt is not new, it's just called New Town. To be sure, it's not old either. And Neustadt is also neither large nor small, neither exciting nor boring, but rather, in all things, in a somewhat aggressive fashion, mediocre. Up to then, that hadn't mattered to me all too much. All in all, I was rather content with what I had. Besides, I had always been told that I would soon, probably on the morning of my eighteenth birthday, leave mediocre Neustadt and go out into the so-called great big world to achieve wealth and happiness. I had always nodded and acted as if I were totally looking forward to that. At the same time, however, I had decided to put off turning eighteen as long as possible. Perhaps I'd even discover a trick to prevent it completely.

But now things were entirely different. My parents, who had recently turned thirty-five, went off into the great big world – and I got to stay in Neustadt, albeit only to live in bitter poverty and miserably go to the dogs.

My mother was already tugging at the suitcases, but my father had evidently read my thoughts. "Don't worry about money. There's enough in the house. You'll find it in good time. I actually wanted to give it to you right away, but Mama said: Don't, he should search a bit, so that he doesn't come right after us. We need a little head-start."

It's not the greatest moment in the life of an almost-fourteen-year-old when he finds out that his own parents are capable of precisely the boundless egoism of which they have accused their son for years. The son in question then instantly feels uncertain about everything and longs quite intensely for comfort and security. And though I'm not really the cuddly type, I suddenly wanted to cling to one of my parents like a three-year-old. But my mother seemed to sense it, and quickly gave me two kisses that were as fleeting as she herself.

"Bye-bye," she said. "And don't try to call us. We've separated from our cell phones too." Indeed, the two cell phones were lying peacefully beside each other on the small cabinet in the hallway.

Shortly thereafter, as my parents roared around the corner in our former family car, I stood barefoot in the front garden and probably looked as silly as our two garden gnomes, the punk one and the hippie one. I didn't wave to my parents,

not one bit; that was the only protest of which I was capable. Besides, I felt like I was about to have trouble breathing again. And to pass out while waving looks especially stupid. I didn't want to move at all anymore. I wanted to turn into a garden gnome myself, not a hippie or a punk, but a separation gnome, whose cheap paint gradually gets washed away from the plastic by rain and wind.

But then our neighbor appeared before the house on the left, Frau Glossbach. She looked at me strangely, then made a beckoning hand motion like a witch in a fairy tale. Who knows, I thought, what else my parents have arranged to maintain their freedom. Possibly they'd even formed an alliance with their enemies, of whom Frau Glossbach was the worst. And perhaps she had already set up a cozy little dungeon for me in her cellar. I mustered my remaining strength, put off until later the desperate death through garden-gnomization and went back into the house.

In the kitchen I promptly found the first of the announced notes; it was yellow and stuck to the big refrigerator. It read: *Attention! All the food stored in this appliance is edible. But caution! You must remove the packaging before eating. And if you're clever, you will not throw the packaging away. That way you'll know what you should buy in the supermarket so that you don't starve.*

I opened the refrigerator. It was not very full, but just right. A few small bowls of rice pudding, a dozen cups of jello and caramel pudding, and a few bottles of multivitamin juice. That fit perfectly into my rather narrow dietary regimen. Or, in other words, those were the only things that I really liked. So I was saved for the time being. And so I allowed myself the first sigh of relief of the day and put together a small meal: rice pudding with jello. And I had multivitamin juice with that.

As I was about to have a caramel pudding for dessert, I noticed on the rice pudding furthest back in the fridge a second yellow note, more than twice as big as the first. Probably it was a general lesson from my former parents, perhaps a lecture on healthy diet in general and the harmfulness of ready-to-eat pudding in particular.

But I wasn't at all in the mood, and so I gratefully declined dessert. But I didn't escape the notes. For as I was about to throw the empty packaging in the garbage can, another installment shone up at me. Installment: *Very good! You're*

protecting the environment. But unfortunately you now no longer know what you have to buy, you unself-reliant and unworldly good-for-nothing.

The only thing I wanted now was to go to bed. The day should not go on. I had always had the ability to fall asleep in a heartbeat when things were not going well. Now I wanted to make use of it. But when I folded back the blanket, I found the next note underneath: *What's this? Going to bed without brushing your teeth? I don't believe it. To the bathroom, you piglet!*

I obediently brushed my teeth, then crawled into my bed and pulled my favorite blanket over my head, a multicolored monster of six square meters, which an acquaintance of my mother sewed together from hundreds of the most varied pieces of material. And though I'd been afraid it might not work this time, scarcely had the world vanished behind the patchwork blanket when I fell asleep.

(pp 15-24)

Piet Monday

(...) I rolled out of bed. A glass of multivitamin juice, I thought, might help now. But on the way through the quiet hallway to the kitchen, another surprise awaited me. The doorbell rang. I opened the front door, and outside stood someone who looked like he came from some delivery service. He had rested his right foot on a box that had slits everywhere and looked rather battered.

“Are you Paul Müller?” he asked sternly.

I know, my name sounds a bit like the names that spies assume when they want to appear particularly inconspicuous. Dumb spies, mind you, or ones that are still in training. But we just happen to be named Müller, like many other people are too. And once your name is Müller, as my father always said, then a Paul can't make things any worse. On the contrary: Next to a Müller, a Paul will downright shine. That's the way my father is – or rather, was.

I nodded. “Okay, I'm Paul Müller, and I admit everything.”

“Good. Then inform the idiots that mailed this monster here that even our special shipping service only delivers boxes that strictly keep still. Ones that want to walk on their own we don’t transport.”

So that explains the foot on the box! Despite this restraint, it actually did seem somehow to be in motion.

“So what’s in it?”

“Doesn’t interest me,” said the deliveryman. “But when I called it to order, it tried to bite me. You’ll get the bill later.” He showed me his right hand, on which there was a harmless scratch. And then he left. I watched him go; even from behind, he looked like someone going straight to a lawyer, already looking forward to his damages for pain and suffering. So I had yet another problem.

But first I had to get this strange box into the house. I pulled and tugged, actually got it into the hallway, but all my tugging finished it off, it broke open, and before me stood a big black dog. That is, a young black dog – but one that every dog expert and even a non-expert like me could see would one day get big. Even very big!

On a rope around the dog’s neck was a yellow note. I’d suspected something of the sort. The writing on the note was rather faded, but the beginning was decipherable. It read: *Hello Paul. If you are reading this, we’re already sitting on the beach. Greetings! This here is Piet. From now on he’ll be your friend. That means you’ll take responsibility for him. This will help you grow up faster. In return he’ll help you with your solitude. Dogs are good at that. You only have to look at them and you immediately feel much better. As opposed to...* There had evidently been more there, but the remaining text had almost disappeared, as if someone had licked it off.

I sat down on the ground in front of the dog at a safe distance, and we looked at each other. His gaze was interested, mine probably more skeptical. Up to now my relationship with dogs had been well balanced. I thought dogs smelled bad and was afraid of getting bitten, while dogs presumably found it more exciting to play with an old plastic bag than with me. So we kept out of each other’s way.

Now, however, circumstances had changed. I sat in our house as solitary as Robinson Crusoe on his island, and my parents had sent me via special delivery a

lovable fellow sufferer. Probably thinking I'd become a fanatic dog lover in a heartbeat. Interesting idea!

A certain something in me suggested simply chasing the dog out the door. Delivery refused. It's a human right to find dogs disgusting and dangerous and to want to live without them. And then this certain something in me prevailed. I had already stood up and had the front-door handle in my hand. "Come, doggy," I said. "Let's go walkies." Though the "we" was of course a lie.

But then the dog sat and looked up at me. He did it with two very brown eyes that nestled in his fur like Mama's amber earrings in her black jewelry box. And at that moment it became clear to me that I was now about to do to him what my parents had done to me yesterday. "I'm sorry," I said, whereupon the dog licked its nose with its tongue. It looked like he was trying to say: "It's okay."

I sat back down on the floor in front of him and talked to him as if he could understand me. "You know what? You've come on a Monday, so I christen you Piet Monday. Besides, that goes well with Paul Müller." I looked deep into his eyes and tried to give my voice an imploring undertone. "And maybe you don't know it yet, but you are a very, very loveable, low-maintenance and obedient dog."

Piet Monday held my gaze. He perked his ears and tilted his head.

I brought myself to move somewhat closer to him. "From now on," I whispered as gravely as I could, "you will do everything I say. You will obey my commands and not get up to any mischief. And don't you take one bit of interest in my glass elephants."

For a moment I thought the dog was nodding. But in fact he was only briefly leaning his head back so as to sneeze with all his might in my face. I fell onto my back in shock and disgust. The dog was immediately standing over me and licked my nose for a change. I rolled onto my stomach and guarded my face from the side with my hands. He used this admittedly pathetic position of mine to snatch my favorite slipper off my right foot. And before I was halfway back on my feet to save the slipper, he had torn it into bite-sized pieces and eaten some of them.

I hobbled into the kitchen. At least, I thought, I didn't have to worry about feeding him. One less thing to worry about. And while Piet Monday, as I believed, was noisily devouring the rest of the slipper in the hallway, I made myself breakfast

in the kitchen: for the sake of simplicity, rice pudding with multivitamin juice. I squinted my eyes as I took both things from the refrigerator so as to avoid the enormous yellow note lying in wait for me there.

When I returned to the hallway, Piet Monday had torn down as much of my mother's winter coat from the rack as he could reach standing on his hind legs. It was quite a lot – actually, there was not even a jacket left. Oh boy, I thought. Another reason for my mother never to come home. Not in winter anyway.

I sat down in the living room and tried to think about my future. But I was prevented from doing so by another yellow note on the television: *Hooray! it read. Paul Müller can finally watch as much television as he's always wanted. From morning to night. Around the clock. Every random piece of – here the word "crap" was crossed out – nonsense. While watching he can eat chips (in the living room cabinet) and drink multivitamin juice (in the fridge), also as much as he wants. Moreover...*

I knew immediately that I would never again in my life want to watch television. (...)

(pp 25-35)

Paula Pink

I went out into the garden, sat down on our garden swing and let myself dry off in the sun. Meanwhile I considered my next step. It was now clear to me that it would not be a particularly brave, impressive or self-reliant step; I was simply not cut out for that. But at least it would be an honest step. I would admit that I needed help. Help of every conceivable kind. And for this help I could at that moment think of only one name: Aunt Elke.

Aunt Elke was actually not really my aunt, but rather a cousin of my mother. As children the two were apparently bosom buddies. But in recent years, my parents had, to put it cautiously, barely kept in touch with her. We had not visited

her at all in her current apartment, and when she was last at our house, the three of them had amassed so much silence that it still rendered me speechless when I entered the living room days later.

The reason for our bad relations with Aunt Elke was the mysterious illness that had afflicted her since I'd known her. In summer and winter alike, she had a dangerously reddened nose, her eyes were incessantly tearing, and her voice was a weepy continual snuffle. Handkerchiefs soaked in herbal tea were her constant companions, and during meals dozens of pills always lay beside her plate. Even if she were otherwise the best person in the world, said my father, this continual sniffing would be enough to avoid being near her. And then he recited a malicious rhyme at which my mother tried not to laugh.

Still, Aunt Elke was my only relative. The only reachable one anyway. Neither my father nor my mother have siblings, and my grandparents first of all live very far away and secondly are very active people. Most of the time they are on extended group trips in some desert or jungle. We visit them so rarely that I always take along pictures of them so that I'll recognize them. Unfortunately it has still happened several times that I have inadvertently fallen into the arms of complete strangers and exclaimed "Hello, Grandpa" or "Hello, Grandma."

Of course, I didn't know whether Aunt Elke would feel responsible for me of her own accord. Or could she be forced by the police to take care of me? And would I even want that? At least, I thought, she might lend me some money. Once I found the treasure in the house, I could pay her back. I searched and found her address in the telephone book: 1 Grimmstraße.

Aunt Elke could perhaps solve yet another of my problems. If I remembered correctly, her profession had something to do with animals. So possibly she could give me a few tips on what to do to transform the all-devourer and hallway-pooper that had been entrusted to my care into a loveable, polite and above all absolutely housebroken dog.

No sooner planned than done. I tied a piece of clothesline around Piet Monday's neck, stowed my last ten euro bill safely in my wallet and walked out the front door. The note on the mailbox, which probably said that I shouldn't bother with the mail because my parents had not only separated from me, but also from all

bills, warnings, second warnings and final warnings – I deliberately overlooked. Or, to be honest, I didn't have a chance to read it, for I had to deal with the resisting dog at the end of the clothesline.

When I looked up for the first time at the front-garden gate, our next-door neighbor, Frau Glossbach, stood in her doorway. She again beckoned me over, so I looked resolutely in the other direction and pulled Piet Monday to the bus stop.

Now that sounds easier than it was, for the dog seemed to have a strong aversion to walking on the leash. Instead of joyfully walking along beside me like the jolly dogs in the dog food ads, he braked as hard as he could. At first he braked with his butt, by just sitting down. In this position, I could still drag him along behind me. But then he braked with his belly, by lying down and splaying out his legs, which made it almost impossible to drag him.

Finally he decided to brake with his back, and flung himself over completely. Now the dragging was actually easier again; his paws seemed to have braked more effectively than his back. But now the clothesline cut off his breathing and he produced unpleasant sounds. I did not even wait and see whether I could tolerate them, for by now the passersby were looking a thousand daggers at me.

I admit, it definitely did not look good, an annoyed almost-fourteen-year-old dragging along a gasping dog behind him. But it was, after all, not a hobby I had chosen to make sensible use of my free time. I had been put in this situation solely by my deserting parents.

However, it was impossible for me to shout across the street to the dagger-lookers that I was at the moment the most maltreated child in all of Neustadt, a victim of his own parents' drive to freedom or self-realization. The facts were simply too complicated and the street too loud. So I picked up Piet Monday in my arms and intended to carry him to the bus stop, but he responded with a dog trick and doubled his weight. It felt like my arms would break at their joints.

So I had no other choice than to throw the dog over my shoulder like a sack. He seemed to like this position, and the whole way to the bus stop he wagged his tail like a windshield-wiper across my face. By the time I finally got to sit down on the little bench in the bus shelter, I was completely exhausted. Besides me there was no one waiting for the bus. Later a girl appeared, about my age.

Since the school break had begun a few days earlier, most people had left Neustadt for vacation. Presumably *with* their children, if I may allow myself this harmless joke at my own expense. Anyway, the bus was rather empty. And seeing as I'm joking at the moment: Had the bus driver been on vacation too, it could have been a very pleasant ride. But as it was, I had to conduct a long conversation with the man about the strict requirements one had to fulfill if one wanted to ride the bus with a dog. The conversation ended with me handing over almost all of my ten euros and having to swear to hold the dog securely on my lap. If other passengers complained, I would have to get off the bus immediately and would not get my money back.

Trembling, I sat down on a two-seat bench. After three stops the bus was almost completely empty. I tried not to take it personally. Then the girl who had boarded with me moved up from the back of the bus to the front. She was wearing, I now noticed, nothing but things that covered the whole spectrum of all possible variations of the color pink. Pink jeans, pink T-shirt, pink sweatshirt, pink necklace, pink hair things, and so on, and so on. To look at her and to have the taste of a particular brand of pink-colored chewing gum in your mouth were practically the same thing.

The girl stood behind the bus driver for a while, then came purposefully toward me and sat down next to me. Now this I had to take personally, for almost all the other seats were empty. To be on the safe side, I looked stupidly out the window, and in the reflection I could see that the girl was looking just as stupidly straight ahead. At first nothing happened, and I was really glad. But after two more stops, Piet Monday suddenly broke free and jumped into the girl's lap. Great, I thought, so now we'll be walking the rest of the way!

But far from it. The girl didn't complain. On the contrary, she scratched the dog rather expertly behind the ears and then slowly turned her head toward me. She was smiling at me. "Hello," she said in a voice that was completely pink-colored as well.

I replied with something that sounded like someone closing a rusty door.

"I'm Paula," said the girl.

I could have made a totally funny response to that, something like: “Then we’re right for each other.” But I said only: “Paul.” That is, I mumbled or grated or rasped it.

“I know,” the girl breathed in pink. “Paul Müller. *My* Paul Müller.”

I felt woozy. Since yesterday morning, my need for surprises of any kind was covered for the next twenty to thirty years. But compared to what happened next, my parents moving out was nothing.

“You see,” she went on in dulcet tones, “I am your lost Siamese twin sister.”

I said: “Oh?” Nothing more.

Sure! Twin sister. Lost, of course. And Siamese too. Apparently this pink hallucination wasn’t satisfied with anything less? I decided to hold to the rule that you don’t argue with crazy people, and continued to look straight ahead. So I only saw out of the corner of my eye that Little Miss Pink was still scratching Piet Monday behind the ears, which didn’t seem to bother the disloyal animal. I must have involuntarily wrinkled my face.

She noticed it immediately. “I know this must be quite a shock for you. It was for me too.” She leaned forward a little bit and looked critically at my face. “I would rather have a brother who didn’t suffer from premature facial wrinkling.” She briefly stuck her tongue out at me. “But let’s forget that now, and simply be happy that we’ve finally found each other.”

Without any warning she hugged me and gave me a kiss on the forehead. Had Piet Monday not been between us, we would have come damn close to each other – closer, anyway, than I had been to any girl before. But I was too weak to push this Paula back into her seat and her pink world. Meanwhile the kiss wasn’t coming to an end. It felt like a hole was being burned into my forehead. Luckily, Piet Monday began to whine. He must have been getting a bit squished, and so Paula finally let me be.

I took a deep breath. “Do you have,” I said, but then the air was already gone again, and I had to take another breath.

Second try: “Do you have any evidence that the two of us are even the least bit related?”

“Oh, you sweetie,” said Paula, and I thanked all the gods that besides the two of us basically only the bus driver was on the bus. “Just look!” She rolled up the right sleeve of my sweatshirt, which I would have liked to prevent, and pointed to the dark mark on my right upper arm, which had roughly the outlines of the Fourth Inca Empire before the discovery of America. The mark was, if my parents were to be believed, a simple burn scar. For my part, I remembered nothing.

“And here we have the perfect match.” Paula rolled up the left arm of her sweatshirt. Blood rushed to my face. First of all because girls’ naked upper arms had always embarrassed me, and secondly because on hers she also had the Fourth Inca Empire, albeit the mirror image, and if I wasn’t mistaken, in the borders after the discovery of America. I was stunned.

With the sharply filed point of her pink-colored forefinger nail Paula traced along the borders of both scar empires. A chill ran down my spine. “This is indeed solid evidence. Right here is where we two cuties” – she really said “we two cuties”! – “were conjoined at birth.” She sighed exaggeratedly. “What lovely, lovely years we spent together, we did everything together!” She giggled. Pick little flowers. Eat from our little plate. Drink from our little cup. Always she on the right and I on the left. Or the other way around, depending on your vantage point.

She indulged a bit more in the memory of our wonderful years together so that I had time to muster my arguments. “No!” I finally shouted.

Paula looked at me, half forgiving, half punishing.

“It can’t be. It’s impossible. It’s scientifically out of the question. Siamese twins are always identical twins. That means either two boys or two girls. But never a boy and a girl. Never! Not ever!”

“Oh, you silly boy! Give me a hug.” I almost had her in my face again, but with great presence of mind I ducked out of the way. As a result, Piet Monday got my nose in front of his. He bit. Probably he meant it in a nice way. But it still hurt.

“Maybe you’re naïve,” said Paula. “Why do you think they left us together for so long? It would have been easy to separate us. Snip! A tailor could have done it with a pair of scissors. But we were a medical sensation. A wonder of nature! The famous Müller-Balaclava twins.”

“Why Balaclava?” And I could have slapped myself in the face. What had happened to my resolution not to argue with a crazy person? Now it was of course too late.

“That was our stage name.” Paula sighed again. “Mama made it up. It sounds like adventure, with a whiff of longing and mystery. And it was a mystery too. Hundreds of doctors examined us. Professors wrote books about us. Oh, we could have had a great life. Paris, London, Rome, Nice, New York. Always the center of attention. Red carpets everywhere. Of course, for us they’d be a bit wider.” She giggled again. And then she said in an altered, somehow more fateful, and so, in a way, dark-pink voice: “But things would turn out differently.”

At this moment, the stop Wielandplatz was announced. And though I was now almost interested in how she would finish this impossible story, I said quickly: “Very interesting. But I have to get off here. So long!” and grabbed Piet Monday from Paula’s lap. I had briefly considered leaving without him. But I did not want to abandon him to this world champion in lying; after all, I was ultimately responsible for his mental health.

“Where are you headed?” called Paula as I, together with the dog and not especially deftly, climbed over her into the aisle.

“To Aunt Elke.” In stressful situations I, dumbass that I am, only rarely think of something to say other than the truth.

“Our lovely Elke? How wonderful! I’ll come along.”

Which I could certainly not prevent her from doing now.

Burkhard Spinnen was born in Mönchengladbach in 1956 and lives as a writer in Münster. His first novel for young readers *BELGISCHE RIESEN* has been published in ten languages. Burkhard Spinnen has received many awards for his work, among them the *Aspekte Literature Award*, the *Kranichstein Literature Award*, the *Konrad Adenauer Foundation Literature Award*, the *Herbert Quandt Media Award*, *Lower Rhine Literature Award*, *BELGISCHE RIESEN* has won the *Oldenburg Award for Young Adult Literature* and the *German Audio Book Award*.

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