

All the Last Wars at Once

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Here is another war story of tomorrow—in a manner of speaking. It may be the ultimate statement on the racial and political differences that have threatened to disrupt the United States in recent years. George Alec Effinger, one of the brightest of science fiction's new stars, is married and lives currently in New Orleans; his unusual and delightful first novel, *What Entropy Means to Me*, was published in 1972.

We interrupt this p—

—upt this program to—

—interrupt our regularly scheduled programming to bring you this bulletin pieced together from the archives of the General Motors Corporation.

"Good afternoon. This is Bob Dunne, NBC News in New Haven, Connecticut. We're standing here in the lobby of the Hotel Taft in New Haven, where the first international racial war has just been declared. In just a few seconds, the two men responsible will be coming out of that elevator. (Can you hear me?)

"—elevator. Those of you in the western time zones are probably already—"

The elevator doors opened. Two men emerged, smiling and holding their hands above their heads in victorious, self-congratulatory boxers' handshakes. They were immediately mobbed by newsmen. One of the two men was exceptionally tall and black as midnight in Nairobi. The other was short, fat, white, and very nervous. The black man was smiling broadly, the white man was smiling and wiping perspiration from his face with a large red handkerchief.

"—C News. The Negro has been identified as the representative of the people of color of all nations. He is, according to the mimeographed flyer distributed scant minutes ago, Mary McLeod Bethune Washington, of Washington, Georgia. The other man with him is identified as Robert Randall La Cygne, of La Cygne, Kansas, evidently the delegate of the Caucasian peoples. When, and by whom, this series of

negotiations was called is not yet clear.

"At any rate, the two men, only yesterday sunk in the sticky obscurity of American life, have concluded some sort of bargaining that threatens to engulf the entire world in violent reaction. The actual content of that agreement is still open to specu—

"—or at any later date."

A close-up on Washington, who was reading from a small black notebook.

"We have thus reached, and passed, that critical moment. This fact has been known and ignored by all men, on both sides of the color line, for nearly a generation. Henceforth, this situation is to be, at least, honest, if bloodier. Bob and I join in wishing you all the best of luck, and may God bless."

"Mr. Washington?"

"Does this necessarily mean—"

"—iated Press here, Mr. Washing—"

"Yes? You, with the hat."

"Yes, sir. Vincent Reynolds, UPI. Mr. Washington, are we to understand that this agreement has some validity? You are aware that we haven't seen any sort of credentials—"

Washington grinned. "Thank you. I'm glad you brought that up. Credentials? Just you wait a few minutes, and listen outside. Ain't no stoppin' when them rifles start poppin'!"

"Mr. Washington?"

"Yes?"

"Is this to be an all-out, permanent division of peoples?"

"All-out, yes. Permanent, no. Bob and I have decided on a sort of statute of limitations. You go out and get what you can for thirty days. At the end of the month, we'll see what and who's left."

"You can guarantee that there will be no continuation of hostilities at the end of the thirty days?"

"Why, sure! We're all growed up, now, ain't we? Sure, why, you can trust *us*!"

"Then this is a war of racial eradication?"

"Not at all," said Bob La Cygne, who had remained silent, behind Washington's broad seersucker back. "Not at all what I would call a war of eradication. 'Eradicate' is an ugly term. 'Expunge' is the word we arrived at, isn't it, Mary Beth?"

"I do believe it is, Bob."

Washington studied his notebook for a few seconds, ignoring the shouting newsmen around him. No attempt was made by the uniformed guards to stop the pushing and shoving, which had grown somewhat aggravated. Then he smiled

brightly, turning to La Cygne. They clasped hands and waved to the flashing bulbs of the photographers.

"No more questions, boys. You'll figure it all out soon enough; that's enough for now." The two men turned and went back into the waiting elevator.

(Tock tockatock tocka tock tock) "And now, the Six O'clock Report (tocka tock tocka tocka), with (tocka-tock) Gil Monahan."

(Tocka tocka tock tock tocka)

"Good evening. The only story in the news tonight is the recently declared official hostilities between members of all non-Caucasian races and the white people of the world. Within minutes of the original announcement, open warfare broke out in nearly every multiracially populated area in the U.S. and abroad. At this moment the entire globe is in turmoil; the scene everywhere flickers between bloody combat in the streets and peaceful lulls marked by looting and destruction of private property.

"What has happened, in effect, is a thirty-day suspension of all rational codes of conduct. The army and National Guard are themselves paralyzed due to their own internal conflicts. A state of martial law has been declared by almost all governments, but, to our knowledge, nowhere has it been effectively enforced.

"There seems to be absolutely no cooperation between members of the opposite sides, on any level. Even those who most sympathized with the problems of the other are engaged in, using Mary McLeod Bethune Washington's terms, 'getting their own.' Interracial organizations, social groups, and even marriages are splintering against the color barrier.

"We have some reports now from neighboring states that may be of importance to our viewers, concerning the conditions in these areas at the present time. A state of emergency has been declared for the following municipalities in New Jersey: Absecon, Adelphia, Allendale, Allenhurst, Allentown, Allenwood, Alloway, Alpha... Well, as my eye travels over this list of some eight or nine hundred towns I notice that only a few *aren't* listed, notably Convent Station and Peapack. You can pretty well assume that things are bad *all* over. That goes for the New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut regions as well.

"We have some footage that was shot in Newark about ten minutes after the New Haven declaration. It's pretty tense out there now. The expert analysts in the news media are astounded that the intense polarization and outbreaks of rioting occurred so quickly. Let's take a look at those films now.

"Apparently there's some diffi—

"I don't know, what can... experiencing ourselves some of this interference with... refusal to even...

"—rifying. They're running around out there like maniacs, shooting and—

"—flames and the smoke is—you can see the clouds against the sky, between the buildings like waves of—"

It was a pink mimeographed factsheet. Frowning, he stuffed it into his pocket. "Factsheet," eh? It had been several days since Stevie had heard a fact that he could trust.

Nobody was saying *anything* worth listening to. The fact-sheets had begun the second day with the expected clutter of charges and accusations, but soon everyone realized that this wasn't going to be that kind of war. Nobody gave a good goddamn *what* happened to anyone else. On the third day the few angry allegations that were made were answered with "our own sources do not indicate that, in fact, any such incident actually occurred" or with a curt "T.S., baby!" or, finally, no reply at all. Now the factsheets just bragged, or warned, or threatened.

Stevie was hitchhiking, which was a dangerous thing to do but no more dangerous than sitting in an apartment waiting for the blazing torches. He felt that if he were going to be a target, a moving target offered the better odds.

He carried a pistol and a rifle that he had liberated from Abercrombie & Fitch. The hot morning sun gleamed on the zippers and studs of his black leathers. He stood by the side of the parkway, smiling grimly to himself as he waited for a ride. Every car that came around the curve was a challenge, one that he was more than willing to accept. There wasn't much traffic lately, and for that Stevie was sorry. He was really getting to dig this.

A car approached, a late model black Imperial with its headlights burning. He set himself, ready to dodge into the ditch on the side of the road. Stevie stared through the windshield as the car came nearer. He let out his breath suddenly: It was a white chick. It looked like she had liberated the car; maybe she was looking for someone to team up with. Even if she was a dog, it would beat hitching.

The Imperial passed him, slowed, and stopped on the road's shoulder. The chick slid over on the seat, rolling down the window on the passenger's side and shouting to him.

"Hurry up, you idiot. I don't want to sit here much longer."

He ran to the car, pulling open the door to get in. She slammed it shut again, and Stevie stood there confused.

"What the hell—"

"Shut up," she snapped, handing him another pink fact-sheet. "Read this. And hurry it up."

He read the factsheet. His throat went dry and he began to feel a buzz in his head. At the top of the page was the familiar, fistful Women's Lib symbol. In regulation incendiary rhetoric below it, a few paragraphs explained that it had been decided by the uppermost echelon to strike now for freedom. During the period of severe disorientation, women the world over were taking the opportunity to beat down the revisionist male supremacist pigs. Not just the oppressed racial minorities can express their militancy, it said. The female popular liberation front knew no color boundaries.

Who did they think they were kidding? Stevie thought.

"You're gonna get plugged by some black bitch, you know that?" he said. He looked up at her. She had a gun pointed at him, aimed at his chest. The buzz in his head grew louder.

"You wanna put that sheet back on the pile? We don't have enough to go around," she said.

"Look," said Stevie, starting to move toward the car.

The girl raised the pistol in a warning. He dove to the ground, parallel to the car, and rolled up against the right front wheel. The girl panicked, opening the door to shoot him before he could get away. Stevie fired twice before she sighted him, and she fell to the grassy shoulder. He didn't check to see if she was dead or merely wounded; he took her pistol and got in the car.

"My fellow Americans." The voice of the President was strained and tired, but he still managed his famous promiseless smile. The picture of the Chief Executive was the first to disturb the televisions' colored confetti snow for nearly two weeks.

"We are met tonight to discuss the intolerable situation in which our nation finds itself. With me this evening"—the President indicated an elderly, well-dressed Negro gentleman seated at a desk to the left of the President's—"I have invited the Rev. Dr. Roosevelt Wilson, who will speak to you from his own conscience. Rev. Wilson is known to many of you as an honest man, a community leader, and a voice of collaboration in these times of mistrust and fiscal insecurity."

Across the nation, men in dark turtlenecks ran down searing channels of flame, liberated television sets in their gentle grasp, running so that they might see this special telecast. Across the nation men and women of all persuasions looked at Wilson and muttered, "Well, isn't he the clean old nigger!"

Rev. Wilson spoke, his voice urgent and slow with emotion. "We must do everything that our leaders tell us. We cannot take the law into our own hands. We must listen to the promptings of reason and calmth, and find that equitable solution that I'm sure we all desire."

The TV broadcast had been a major accomplishment. Its organization had been a tribute to the cooperation of many dissatisfied men who would rather have been out liberating lawn furniture. But the message of these two paternal figures of authority was more important.

"Thank you, Dr. Wilson," said the President. He stood, smiling into the camera, and walked to a large map that had been set up to his right. He took a pointer in one hand.

"This," he said, "is our beleaguered nation. Each green dot represents a community where the violence that plagues us has gone beyond containable limits." The map was nearly solid green, the first time the United States had been in that condition since the early seventeenth century. "I have asked for assistance from the

armed forces of Canada, Mexico, and Great Britain, but although I mailed the requests nearly two weeks ago, I have yet to receive a reply. I can only assume that we are on our own.

"Therefore, I will make one statement concerning official government policy. As you know, this state of affairs will technically come to an end in about fifteen days. At that time, the government will prosecute *severely* anyone connected with any further disruptions of Federal activities. This is not merely an empty threat; it con—"

A young black man ran before the camera, turning to shout an incoherent slogan. Rev. Wilson saw the pistol in the boy's hand and stood, his face contorted with fear and envy. "The business of America *is* business!" he screamed, and then dropped back into his seat as the black militant shot. The President clutched his chest and cried, "We *must* not... lose..." and fell to the floor.

The cameras seemed to swing at random, as men rushed about confusedly. From somewhere a white man appeared, perhaps one of the technicians, with his own pistol. He hurried to the desk shouting, "For anarchy!" and shot Dr. Wilson point-blank. The white assassin turned, and the black assassin fired at him. The two killers began a cautious but noisy gun battle in the studio. Here most viewers turned off their sets. "In very poor taste," they thought.

The sign outside: "SECOND NATIONAL BANK OF OUR LORD, THE ENGINEER. UNIVERSAL CHURCH OF GOD OR SOME SORT OF COSMIC EMBODIMENT OF GOOD."

Above the entrance to the church fluttered a hastily made banner. The masculine symbol had been crudely painted on a white sheet; the white flag indicated that the worshipers were white males and that blacks and women were "welcome" at their own risk. The population was now split into four mutually antagonistic segments. The separate groups began to realize that there was some point in keeping their members together in little cadres. The streets and apartment buildings were death traps.

Inside the church the men were silent in prayer. They were led by an elderly deacon, whose inexperience and confusion were no greater or less than any in the congregation.

"Merciful God," he prayed, "in whatever Form the various members of our flock picture You, corporal Entity or insubstantial Spirit, we ask that You guide us in this time of direst peril.

"Brother lifts sword against brother, and brother against sister. Husband and wife are torn asunder against Your holiest ordainments. Protect us, and show us our proper response. Perhaps it is true that vengeance is solely Yours; but speak to us, then, concerning Limited Cautionary Retaliation, and other alternatives. We would see a sign, for truly we are lost in the mires of day-to-day living."

The deacon continued his prayer, but soon there began a series of poundings on the door. The deacon stopped for just a second, looking up nervously, his hand

straying to his sidearm. When nothing further happened, he finished the prayer and the members of the congregation added, if they chose, their amens.

At the end of the service the men rose to leave. They stood at the door, in no hurry *to* abandon the sanctuary of the church. At last the deacon led them out. It was immediately noticed that a yellow factsheet had been nailed to the outside of the door. The Roman Catholics of the neighborhood had decided to end the centuries-long schism. Why not now, when everybody else was settling their differences? A Final Solution.

A bullet split wood from the door frame. The men standing on the stoop jumped back inside. A voice called from the street, "You damn commie atheist Protestants! We're gonna wipe you out and send your lousy heretic souls straight to Hell!" More gunfire. The stained glass windows of the church shattered, and there were cries from inside.

"They got one of the elders!"

"It's those crummy Catholics. We should have got them when we had the chance. Damn it, now they got us holed up in here."

The next day a blue factsheet was circulated by the Jewish community explaining that they had finally gotten tired of having their gabardine spat on and that everybody'd just have to watch out. Around the world the remaining clusters of people fractured again, on the basis of creed.

It was getting so you didn't know *who* you could trust.

Stevie was heading back toward the city when the car went. It made a few preliminary noises, shaking and rattling slower, and then it stopped. For all he knew it might simply have been out of gas. There were eight days left in the prescribed thirty, and he needed a ride.

He took the rifle and the two pistols from the Imperial and stood by the side of the road. It was a lot more dangerous to hitch now than it had been before for the simple reason that the odds were that anyone who happened by would probably be on the other side of *one* of the many ideological fences. He was still confident, though, that he would be safely picked up, or be able to wrest a car away from its owner.

There was very little traffic. Several times Stevie had to jump for cover as a hostile driver sped by him, shooting wildly from behind the wheel. At last an old Chevy stopped for him, driven by a heavy white man whom Stevie judged to be in his late fifties.

"Come on, get in," said the man.

Stevie climbed into the car, grunting his thanks, and settled warily back against the seat.

"Where you going?" asked the man.

"New York."

"Um. You, uh, you a Christian?"

"Hey," said Stevie, "right now we ain't got any troubles at all. We can just drive until we get where we're going. We only have eight days, right? So if we leave off the questions, eight days from now *both* of us'll be happy."

"All right. That's a good point, I guess, but it defeats the whole purpose. I mean, it doesn't seem to enter into the spirit of things."

"Yeah, well, the spirit's getting a little tired."

They rode in silence, taking turns with the driving. Stevie noticed that the old man kept staring at the rifle and two pistols. Stevie searched the car as best he could with his eyes, and it looked to him as though the old man was unarmed himself. Stevie didn't say anything.

"You seen a factsheet lately?" asked the man.

"No," said Stevie. "Haven't seen one in days. I got tired of the whole thing. *Now* who's at it?"

The old man looked at him quickly, then turned back to the road. "Nobody. Nothing new." Stevie glanced at the man now, studying his face curiously. Nothing new.

After a while the man asked him for some bullets.

"I didn't think that you had a gun," said Stevie.

"Yeah. I got a .38 in the glove compartment. I keep it there, well, I'm less likely to use it."

"A .38? Well, these shells wouldn't do you any good, anyhow. Besides, I don't really want to give them up yet."

The man looked at him again. He licked his lips, appearing to make some decision. He took his eyes off the road for a moment and lunged across the seat in a dive for one of the loaded pistols. Stevie slammed the edge of his hand into the older man's throat. The man choked and collapsed on the seat. Stevie switched off the engine and steered the car to the side of the road, where he opened the door and dumped the still body.

Before he started the car again, Stevie opened the glove compartment. There was an unloaded revolver and a crumpled factsheet. Stevie tossed the gun to the ground by the old man. He smoothed out the wrinkled paper. The youth of the world, it proclaimed, had declared war on everyone over the age of thirty years.

"How you coming with that factsheet?"

The thin man in the green workshirt stopped typing and looked up. "I don't know. It's hard making out your crummy handwriting. Maybe another fifteen minutes. Are they getting restless out there?"

The man in the jacket gulped down some of his lukewarm coffee. "Yeah. I was going to make an announcement, but what the hell. Let 'em wait. They had their vote, they know what's coming. Just finish that factsheet. I want to get it run off and put up before them goddamn Artists beat us to it."

"Look, Larry, them queers'll never think of it in the first place. Calm down."

The man in the workshirt typed in silence for a while. Larry walked around the cold meeting hall, pushing chairs back in place and chewing his cigar nervously. When the stencil was finished, the man in the workshirt pulled it out of the typewriter and handed it to Larry. "All right," he said, "there it is. Maybe you better go read it to them first. They been waiting out there for a couple of hours now."

"Yeah, I guess so," said Larry. He zipped up his green jacket and waited for the man in the workshirt to get his coat. He turned off the lights and locked the door to the hall. Outside was a huge crowd of men, all white and all well into middle age. They cheered when Larry and the other man came out. Larry held up his hands for quiet.

"All right, listen up," he said. "We got our factsheet here. Before we go and have it run off, I'm going to let you hear it. It says just like what we voted for, so you all should be pretty satisfied."

He read the factsheet, stopping every now and then to wait through the applause and cheers of the men. He looked out at the crowd. They're all brawny veteran types, he thought. That's what we are: We're Veterans. We been through it all. We're the ones who know what's going on. We're the Producers.

The factsheet explained, in simple language unlike the bitter diatribes of other groups, that the laborers—the Producers—of the world had gotten fed up with doing all the work while a large portion of the population—the goddamn queer Artists—did nothing but eat up all the fruits of honest nine to five work. Artists contributed nothing and wasted large amounts of our precious resources. It was simple logic to see that the food, clothing, shelter, money, and recreational facilities that were diverted from the Producers' use were as good as thrown into the garbage. The Producers worked harder and harder and got back less and less. Well then, what could you expect to happen? Everything was bound to get worse for everybody.

The men cheered. It was about time that they got rid of the parasites. No one complained when you burned off a leech. And no one could complain when you snuffed out the leechlike elements of normal, organized, Productive society.

Larry finished reading the sheet and asked for questions and comments. Several men started talking, but Larry ignored them and went on speaking himself.

"Now, this doesn't mean," he said, "that we gotta get everybody that doesn't work regular hours like we do. You see that some of the people are hard to tell whether they're Producers like us or just lousy addict Artists. Like the people that make TV. We can use them. But we have to be careful, because there's a lot of Artists around who are trying to make us think that they're really Producers. Just

remember: If you can use it, it's not Art."

The crowd cheered again, and then it began to break up. Some of the men stood around arguing. One of the small groups of Producers that was slowly walking to the parking lot was deeply involved in debating the boundaries separating Artists and Producers.

"I mean, where are we going to stop?" said one. "I don't like the way this divisioning is going. Pretty soon there won't be any groups left to belong to. We'll all be locked up in our homes, afraid to see anybody at all."

"It's not doing us any good," agreed another. "If you go out and get what you want, I mean, take something from a store or something, why, everybody knows you got it when you bring it home. Then *you're* the target. I got less now than when this all started."

A third man watched the first two grimly. He pulled out a factsheet of his own from the pocket of his jacket. "That's commie talk," he said. "You're missing the point of the whole thing. Let me ask you a question. Are you right- or left-handed?"

The first man looked up from the factsheet, puzzled. "I don't see that it makes any difference. I mean, I'm basically left-handed, but I write with my right hand."

The third man stared angrily, in disbelief.

Bang.

YANG and YIN: Male and female. Hot and cold. Mass and energy. Smooth and crunchy. Odd and even. Sun and moon. Silence and noise. Space and time. Slave and master. Fast and slow. Large and small. Land and sea. Good and evil. On and off. Black and white. Strong and weak. Regular and filter king. Young and old. Light and shade. Fire and ice. Sickness and health. Hard and soft. Life and death.

If there *is* a plot, shouldn't you know about it?

One more hour.

Millions of people hid in their holes, waiting out the last minutes of the wars. Hardly anyone was out on the streets yet. No one shouted his drunken celebrations that little bit ahead of schedule. In the night darkness Stevie could still hear the ragged crackings of guns in the distance. Some suckers getting it only an hour from homefree.

The time passed. Warily, people came out into the fresher air, still hiding themselves in shadows, not used yet to walking in the open. Guns of the enthusiasts popped; they would never get a chance like this again, and there were only fifteen minutes left. Forty-second Street chromium knives found their lodgings in unprotected Gotham throats and shoulders.

Times Square was still empty when Stevie arrived. Decomposing corpses sprawled in front of the record and porno shops. A few shadowy forms moved across the streets, far away down the sidewalk.

The big ball was poised. Stevie watched it, bored, with murderers cringing around him. The huge lighted New Year's globe was ready to drop, waiting only for midnight and for the kissing New Year's VJ-Day crowds. There was Stevie, who didn't care, and the looters, disappointed in the smoked-out, gunfire black, looted stores.

It said it right up there: 11:55. Five more minutes. Stevie pushed himself back into a doorway, knowing that it would be humiliating to get it with only five minutes left. From the vague screams around him he knew that some were still finding it.

People were running by now. The square was filling up.

:58 and the ball was *just* hanging there: The sudden well of people drew rapid rifle-fire, but the crowd still grew. There was the beginning of a murmur, just the hint of the war-is-over madness. Stevie sent himself into the stream, giving himself up to the release and relief.

:59... The ball seemed... to tip... and *fell!* 12:00! The chant grew stronger, the New York chant, the smugness returned in all its sordid might. "We're Number One! We're Number One!" The cold breezes drove the shouting through the unlit streets, carrying it on top of the burnt and fecal smells. It would be a long time before what was left would be made livable, but We're Number One! There were still sporadic shots, but these were the usual New York Town killers, doing the undeclared and time-honored violence that goes unnoticed.

We're Number One!

Stevie found himself screaming in spite of himself. He was standing next to a tall, sweating black. Stevie grinned; the black grinned. Stevie stuck out his hand. "Shake!" he said. "We're Number One!"

"We're Number One!" said the black. "I mean, it's *us!* We gotta settle all this down, but, I mean, what's left is *ours!* No more fighting!"

Stevie looked at him, realizing for the first time the meaning of their situation. "Right you are," he said with a catch in his voice. "Right you are, Brother."

"Excuse me."

Stevie and the black turned to see a strangely dressed woman. The costume completely hid any clue to the person's identity, but the voice was very definitely feminine. The woman wore a long, loose robe decorated fancifully with flowers and butterflies. Artificial gems had been stuck on, and the whole thing trimmed with cheap, dimestore "gold-and-silver" piping. The woman's head was entirely hidden by a large, bowl-shaped woven helmet, and from within it her voice echoed excitedly.

"Excuse me," she said. "Now that the preliminary skirmishes are over, don't you think we should get on with it?"

"With what?" asked the black.

"The Last War, the final one. The war against ourselves. It's senseless to keep avoiding it, now."

"What do you mean?" asked Stevie.

The woman touched Stevie's chest. "There. Your guilt. Your frustration. You don't really feel any better, do you? I mean, women don't really hate men; they hate their own weaknesses. People don't really hate other people for their religion or race. It's just that seeing someone different from you makes you feel a little insecure in your own belief. What you hate is your own doubt, and you project the hatred onto the other man."

"She's right!" said the black. "You know, I wouldn't mind it half so much if they'd hate me because of *me*; but nobody ever took the trouble."

"That's what's so frustrating," she said. "If anyone's ever going to hate the *real* you, you know who it'll have to be."

"You're from that Kindness Cult, aren't you?" the black said softly.

"*Shinsetsu*," she said. "Yes."

"You want us to meditate or something?" asked Stevie. The woman dug into a large basket that she carried on her arm. She handed each of them a plump cellophane package filled with a colorless fluid.

"No," said the black as he took his package. "Kerosene."

Stevie held his bag of kerosene uncertainly and looked around the square. There were others dressed in the *Shinsetsu* manner, and they were all talking to groups that had formed around them.

"Declare war on myself?" Stevie said doubtfully. "Do I have to publish a factsheet first?" No one answered him. People nearby were moving closer so they could hear the *Shinsetsu* woman. She continued to hand out the packages as she spoke.

Stevie slipped away, trying to get crosstown, out of the congested square. When he reached a side street he looked back: Already the crowd was dotted with scores of little fires, like scattered piles of burning leaves in the backyards of his childhood.

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