



The Man Upstairs, Ray Bradbury

## The Man Upstairs

HE remembered how carefully and expertly Grandmother would fondle the cold cut guts of the chicken and withdraw the marvels therein; the wet shining loops of meat-smelling intestine, the muscled lump of heart, the gizzard with the collection of seeds in it.

How neatly and nicely Grandma would slit the chicken's breast and push her fat little hand in to deprive it of its medals.

These would be segregated, some in pans of water, others in paper to be thrown to the dog later, perhaps.

And then the ritual of taxidermy, stuffing the bird with watered, seasoned bread, and performing surgery with a swift, bright needle, stitch after pulled-tight stitch.

But for all the miracle of surgery, the bird would never survive the operation. It was only transported immediately into a hell and poked and basted and cooked until such time as the other surgeons gathered at the festive board and took up their scalpels to attack.

This was one of the prime thrills of Douglas's eleven-year-old life span. The knife collection, itself, was an intrigue.

It lay abed in the various squeaking drawers of the large wooden kitchen table.

A magic table, from which Grandmamma, admittedly a rather kindly, gentle-faced and white-haired old witch, would draw paraphernalia for her miracles. The knives seemed to be most important in the dissection and investigation of chicken and other like fowl.

Altogether, moving his small lips, Douglas counted twenty knives of varying shapes and sizes. And each was unfailingly polished into a sharp

mirror in which he could find his red hair and freckles distorted brilliantly.

He was to be quiet while Grandmamma worked over her split animals. You could stand across the table from her, your nose tucked over the edge, watching, but any loose boy-talk might interfere with the spell.

It was a wonder watching Grandma brandish silver shakers over the bird, supposedly sprinkling showers of mummy-dust and pulverized Indian bones, muttering mystical verses under her toothless breath.

Douglas at last gathered courage under him like a coiled spring and let fly with:

'Grammy, am I like that inside?' He pointed at the chicken.

'Like what, child?'

'Am I like that, inside?'

'Yes; a little more orderly and presentable, but just about the same — '

'And more of it,' added Douglas, proud of his guts.

'Yes,' said Grandma. 'More of it.'

'Grandpa has lots more than me. His sticks out in front so he can rest his elbows on it, Grammy.'

Grandma laughed and shook her head.

Douglas said, 'And Lucie Williams, down the street, she — '

'Hush, child!' cried Grandma.

'But she's got — '

'Never you mind what she's got! That's different. You just shush up about Lucie!'

'But why is she different?'

'A darning-needle dragon-fly is coming by some day soon and sew up your mouth,' said Grandma, firmly.

Douglas retreated immediately, then thoughtfully came back with,

'How do you know I've got insides like that, Grandma?'

'I just know, that's all. Go 'way now.'

Scowling, Douglas thumped off to the living-room, still bothered about the wealth of knowledge obtainable from adults lacking absolute proof. They were so darn right. The house bell jangled.

Through the front-door glass as he ran down the hall, Douglas saw a straw hat. He opened the door, irritated at the continuous again-and-again jangle of the bell.

'Good morning, child, is the lady of the house at home?'

Cold grey eyes in a long smooth walnut-coloured face, gazed upon him. The man was tall, thin, and carried a suitcase, a brief-case, an umbrella under one bent arm, gloves rich and thick and grey on his thin hands, and wore a horribly new straw hat.

Douglas backed up. 'She's busy.'

'I wish to rent her upstairs room, as advertised.'

'We've got ten boarders in the house, and it's already rented, go away.'

'Douglas!' Grandma was behind him suddenly, forging along the hall. 'How do you do?' she said to the stranger. 'Won't you step in? Go right on upstairs. Never mind this child.'

'Quite all right.' Unsmiling, the man stepped stiffly in. Douglas watched them ascend out of sight, heard Grandma detailing the conveniences of the upstairs room. A suitcase bumped down on the upstairs floor, and soon Grandma hurried down to take linens from the linen-closet, pile them on Douglas and send him scurrying up to the newly rented room.

Douglas paused at the room's threshold. It was transformed simply by the man being in the room a moment. The straw hat lay on the bed, the umbrella leaned stiff against one wall like a dead bat with dark wings tucked. Douglas blinked at the umbrella. The man stood in the centre of the room, his suitcase at his feet.

'Here.' Douglas decorated the bed with linens. 'We eat at twelve sharp and if you don't come down the soup'll get cold. Grandma fixes it so it will, every time.'

The man counted out ten pennies, tinkled them into Douglas's blouse pocket. 'We shall be friends,' he said.

It was funny, the man having nothing but pennies. Lots of them. No silver at all, no dimes, no quarters. Just new copper pennies.

Douglas thanked him. 'I'll drop these in my dime bank when I get them changed into a dime.'

'Saving money, young fellow?'

'Got six dollars and fifty cents. This makes sixty cents. For my camp trip in August.'

'I must wash now,' said the tall, strange man.

Once, at midnight, Douglas had awakened to hear a storm rumbling outside, the cold hard wind shaking the house, the rain driving against the windows. And then, a bolt of lightning had landed outside the window with a silent, terrific pounding. He remembered that fear. That fear of looking around at his room, seeing it strange and terrible in the instantaneous light.

It was the same, now, in this room. He stood looking at the stranger. This room was no longer the same, but changed indefinably, because this man, as quick as a lightning bolt, had shed his light about it. Douglas did not like it.

The door closed in his face.

The wooden fork came down, went up with mashed potatoes. Mr. Koberman, for that was his name, had brought the fork and the wooden knife and spoon with him when Grandma called lunch.

'Mrs. Spaulding,' he had said, quietly. 'My own cutlery; please use it. I will have lunch today, but from tomorrow on, only breakfast and supper.'

Grandma bustled in and out, bearing steaming tureens of soup and beans and mashed potatoes to impress her new boarder, while Douglas

sat rattling his silverware on his plate, because he had discovered it irritated Mr. Koberman.

'I know a trick,' said Douglas. 'Watch.' He picked a fork tine with his fingernail. He pointed at various sectors of the table, like a magician. Wherever he pointed, the sound of the vibrating fork-tine emerged, like a metal elfin voice. Simply done, of course. He simply pressed the fork handle on the table-top, secretly. The vibration came from the wood like a sounding-board. It looked like magic. 'There, there and there!' exclaimed Douglas, happily plucking the fork again. He pointed at Mr. Koberman's soup and the noise came from it.

Mr. Koberman's walnut-coloured face was hard and firm and awful. He pushed the soup bowl away, his lips twisting, and fell back in his chair. Grandma appeared.

'Why, what's wrong, Mr. Koberman?'

'I cannot eat the soup,' he said.

'Why?'

Mr. Koberman glared at Douglas.

'Because I am full and can eat no more. Thank you.'

Excusing himself, Mr. Koberman walked upstairs.

'What did you do, just then?' asked Grandma at Douglas, sharply.

'Nothing. Grammy, why does he eat with wooden spoons?'

'You're not to question! When do you go back to school, anyway?'

'Seven weeks.'

'Oh, my land,' said Grandma.

Half-way to the second floor was a large, sun-filled window. It was framed by six-inch panes of orange, purple, blue, red and green glass. Some panes were yellow, some a wondrous burgundy.

In the enchanted late afternoons, when the sun fell through to strike upon the landing and slide down the stair banister, Douglas stood entranced by this window, peering at the world through the multi-coloured panes.

Now a blue world. Douglas pressed his nostrils against the blue pane, saw the blue-blue sky, the blue people and the blue street-cars and the trotting blue dogs.

Now — he shifted panes — there was an amber world. Two lemonish women glided by, looking like daughters of Fu Manchu. Douglas giggled. This pane made even the sunlight more purely golden, like taffy spilled on everything.

Douglas heard a noise above him. He knew Mr. Koberman stood outside his door, watching.

Not turning, Douglas observed. 'All kinds of worlds. Blue ones, red ones, yellow ones. All different.'

After a long pause, Mr. Koberman said, distractedly:

'That is true. All kinds of worlds. Yes. All different.'

The door closed. The hall was empty. Mr. Koberman had gone in.

Douglas shrugged and found a new pane.

'Oh! Everything's pink!'

It was simple as a rain-drop. Spooning his morning cereal, Douglas felt a simple, pure white flame of hatred stand inside him, burning with a steady, unflickering beauty. Upstairs, this morning, Mr. Koberman's door had been ajar, the room empty. He had looked in, with distaste.

It was Mr. Koberman's room now. Once it had been bright and flowery when Miss Sadlowe had lived there; full of nasturtiums and bright balls of knitting-cotton, bright pictures on the walls. When Mr. Caples had lived there it reflected him: his athletic vivacity, his tennis shoes on a chair, a disembodied sweater crumpled on the bed, wrinkled pants in the closet, cutouts of pretty girls on the bureau, but, now. . .

Now the room was Koberman Land. Bare and clean and cold and everything microscopically set in place. Not a microbe or dust-mote or oxygen cell existed in the room without having an appointed and irrevocable station.

Douglas finished breakfast, feeding simultaneously on one part buttered toast, two parts hatred. He walked up to the landing and stared through the coloured glasses.

Mr. Koberman strolled by below, on the sidewalk, on his morning exercise. He walked straight, cane looped on arm halfway to elbow, his straw hat glued to his head with patent oil. Mr. Koberman was a blue man walking through a blue world with blue trees and blue flowers and — something else.

There was something about Mr. Koberman. Douglas squinted. The blue glass did things to Mr. Koberman. His face, his suit — There was no time to fathom it. Mr. Koberman glanced up just then, saw Douglas, and raised his cane-umbrella as if to strike, then put it down swiftly and hurried to the front door. 'Young man,' he said, coming up the stairs, 'what were you doing?'

'Just looking.'

'That's all, is it?'

'Yes, sir.'

Mr. Koberman stood, fighting himself. The veins stood out on his face like small, grey wires. His eyes were deep black holes. Saying nothing, he went downstairs for another walk around the block.

Douglas played in his sand-box in the backyard for half an hour. At about nine-thirty he heard the crash and the shattering tinkle. He jumped up. He heard Grandma's slippers scuffing in the hall, hurriedly, then scuffing back to the kitchen. The screen door swanged open, on its wire-spring restrainer.

'Douglas!'

She held the old razor strop in her hand.

'I told you time and again never to fling your basketball against the house! Oh, I could just cry!'

'I been sitting right here,' he protested.

'Come in here! See what you done!'



The great coloured window-panes were tumbled in a rainbow chaos on the upstairs landing. The basketball lay on the ruins.

Before Douglas could even begin telling his innocence, Grandma struck him seven stinging whops on his rump. Screaming Douglas leaped like a fish, and wherever he landed he was whopped again! He sang an age-old song to his wild dancing.

Much later, hiding his mind in a pile of sand in the sand-box, like an ostrich, Douglas nursed his pain. He knew who'd thrown that basketball to shatter the coloured windows. A man with a straw hat and a stiff umbrella, and a cold, grey room. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He dribbled tears in the sand. Just wait. Just wait.

The thin, tinkling shuf-shuf-shuf noise was Grandma sweeping up the glittering debris. She brought it out back and cascaded it into the trash-bin. Blue, pink, white, yellow meteors of glass dropped brightly down. Grandma looked broken-hearted.

When she was gone, Douglas dragged himself over to save out three pieces of the precious glass; pink and green and blue. He had an idea why Mr. Koberman disliked the coloured windows. These — he clinked them in his fingers — would be worth saving.

Mr. Koberman worked nights and slept all day. Each morning at eight he arrived home, devoured a light breakfast, took a brief walk around the block, then climbed primly upstairs to sleep soundlessly throughout the day until six at night, when he came down to the huge supper with all the other boarders.

Mr. Koberman's sleeping habits made it necessary for Douglas to be quiet. Not being quiet by nature, frustration set in on him like a growing abscess.

Resultantly, when Grandma visited next door at Mrs. Eddy's or bought groceries at Mrs. Singer's, Douglas would vent his repressions by stomping up and down stairs beating upon a drum. Golf-balls, rolled

slowly down the steps, were also delightful. Followed by a quick shuttling of the house killing Indians and flushing all the toilets three times in succession.

After three days, Douglas realized he was getting no complaints. On the fourth day, after Grandma was gone to the store, he yelled outside Mr. Koberman's door ten minutes straight, without criticism.

Then, and only then, did he dare to try the door, carefully, and open it. The room was in half-light, the shades drawn. Mr. Koberman lay on top of the covers of his bed, in sleeping clothes, breathing gently, up and down. He didn't move. His face was motionless.

'Hello, Mr. Koberman.'

The colourless walls echoed the man's regular breathing.

'Mr. Koberman, hello!'

Bouncing the golf-ball, Douglas advanced. No response. He yelled. Still no answer. Mr. Koberman lay like a papier-mâché dummy, not complaining, his eyes shut.

'Mr. Koberman!'

Douglas searched the room with quick eyes. On the bureau rested the wooden eating utensils. This gave Douglas an idea. He ran and got a silver fork, came back. Picking the tines he held it close to the sleeping face.

Mr. Koberman winced. He twisted on his bed, groaning, muttering bitterly.

Response. Good. Swell.

Another ting of the fork. Mr. Koberman twitched in a nightmare of vibrations, but could not wake up. He didn't look as if he could, even if he wanted to.

Douglas remembered about the coloured glass. He drew a pink shard from his pocket and stared through it at Mr. Koberman.

The clothes dissolved off of Mr. Koberman. The pink glass had something to do with it. Or maybe it was the clothes themselves, being

on Mr. Koberman. Douglas licked his lips. He could see inside Mr. Koberman.

Mr. Koberman was — weird inside.  
Very weird. Very interesting.

He was beginning to enjoy himself when the front door banged.  
Grandma was home.  
Douglas had to come downstairs, frustrated, trying to look innocent.

When a slow heavy tread filled the hall, and a thick mahogany cane thumped in the cane-rack, that always meant Grandfather was home for the day. He arrived from his newspaper office each night, shortly ahead of the boarders, at five-fifteen, a copy of his own newspaper folded into his black coat-pocket along with a pink peppermint stick to be used expressly for spoiling Douglas's dinner-appetite.

Douglas ran to embrace the large stomach that was Grandpa's main defence against a vigorously long life-battle with circumstance. Grandpa, peering down over the cliff of that stomach, cried, 'Hello, down there!'

Seated in the great morris chair, his spectacles attached, Grandpa scanned the paper with a keen eye.  
'Grandma cut chickens again today. It's fun watching,' said Douglas.

Grandpa kept reading. 'Chickens? Again? That's twice this week. She's the chickenest woman. You like to watch her cut 'em, eh? Cold-blooded little pepper, Ha!'

Douglas felt the subterranean laughter explode down through the huge old bones, echo out on Grandpa's vibrant knee-cap.

'I'm just curious,' said Douglas.

'You are,' rumbled Grandpa, pursing his lips, scowling. 'I remember that day when the young lady was killed at the rail station. Didn't bother you a mite. You just walked over and looked at her, blood and all.'

'But, why shouldn't I look?'

'Doesn't it make you sick?' Grandpa put the paper aside.

'No.'

'Queer duck. Sensible, though. Stay that way, Dougie-boy. Fear nothing, ever in life. Life's full of things not worth fearing. Bodies are bodies and blood is blood. The only bad things are those we make in our minds. We teach each other fear. We learn certain reactions to certain stimuli. Death, for instance. Orientals deem it fairly fine and honourable to die. But some European cultures have trumped up sassafras about death being a dark horror. Why — '

He stopped blinked, swallowed, and laughed.

'What am I saying? You don't understand one word — '

'Sure I do. Go ahead, Gramps. It's fun.'

'Funny duck. Your father raised you funny. But then, him being a military man, and you so close to him 'till you come here last year.'

'I'm not funny. I'm just me.'

'There — ' Grandpa nodded, 'you have a point! There's no norm among humans, not really. Certain cultural norms, perhaps, but individual norms, no, no.'

This seemed like the moment ripened on the tree of time for picking. Douglas picked.

'Gramps, what if a man didn't have no heart, lungs or stomach?'

Grandpa was used to such questions. 'Why, then, I guess he'd be dead.'

'No, I don't mean that. I mean, what if he didn't have a heart or no lungs or no stomach but still walked around? Alive.'

'That,' rumbled Gramps, 'would be a miracle.'

'Besides,' said Douglas, swiftly. 'I don't mean a — a miracle. I mean — what if he was all different inside? Not like me.'

'Oh, I see. Umm. Well, he wouldn't be quite human then, would he, boy?'

'I guess not,' Douglas stared at the watch-fobbed stomach. 'Gramps. Gramps, you got a heart and a brain and lungs, Gramps?'

'I should live to tell you!'

'How do you know?'

'Uh — ' Gramps stopped. 'Well,' he had to laugh, 'tell the truth, I don't know. Never seen them. Never been to a doctor, never had an X-ray. Might as well be potato-solid for all I know.'

'How about me? Have I got a stomach?'

'You certainly have!' said Grandma, in the parlour entrance. 'Cause I feed it. And you've lungs, because you scream loud enough to wake the crumblees. And you've dirty hands, go wash them! Dinner's ready. Grandpa, come on. Douglas, git!'

She tinkled a little black lacquered metal bell in the hall.

In the rush of boarders streaming downstairs, Grandpa, if he had intentions of questioning Douglas further about the weird conversation, lost his opportunity. If dinner delayed an instant more, Grandma and the potatoes would develop simultaneous lumps.

The other boarders, laughing and talking at the table, Mr. Koberman silent and sullen between them — this attitude being attributed to liver trouble by Grandma — were put into a silent stasis by Grandfather who cleared his throat and spoke about the recent deaths in the town.

'Save that for later, when we drink our coffee,' said Grandma.

'It's certainly enough to make a newspaper editor prick up his ancient ears,' said Grandpa, carefully eyeing them all. 'That young Miss Larsson, lived over across the ravine, now. Found her dead three days ago for no reason, just funny kinds of tattoos all over her, and a facial expression would make Dante cringe. And that other young lady, what was her name? Whitely? She disappeared and never did come back.'

'Those things happen alla time,' said Mr. Peters, the garage mechanic, chewing. 'Ever peek in the Missing People's Bureau file? It's that long.' He illustrated. 'Can't tell what happens to most of 'em.'

Grandma cut in. 'Anyone want more dressing?' She ladled liberal portions from the chicken's sad interior. Douglas watched, thinking about how that chicken had had two kinds of guts — God-made and man-made.

Well, how about three kinds of guts?

Eh?

Why not?

Conversation continued merry about the mysterious death of so-and-so, and, oh yes, remember a week ago, Marion Barsumian died of heart failure, but maybe that didn't connect up, or did it, you're crazy, forget it, why talk about it at supper, on a full stomach? So.

Cigarettes fired, the diners idled lazily into the parlour, where Grandpa let somebody interrupt him on occasions when he needed breath.

'Never can tell,' said the garage mechanic. 'Maybe we got a vampire in town.'

'In the year 1927? Oh, go on now.'

'Sure. Kill 'em with silver bullets. Anything silver for that matter. I read it in a book somewhere, once. Sure, I did.'

Douglas sat on the floor looking up at Mr. Koberman who ate with wooden knives and forks and spoons, and carried only copper pennies in his pocket.

'It'd be poor judgment,' said Grandpa, 'to call anything by a name. We don't even know what a hobgoblin or a vampire or a troll is. Could be a lot of things. You can't heave them into categories with labels, and say they'll act one way or another. That'd be silly. They're people, people who do things. Yes, that's the way to put it — people who do thing's.'

'Good evening, everyone,' said Mr. Koberman, and got up and went out for his evening walk to work.

The radio was turned on. Card games were played. Ice-cream was bought and served later. Then, the good-nights, and into bed.

The stars, the moon, the wind, the clock ticking and the chiming of hours into dawn, the sun coming up, and here it was another morning, another day, and Mr. Koberman coming from his walk after breakfast. Douglas stood off like a small mechanism whirring and watching with carefully microscopic eyes.

At noon, Grandma went to the store to buy groceries. Douglas yelled outside Mr. Koberman's door for a minute, and then tried to enter. This time the door was locked. He had to run get the pass-key.

Clutching the pass-key, and the pieces of coloured glass nervously, he entered and closed the door and heard Mr. Koberman breathing deep. Douglas placed the blue glass fragment over his own eyes.

Looking through it, he found himself in a blue room, in a blue world different from the world he knew. As different as was the red world. Aquamarine furniture, cobalt bedclothes, turquoise ceilings, and the sullen dark blue of Mr. Koberman's face and arms, and his blue chest rising, falling. Also — something else.

Mr. Koberman's eyes were wide open, staring at him with a hungry darkness. Douglas fell back, pulled the blue glass from his face. Mr. Koberman's eyes were shut. Blue glass again — open. Blue glass away — shut. Blue glass again — open. Away — shut. Funny. Douglas experimented, trembling. Through the glass the eyes seemed to peer hungrily, avidly through the closed lids, like little flashlights. Without the blue glass they seemed tight shut.

But it was the rest of Mr. Koberman's body. . .

Douglas must have stood amazed for five minutes. Thinking about blue worlds, red worlds, yellow worlds, side by side, living together like glass panes around the big white stair window. Side by side, the coloured panes, the different worlds; Mr. Koberman had said so himself.

So this was why the windows had been broken. At least partially why.

'Mr. Koberman, wake up!'

No response.

'Mr. Koberman, where do you work at night? Mr. Koberman, where do you work?'

A little breeze stirred the blue window shade.

'In a red world or a green world or a yellow one, Mr. Koberman!'

Over everything was a blue-glass silence.

'Wait there,' said Douglas.

He walked out of the room, walked downstairs to the kitchen and pulled open the great squeaking drawers where all the knives lay gleaming. He picked out the sharpest, biggest one. Very calmly he walked into the hall, climbed back up the stairs again, opened the door to Mr. Koberman's room and closed it.

Grandma was busy fingering a pie-crust into a pan when Douglas entered the kitchen to put something on the table.

'Grandma, what's this?'

She glanced up briefly, over her glasses. 'I don't know.'

It was square, like a box, and elastic. It was bright orange in colour. It had four square tubes, coloured blue, attached to it. It smelled funny. Not good but yet not bad.

'Ever see anything like it, Grandma?'

'No.'

'That's what I thought.'

Douglas left it there, went out of the kitchen. Five minutes later he returned with something else. 'How about this?'

It resembled a bright pink linked chain with a purple triangle at one end.

'Don't bother me,' sniffed Grandma. 'It's only a chain.'

He went away. Next time he came with two hands full. A ring, a square, a pyramid, a rectangle — and other shapes. 'This isn't all. Lots more where this came from.'



Grandma said, 'Yes, yes,' in a far-off tone, very busy.

'You were wrong, Grandma.'

'About what?'

'About all people being the same inside.'

'Stop talking nonsense.'

'Where's my piggy-bank?' he asked.

'On the mantel.'

'Thanks.'

He tromped into the parlour, reached up for the piggy-bank.

Grandpa came home from the office at five-fifteen.

'Grandpa, come upstairs.'

'Sure, son. Why?'

'Something to show you. It's not nice. But it's interesting.'

Grandpa chuckled, followed his grandson's feet up to Mr. Koberman's room.

'Grandma mustn't know about this; she wouldn't like it,' said Douglas.

He pushed the door wide. 'There.'

Grandfather gasped.

Douglas remembered the last scene all the rest of his life. Standing over the naked body, the coroner and his assistants. Grandma, downstairs, asking somebody, 'What's going on up there?' and Grandpa saying, shakily, 'I'll take Douglas away on a long vacation so he can forget this whole ghastly affair. Ghastly, ghastly affair!'

Douglas said, 'Why should it be bad? I don't see anything bad. I don't feel bad.'

The coroner shivered and said: 'Koberman's dead all right.'

His assistant sweated. 'Did you see those things in the pan of water and in the wrapping paper?'

'Oh, My God, My God, yes, I saw them.'

'Christ.'

The coroner bent over Mr. Koberman's body. 'This better be kept secret, boys. It wasn't murder. It was a mercy the boy acted. God knows what may have happened if he hadn't.'

'What was Koberman — a vampire? a monster?'

'Maybe. I don't know. I don't know anything. Something — not human.'

The coroner moved his hands deftly over the suture.

Douglas was proud of his work. He'd gone to much trouble. He had watched Grandma carefully and remembered. Needle and thread and all. All in all, Mr. Koberman was as neat a job as any chicken ever popped into hell by Grandma.

'I heard the boy say that Koberman lived even after all those things were taken out of him. Kept on living. God.'

'Did the boy say that?'

'He did.'

'Then, what killed Koberman?'

The coroner drew a few strands of sewing thread from their bedding.

'This — ' he said.

Sunlight blinked coldly off a half-revealed treasure trove; six dollars and seventy cents' worth of silver dimes inside Mr. Koberman's chest.

'I think Douglas made a wise investment,' said the coroner, sewing the flesh back up over the 'dressing' quickly.

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The end