

Something is stalking Ballenville. When people start going insane or vanish altogether, a teenager and a detective begin a desperate search for a creature that cannot possibly exist. What they discover is more bizarre than they could ever imagine.

Caruso

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# Caruso

## *Terror in the Caverns!*

Hurrying now, he was getting nervous. Getting lost in these caves was not a thought he relished. In his haste, he didn't notice the low, long object on the cave floor, even though he shined his light directly at it. As he passed, he didn't see the eye that opened up to follow his movements, an eye that saw very well in the low light of this cave. With his earplugs securely in place, he didn't hear when the object turned around and began to follow him.

In time, Tim came to another tunneled out section. There was light here, enough to see; he turned off his flashlight. "How far have I come?" he wondered aloud. When the tunnel took on a slight uphill slope, he figured that it must head north or northeast out of town. Tim started up the slope. At intervals, there were small cut out rooms or alcoves. He peered into each one as he went by. Stepping into one alcove, he looked around for a moment. He turned to step back into the main tunnel and came face to face with... it!

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# Caruso

Jim Turner

## Prologue

Old Joe was hungry. It had been another bad day. In fact the whole week had not gone very well. Lately, it seemed like there were a lot of bad days and this week Joe hadn't eaten since Tuesday. But this was Friday and tomorrow he would make his weekly trip to the shelter. A hot shower, a good meal, and he would be set for the next week. Still, he was hungry now. Ever since the Grand Opera House had been closed down, finding good places to make a buck was getting harder and harder. The Opera House was always a draw for people in the winter and since it closed three months ago people had no reason to come out into the cold. As the days warmed with the arrival of spring, Joe was hopeful of better times. Already he noticed more people on the streets, but it hadn't translated into more money. It was a point of pride with Old Joe that he tried not to hate anyone, but every rumble in his empty stomach gave him cause to curse the Mayor of this town. It was the Mayor who ordered the Opera House closed. Adding insult to injury, the Mayor had given a speech on the steps of the building only three months ago citing him—by name—as one of the reasons why the downtown area needed to be restored. It hurt, angered and embarrassed him that the Mayor would shut down and demolish his home, singling him out as the reason for doing it. He told himself that he didn't hate the Mayor, but somehow, somehow, he would get even.

In spite of his troubles, Joe could have eaten. There was the shelter if he was truly desperate but it was a personal obsession with him that he only go on Saturday. Slim as the pickings were, he had made a few bucks today but that went for a nice bottle of port. It would keep him warm against the cold night air, or so he reasoned, and he was feeling pretty warm right now after half a bottle. He'd gone to sleep hungry before and would do it again, so it wasn't too bad. Joe and the remainder of his bottle settled in to a small covered enclave behind the Opera House for the night. The concrete floor was hard, but it was covered and fairly protected from the wind. He

had made it his home for the last few years and it served him well. The other homeless people tended to congregate on the other side of the downtown and for some reason no one had ever moved in on his privacy. For that he was grateful. He used to panhandle right out front. Then, after things settled down, he would retire to the back of the Opera House. Now, there was usually no one around at all so it was quite a surprise when Joe heard sounds of someone shuffling around not far from him. Curious, he peeked out from his little enclave, looking up and down the alleyway—nothing. Then he heard it again; a shuffling, like the sound of someone dragging their feet when they walked. Still, he couldn't see anyone.

“Hello? Anyone there?” he asked, just a bit nervous.

No answer, just the shuffling sound again.

Joe stepped out into the alleyway to get a better look.

Again he asked, “Hello? Anyone there?”

Off in a dark corner of the alleyway a shadow began to rise separating itself from the surrounding darkness. Hungry, cold, and more than a little bit drunk, Joe thought this might be someone with food to share. He took a few steps towards the shadow.

Moving tentatively, he took a chance, “Hello, Friend? You got anything to eat?”

No answer. He went on, “I can start us a fire if you're cold? I have a little liquid warmth here I'd be happy to share.”

The shadow moved a bit, but still didn't speak.

Now Joe was very apprehensive. He tried one more time, “Hello friend, need a warm up? I can light us a fire. You wouldn't have a little bit of food for a poor old man?”

The shadow moved forward. Joe stopped. Finally the shadow stepped out into the light of a streetlamp. Food, cold, sleep all forgotten, Joe stared in disbelief. The shadow began to speak at him. The sound was terrible, like nothing he had heard before. It clawed at Joe's soul, threatened to drag the life force out of him. Demons rose in his mind spurred on by that awful sound. They added their voices

to the cacophony of sounds emanating from the fearsome maw of something horrible.

Joe screamed in terror! He dropped the bottle of port at his feet oblivious to the shattering glass and staggered backwards. The shadow moved toward him, still making that sound. That horrible sound, it filled Joe's mind with terror. The alley was spinning around him as he backed up. The shadow moved relentlessly towards him.

"No, No, get away!" he yelled, only half conscious of the words coming from his mouth.

He fell down, turned and tried to crawl away. He looked behind him and the shrieking shadow was almost on top of him. Terror overcame him, yet somehow he found the strength to get on his feet, turn and run with all his might out of the alley and into the cold night.

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Mrs. Cleary was tired. She had been at that silly Tupperware party all night. As usual, she bought stuff she didn't need, and in about a month she would add even more unused plastic oddities to her growing collection. She was mentally berating herself for giving in again. First, she had gone to the party against her better judgment, and then she had not been able to resist buying stuff. Bob wouldn't be mad of course, he never was. He would just use this as justification to go out and buy another tool, or toy, or whatever else they couldn't afford. Lost in her thoughts, she wasn't paying attention to where she was going until suddenly out of a dark alley, an old man ran madly into the street. Horrified, she slammed on the brakes! Tires screeching, the car slid toward the old man who stopped right in front of the car. He stared wildly at Mrs. Cleary, hands up in a vain attempt to protect himself. Somehow, as if by a miracle, the car stopped inches from the man.

For one long moment, they stared at each other and then the man began to cry out, "No, no, go away, go away, Aaaagh!"

*Jim Turner*

Before Mrs. Cleary could respond, the man turned and ran screaming into the night. The sudden adrenalin rush overwhelmed her and she began shaking, staring out at the street. After a few moments, calmed down, she regained control of her emotions and began to take a few deep breaths.

“That was Old Joe,” she thought. “Whatever in the world was wrong with him? I almost killed him, that crazy old man.”

She pressed the accelerator, nothing.

“What now?” she said confused for a moment.

She looked down at the gauges and saw that the car had stalled. She tried to start the car, nothing. Panic began to rise, but then she realized that the car was still in gear. She shifted to park, turned the key and to her immense relief, heard the reassuring sound as the engine roared to life. With a final heavy sigh, she composed herself, shifted into gear and drove away.

Mrs. Cleary never saw the dark shadow that watched her from the alley. She didn't see the eyes follow her as she drove away. She was unaware when those eyes looked back to where Old Joe had gone. She had turned the corner and was gone when the shadow paused for a moment as if trying to come to a decision and then finally disappeared back into the dark alley.



## Chapter 1

Tim Barker rolled out of bed to a bright Saturday dawn. He looked out the window, his eyes squinting against the morning sun. The eastern exposure of his bedroom window, a curse during the week when it took away ability to sleep in, was a blessing now that the weekend had come. As much as he hated to get up for school, he hated to waste a moment of any weekend.

“No school today, I love it,” he said to no one in particular.

Tim had homework to do, but that could wait until late Sunday night. For now he wanted to get a start on the day. He enjoyed a quick shower, dressed and went out to the kitchen. His father wasn't up yet and probably wouldn't be for another hour or so. As Chief of Police, George Barker always had to get an early start on his day. Saturday was the one day he could sleep in a bit. Tim grabbed the TV remote and started checking his recorded shows. He settled on the first of a week's worth of SpongeBob Squarepants recordings.

The TV playing in the background, Tim went back to the kitchen and started making breakfast. Weekends were the only times he and his father were able to eat breakfast together and it was a tradition that Tim cooked breakfast and had it ready for his dad on Saturday morning. It all started a couple of years ago when his mother had died suddenly, leaving Tim and his father alone. It was devastating for both of them, but especially for his father. To help get them through their mutual grief and take some of the pressure off his dad, Tim began assuming some of the domestic chores his mother had always done. In time, that translated into the Saturday morning ritual they now enjoyed. Even so, their relationship had never been the same. His father was distant and distracted. He worked too much and seemed to avoid the closeness they once shared. It hurt Tim, but he tried to understand. He was too well grounded and respected the memory of his mother too much to go off the emotional deep end, but it still hurt. The sound of the shower

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told him that his father was awake now. Breakfast was almost ready. Tim smiled, perfect timing as usual.

“I need to head down to the homeless shelter right after breakfast,” Tim reminded his father after they had finished breakfast.

George Barker replied, “OK, don’t forget to do your homework though. I have to work today, so if you need me, just call my cell. By the way, have I ever told you how proud I am that you are working down at the shelter?”

“Not lately,” Tim replied, quietly pleased that his efforts were noticed.

Once they finished breakfast, Tim cleared the table, tossed the dirty dishes into the dishwasher and headed out the door. At seventeen, Tim was able to drive and had his own car, but today was a nice day, so he decided to ride his bike. It was good exercise and besides, it was just plain fun. Helmet on; iPod in place; Tim took off out of his driveway. He hopped the curb, rode out into the street, turned the corner and hit the long hill that would take him down into central Ballenaville. He’d have to come back up that hill later, but that was okay by him. In fact, he’d probably go around the other way and ride through the back woods where the climb would be more gradual and the ride a whole lot more fun.

Ballenaville, a medium sized town with about twenty-five thousand people sits in a small valley isolated from the big urban population center by a state park in the mountain range to the west. This effectively cuts off the town from urban sprawl and leaves it with the feel of a small mountain town. Close enough to major metropolitan areas to have benefit of their populations yet far enough away to maintain its isolation, Ballenaville provides the best of both worlds. Sometime in the late 1800s, the town had the idea of building a large theatre. The Grand Opera House, as it became known, was for many years the cultural center of town. Given the proximity to a major population center, even in the 1800s, the Grand Opera House was able to draw top talent. Over the last twenty-five years, the annual opera season routinely sold out bringing great prosperity to

the downtown area. Recently though, the appeal of opera had dwindled and the city government had not been able to make the transition to other uses for the historic venue. About three months ago, the Mayor had ordered the Grand Opera House closed, announcing plans to have it torn down and replaced by a multiplex movie theatre and shopping center.

Tim coasted down the hill into town and then rode to the city center. As he rode down the street past the Opera House, a truck pulled up along side of him. Glancing over, he saw Billy Haverstrom behind the wheel with one of his ubiquitous friends beside him.

“Hey Timbo! What’s the matter, Daddy take away your driver’s license?” Billy asked. The pair laughed at the brilliant insult Billy had launched.

Tim had heard perfectly well, but pulled one ear bud off and said, “What?” He smiled at the reciprocal brilliance of his retort.

“Hey doofus!” Billy replied, “Think fast!” and suddenly jerked the wheel of his truck to the right.

Tim swerved to avoid the truck and only then saw the car parked directly in front of him. He turned quickly to the right, pulled back deftly on the handlebars and jumped the curb missing the parked car by inches. As he pulled onto the sidewalk, he saw Billy accelerate to cut him off at the end of the block. Tim turned right again into the walkway of a downtown shopping mall. He hopped a small stairway and pumped as fast as he could past a line of storefronts. Bike riding was illegal in the mall areas and if he were seen word would surely get back to his father. But Billy was acting crazy and Tim would rather face his dad than fight with a pickup truck. He sped along the walkway, carving a quick left turn to follow the walkway. He looked to the left and saw Billy hopping speed bumps in the parking lot in an effort to beat him to the end of the mall, but Tim had no intention of meeting him there. Just ahead was a small gap between buildings that led to the back access of the mall. He would take that and hopefully come out on a cross street opposite where Billy was. He looked back ahead just in time to see a lady step

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out of the Shoe Mart. She screamed. He swerved, barely missing her, and yelled, "Sorry!" back over his shoulder as he sped down the walkway.

He skidded to a right turning stop in front of the gap between buildings and then pedaled to the back of the mall. He made a right turn at full speed and headed for the street. Tim hit the street at full speed and made a wide left turn right in front of an oncoming car. He heard the screeching of tires as the car stopped just in time. Tim kept going and heard the fading curses of the driver as he sped back the way he had come. Past the Opera House he swung back to the right and into an alley. Through the alley, across the city park, through another alley, and he was suddenly four blocks removed from Billy.

Feeling safe Tim stopped for a moment to catch his breath and get properly connected to his iPod again. All set, he rode at a comfortable pace through the downtown and finally arrived at the homeless shelter. He parked his bike in a small room off the front entrance safe from potential thieves. His bike secure, Tim went into the shelter fully expecting, and hoping, to find his friend, Old Joe.

Ballenaville doesn't have many homeless, at least as compared to other towns, but they do have some. The homeless shelter was opened several years ago by some kind hearted folks who wanted to make sure that Ballenaville's homeless at least had a place to eat a hot meal and get cleaned up. They offered whatever services they could arrange and kept the doors open on especially cold nights to provide a warm place to sleep. Tim volunteered to work at the shelter as part of his community service project for school. As it turned out, he enjoyed it so much that he had just kept coming on weekends to help out. Over time, he and Old Joe had become pretty good friends. They spent hours visiting and Tim enjoyed the stories that Old Joe loved to tell. Old Joe seemed to appreciate the company and looked forward to their Saturday visits. Tim didn't make it down every Saturday, but there had never been a time when Old Joe hadn't been there.

Tim exchanged pleasantries with the folks as he walked in, “Hey Pete, what do you need help with today?”

Pete Roberts, who was in charge of the shelter, had a strange look on his face that bothered Tim. “Hey Tim, how are you this morning? Can you come in the back so we can talk for a minute?”

“Sure, what’s up?” Tim felt uneasy as he headed for the back room.

“Nothing about you Tim,” Pete said. Tim’s relief faded as Pete continued, “It’s about Old Joe.”

“Why, what’s going on? Where is Joe anyway? He’s usually here by now,” Tim replied with genuine concern.

Pete hesitated, as if unsure how to proceed, “Old Joe is in the hospital. When we came in this morning we found him on the steps of the shelter, crazy out of his mind. We tried to talk to him, but he was completely out of it. We had to call an ambulance and have him taken over to Mercy General.”

“What do you mean out of his mind? Was he drunk?” Tim tried to get his mind around what was going on.

“Not drunk Tim,” Pete explained. “We’ve seen Old Joe drunk before. This was nothing like that. He was scared. Terrified if you ask me. He was going on and on about a monster that was coming after him. He said it sang at him, and he kept screaming for it to go away. I’m no shrink, but he seemed psychotic to me. We felt that he needed to get medical attention.”

“That just doesn’t sound like Old Joe,” Tim replied. “I know he drinks, but I’ve known him for about a year now. He’s never acted strange before. Why now? He must be sick or something.”

Pete was skeptical, “I don’t know. He’s been living on the street for a long time. There’s a lot about him we don’t know and there’s a reason he’s homeless Tim. Listen, I hesitate to suggest this, but I know you are friends and you’re a pretty mature kid. Why don’t you go down to the hospital and look in on him. Maybe he’s doing better by now. At any rate, I’m sure a familiar face would be

*Jim Turner*

comforting to him. Just be prepared if he is still crazy. It really was frightening this morning.”

Tim left the shelter confused and upset. Going to the hospital was probably a good thing, but selfishly he hesitated. One thing was certain; he couldn't go alone. For a moment he thought about calling his dad, but then decided to call Suzy.

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“He is NOT a jerk, I love him!” Debbie protested.

Suzy was adamant, “Listen, Deb. Mike only wants one thing. He took that girl from Crosstown for a ride last year, and before that, he was with Sharice. She told me he tried to...”

Debbie interrupted her, “I know all that, but he's changed. He told me...”

“Girlfriend, you are just asking for trouble, I'm telling you...” Suzy's planned speech was interrupted by the buzz on her cell phone.

She reached for the phone, but Debbie was faster. “Speaking of jerks, it's a message from Tim.”

“He is not a jerk, a little dense maybe. Now give me the phone.”

Suzy reached for the phone as Debbie moved it into her other hand. Suzy reached again, lost balance and fell on top of Debbie. She climbed on top of her, trying to reach for the phone. In a second, they were rolling on the floor laughing as Suzy finally climbed over the top of her friend, and Debbie grudgingly let go of the phone.

Laughing Suzy opened the IM. Her smile faded as she read the post, “*Old Joe n bsptl cn u meet me?*”

“What is it?” Debbie asked sharing her friend's concern.

“Tim's homeless friend, Old Joe, is in the hospital. He wants me to meet him there.” Even as she spoke, she was typing her response, “*cu in 30, tc.*”

“I gotta go,” Suzy continued as she started gathering up her stuff.

“Oh sure, run to his side as if he would even notice. At least Mike knows how to treat a girlfriend.”

Suzy acted hurt, but she knew Debbie was only teasing. In fact, she was right. Still, she defended Tim, “He’s just a little slow. He’ll figure it out eventually. In the meantime, we are good friends.”

“Oh, you know that’s not true. He’s your boyfriend. He’s just too stupid to figure out that you’re his girlfriend. Has he even tried to kiss you yet?”

“I’ll never tell.” Suzy said flippantly as she headed out the door.

That was enough of an answer for Debbie. She knew Suzy was frustrated with Tim, but really did love him. Debbie thought, “Tim is a fool who doesn’t deserve someone like Suzy. Maybe she will eventually come to her senses and dump him. Oh well, what do I do now?” After a moment, she picked up her cell phone and dialed Mike’s number. Maybe they could go for a drive in the country or something.

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When Tim got to the hospital, he paused shivering slightly against the cold reminiscence of his last visit to this place. The passage of more than two years did nothing diminish the visceral pain he felt as memories of his dying mother flooded into his mind. He stood in the entryway frozen in time.

“Tim, are you okay?” Suzy came briskly up to the main door.

“Huh? Oh, I’m good, thanks for coming. I hope I’m not putting you out?”

“Of course not, what are friends for?” She gave him a friendly hug.

He responded enthusiastically, and the hug lingered tantalizingly, for just a moment. She looked up at him with hopeful eyes, ready to respond, willing him to kiss her. The moment passed. He relaxed his hug and their bodies parted.

“C’mon, let’s go in and see if we can find him.” She tried to hide her disappointment as she stepped up to the computer terminal.

“This must be him, on the second floor, room 204,” The volunteer at the front desk was helpful if a bit disinterested.

“Thanks. C’mon, it’s this way,” Suzy said as she headed off down the hallway with Tim in hot pursuit.

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“But dad, that’s what he said. The monster sang at me!” Tim tried explaining again as his father looked on in disbelief.

“Son, Old Joe has probably just gone senile, or maybe just had way too much to drink,” His father was skeptical, he continued, “...and I have something else to discuss with you anyway. A woman called my office today and said that someone who looked a lot like you almost ran her over in the downtown mall this morning. Do you know anything about that?”

Tim’s heart sank, “Yeah, that was me. I’m really sorry about that. Billy H. tried to run me over this morning. I couldn’t believe it. He pushed me right off the street. I cut through the mall to get away from him.”

“So you just decided to run folks down yourself, is that it? I expect more of you, Son.”

“Look, Dad, I’m really sorry about that, it was early, and most of the stores weren’t open. I thought...”

“Didn’t think is more like it! I thought you were responsible and mature. I’m beginning to wonder.”

“Dad, I’m sorry. I was just trying to get away from Billy. Next time I’ll be more responsible and let him run me down.” Tim instantly wished he’d thought before speaking.

“Don’t get smart with me young man. If anything like this happens again, I’ll ground you for a month.”

“Okay, okay, I understand, but can we get back to Old Joe?” Tim hoped to change the subject and he really did want to discuss this with his father.

“Don’t try to cover up your mistakes by making up stories. That bum is an old drunk. He probably doesn’t know what he says half the time. I’m surprised that you would use the ranting of an old



drunk to try and deflect this conversation. You need to be accountable.”

Tim seldom raised his voice to his father, but he did so now, “I’m NOT making up stories! Talk to Pete down at the shelter if you don’t believe me!”

Now George was angry, “Don’t you raise your voice with me! If you can’t act responsibly, don’t make up stories to divert attention! I have half a mind not to let you go back to that shelter anymore; it doesn’t seem to be doing you any good. Oh, and you had better make sure your homework is done for Monday!”

“My homework, what? Whatever... Look, I’m sorry I rode my bike! I’m sorry I cared about Old Joe, and I’m sorry I ruined my GPA with ONE A-minus last quarter, I’m a real screw up.” Livid, Tim turned and stormed out of the room.

“Don’t you walk out on me like that, get back here!” George yelled at Tim’s back.

“You want to ground me, ground me, I don’t care. I have homework to do!” Tim yelled back with as much attitude that he could put in his voice. He reached the end of the hall, went into his room, and slammed the door behind him.

Furious, George started down the hallway intent on giving his son a tongue lashing he would never forget. In reality, he was embarrassed and ashamed for losing control of the situation and demeaning his son. Halfway to the room, he stopped and thought that maybe he would go in apologize and listen to what Tim had to say. Instead, he rationalized that this would all be forgotten in the morning and things would be okay. They would talk then. For now, his stomach hurt. He turned and walked away, cursing himself for screwing up another conversation with his son.

## Chapter 2

Mrs. Eldridge always went for evening walks alone and tonight was no exception. *Once more, I asked that fat, lazy husband of mine to come along, and once more, here I am walking alone.* If her husband wasn't so rich, she would have left him a long time ago, but lazy as he was, he did provide for her and she was welcome in the upper echelon of local society. *Why, I even met the president once thanks to his connections.* She wasn't quite ready to give that up, so she went for her walks alone, kept up her health, and patiently waited for her time.

The Eldridges lived near downtown in a classic old house that dated from the late 1800s. It was a community showpiece and worth well over four million dollars. They could have moved anywhere they wanted over the years, but the ambiance and prestige of living in this old house in this upscale neighborhood always kept them there. Over the years, they had worked hard to keep it in good repair. Their parties were the talk of the town, especially the big social events following Opera performances. Since the Opera House was an easy walk from the house, it was a natural combination. Now, with the Opera House closed, the parties would be fewer, but still as lavish—Mrs. Eldridge would see to that. She thought about her next party, a fundraiser for the Mayor's election campaign. It was never too early to start raising money and it was good to have the Mayor in your debt. "That hadn't helped keep the Opera House open," she thought wryly as she strolled past its looming structure. She was sad to see it go and the thought of a commanding view of a multiplex cinema from her house irritated her. They might actually have to move to a different neighborhood after all these years. *The Mayor is going to owe me a great many political favors.* She continued her walk, lost in her thoughts.

The park behind the Opera House was well lit and generally safe at night, even though there were very few people down here these days. She had walked here almost every night for several years without a problem, so it came as a shock that as she walked past the

alley behind the theatre she heard a sound, almost like someone shuffling quickly along the ground. She stopped and looked behind her—nothing. She started walking again. Again, there was a sound, louder, closer. She looked behind her again. Was that a shadow over by the building in the bushes?

“Hello? Is anyone there?” she asked, unsure of what to do.

As if on cue, the shadow in the bushes began to rise up and move towards her. She stepped backwards instinctively as the shadow stepped out into the light. What she saw chilled her to the bone and for a moment she was frozen in fear. Then the shadow unleashed a screeching hissing roar. She screamed and turned to run. As she turned, she slipped and fell. Stunned, she lay still for a second and then tried to get up. Looking up, she saw the shadow right behind her; again it hissed and screeched. Mrs. Eldridge cried out one last time and mercifully passed out.

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Mr. Eldridge was worried. He looked out the window of his home one more time. It had been four hours since his wife had left. Normally, her walks lasted no more than one-half hour and here it was four hours later. He thought about going out and looking for her, but it was almost midnight now and quite frankly he wasn't sure where she walked. Reaching a decision, he picked up the phone. First, he filed a missing persons report with the police, then, unhappy with the police response, he called the Mayor and woke him up.

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