

## Mezzo Millimetro

by Caitlynn Cummings

It wasn't the architecture in Rome that captivated me. Not the marble in the Pantheon. Not the pulsing history of the *foro*. Not the charming serpentine streets or the glassed-in *Ara Pacis*. It wasn't the thrilling danger and graffiti of San Lorenzo. Nor the thefts and cleverness of Termini. Not the deep-fried zucchini blossoms. Not the *caffè corretti*. Not the ancient Tiber. Not even the sublimity of Bernini's Daphne, her back turning to bark. Nor was it Mussolini's EUR, though that was closer.

It was Shelley's ponytail.

The metro ride to the EUR was uneventful: a handful of stops on the B line toward Laurentina from Termini. I peeled myself off the orange vinyl seats — thighs sticking, skirt clinging — and exited the bowels of the subway to an entirely different city. Ten kilometres from romantic Rome, postcard Rome, this was a ghost town, though that connotes the Wild West. This was more like a fascist hospital. Gleaming. White. Orderly.

I wandered the streets of an Italy where Mussolini won. Wide boulevards, symmetry, impositions. I felt extremely small. Twice I wondered how long ago I had washed my hands. The blinding façades made me feel dirty. I scanned my map for the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, the square colosseum. When I saw its stairs, I did a double take. The small specks moving across it were people. The flight was as tall as an apartment building, and atop it the austere *palazzo* sanitized the concept of a colosseum into a fear-mongering block.

A sharp voice made me jump. "*Vada alla piramide. Questo è noioso: Fendi, Mussolini. Noioso.*" The man beside me, mid-thirties, was eating a sandwich from a baggie and looking at the building like his tuna was off.

"*Scusa. Parla inglese?*" Why hadn't I chosen French to master? At least I knew more than reverting to English in French.

He pried his eyes off the monstrosity and spoke to me like I was an office worker asking the IT guy how to save a Word doc. "*Pi-ra-mi-de. Vada.*"

Pyramid? I found Piramide di Caio Cestio on my map, a few stops back on the metro line. "This?" I pointed to the map.

"*Sì. Vada fuori di qui. Si salvi.*" He sauntered off to his cubicle and C++, I assumed. I looked at my phone and swiped away another "Where are you?" message from my supervisor. 2pm, was that lunch time here?

I read Airbnb's writeup of the pyramid neighbourhood en route.

"Testaccio is in-your-face, no-holds-barred Rome. On the edge of the old city, it sports a solitary ancient ruin —"

Aha! The pyramid of Gaius Cestius. Chalky grey stones led up to an impossibly pointy top, tufts of green grass bursting from the sides. Quite a nice grave marker, Gaius.

"that seems almost an afterthought —"

Not to that IT guy. He was insistent.

"Testaccio's delightfully cramped restaurants and nightclubs are the opposite of trendy. Instead, their inelegance succeeds in making the neighbourhood wildly popular with Romans who value exquisite food and bawdy fun more than seeing-and-being-seen —"

I ambled through the covered market. It was clear the Testaccians worshipped food. A shopkeeper entreated me — "*Provi! Provi!*" — to try a piece of his jerky. It was delicious, lean and spicy. I learned later, after consulting the C pages of my dictionary, that *coppiette di cavallo*

was horse meat. I wondered if any *cavalli* would make their way onto my second language defence. That word I'd remember.

"If you tire of gazing at fading frescoes or feeling like the frumpiest person around, Testaccio is the spot for you."

A) who could tire of frescoes? B) who are you calling frumpy, Airbnb?

I made my way back to the pyramid and got caught up in the Protestant Cemetery, as all good students of poetry do. Percy Bysshe Shelley clearly had the strongest epitaph game: short and sweet, apropos death-wise, and from *The Tempest*. John Keats' was like a head of those extensions that go on and on and on. Cut it. Enough preamble.

The Romantics had a museum here too, didn't they: Goethe Keats? Shelley Byron? My Italian SIM confirmed the Keats-Shelley Memorial House existed up near the Spanish Steps. I quickly Googled Balduina, a neighbourhood also in the North, where some second cousins once removed on my dad's side lived. Good, nope, Balduina was up past the Vatican.

There it lay, in a box of crushed velvet that at a glance looked like a white mould, perfectly at home on the outside of an English cottage. And the box was sizeable: 11 inches wide? The tress took up two thirds of it. It coiled around and through itself, like a super thick toupee, like Donald Trump's dream. I wondered how long it would be if you could unravel it, lay it out in a straight line.

It was cut so 13-year-old Shelley could come of age, start distinguishing himself from girls. I twirled my ponytail. Apparently the tress was kept as a good luck charm. I couldn't take my eyes off it. I swear it was fluffy, like someone had recently brushed it. Was that a job: head curl comber? Senior artifact primer? A 211-year-old ponytail. I could barely contain myself.

The museum also had locks of Milton's, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's, Keats', and Leigh Hunt's. But they were small: a wisp here, a wisp there. I kept gravitating back to Shelley's. What a manly tress.

I left the museum in a daze, sat on the Spanish Steps, and French-braided my hair absentmindedly.

I visited the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri on Piazza Della Repubblica, admittedly because I was searching for a reputedly shmancy McDonalds. My reviews were out of date. The location had closed in 2013. My barbaric North American curiosity averted, I entered the church instead. A modern sculpture of the head of St. John the Baptist, bands wrapped around his face, caught my eye. His hair was short and curly, in the classical mode, though usually John gets the privilege of being the only dude besides Jesus to wear his hair long.

As in so many of Rome's buildings, there was marble everywhere. But it was the flickering that drew me. I lit two candles for my dad, plucked some of my own hair, and burned a few strands in the flames. I tried to pick the rogue grey ones, but it was hard to tell in the dim light. Oh, to have an *ornatrix*. The ancient Romans had slave hairdressers to pluck out their melanin-deprived strands, and create any updo they fancied.

An older Italian woman a few meters away began to sniff audibly, so I beelined for the doors.

The Keats-Shelley museum became my daily haunt. I said I was a grad student doing research. My thesis: Romantic Poets and the Body, Particularly the Upper Head. It wasn't a lie, exactly. My dissertation was about (prairie) poets (like Robert Kroetsch). But first I had to pass those damned language requirements. My dad wasn't the sort of fourth-generation Italian descendent

who spoke *la dolce lingua*. The staff were obliging, if bemused. I also began to learn the language in earnest, with a private tutor.

*“Il peggio era la pasta troppo cotta e il fatto che avevo dimenticato il mio spazzolino da denti.”*

“I didn’t catch all that.”

My tutor moved her mouth slowly and carefully around the translation. “The worst part was the overcooked pasta and the fact I forgot my toothbrush.”

*“Quale tipo di libro è questo?”* I asked, laughing. *“Molto americano, molto imbarazzante.”*

*“Sei americana!”*

*“Attenzione, Eufemia! Sono canadese. Molto differente.”*

*“Allora, che cosa vuole imparare questa canadese? Niente pasta, niente spazzolino da denti. Che altro?”*

*“I capelli.”*

“Hair? How will that help you on your language exam?”

*“What’s the word for split ends? Come si dice flat iron?”*

I like hair-like words, hairesque turns of phrase: hardy har har, harebrained ideas, Hardy boys, hara-kiri, Harlequins, harems, and haricots. But why stop there? When you escape from the pub by a hair’s breadth after letting your hair down, likely the next morning you’ll have the hair of the dog. You’ll probably be in your roommate’s hair, annoying them with your immature goings-on. The mere sight of you might make her hair stand on end, when she has not a hair out of place. Or maybe she’ll not turn a hair, having seen this behaviour dozens of times. You’ll try to convince: it puts hair on one’s chest! She’ll say: you’re destroying your liver. You: Let’s not split hairs.

And then I learned Italian with Eufemia. *Capelli* — 2 l’s, like those straight cuts, Cher-style. Not to be confused with *cappello*, hat, 2 p’s. And *capo* — boss. A *cappella* in the chapel, singing. *Il capitolo*, the chapter. I went to *biblioteche* just to pick up books and look at their contents pages. Chapter 1, Chapter 2. *Il capitello*, the capital. I mean I was in Rome, so there was that. Even *cappuccini*. I got shivers every time I sidled up to a bar. I always noticed the barista’s head: usually balding, a wreath of hair around the ears. If he were Caesar he would hide his receding hairline with laurel.

*“Certo, I know some of these words,”* said Eufemia. *“But why don’t we visit my friend Assunta? She is a buona parrucchiera. She works in San Lorenzo, near the università. Very trendy cuts, alla moda.”*

The graffiti in San Lorenzo was amazing: pastel portraits of young girls, the Virgin Mary, Ray Charles with his mouth agape. Eufemia’s heels clacked over the irregular sidewalks, cracked here, akilter there. *“L’arte da strada è meravigliosa qui. Tanto vigorosa, tanto giovanile.”*

She seemed so proud of this district, so excited. *Ragazzi* walked by with their hair gelled this way and that, undercuts, various shades of the rainbow. What did the *studenti* want with their hair? What was it there for? To show they were counterculture, that they owned their own bodies, to proclaim they were creative? Not “a creative” like in Toronto or New York: not a watered down graphic designer. This was something else.

Assunta’s shop had no name, or none that I could see. Only an oversized pair of scissors hanging above the doorway, like mistletoe, like an impending guillotine, indicated the establishment’s purpose. I thought about kissing Eufemia as we entered.

Assunta was finishing up with a client when Eufemia bounded in, bestowing a kiss, two, three, on her friend's cheeks. Hairdressers seemed to hand-talk just as exaggeratedly as the average Italian, but with shears it seemed more dangerous than usual.

"Eufemia, *che sorpresa!*" Kiss, kiss. "*E chi è questa ragazza?*" She thrust the shears at me.

"I've brought a friend," said Eufemia, "who is obsessed with hair."

Assunta switched to English with no problem. "Fantastic, just like me." I too got the *bacia* treatment, inhaling the hairdresser's ammonia-lavender smell as I was kissed.

I quizzed Assunta for an hour on vocabulary, jotting down each word and phrase in my notebook. *La forfora* — dandruff — that was a good one. As things were winding down, she asked me, "but why do you want to know?"

I blushed. I've developed a thing for hair. I'm not sure if it's in the DSM-V. Maybe it's called strandophilia. That's a lie, I've looked it up. There's trichophilia, but I don't have the erotic overtones. And there's trichotillomania, pulling one's hair out, but that's not it at all. Hair fascinates me, is all. "I've always wanted to be a *parrucchiera*." Lies like angel hair pasta, spilling from my lips.

"Brava," said Assunta. "But your hair, is this how you like it?"

I caught a glance of my long dark tresses in the mirror.

"*Molto mediavole, no?*" She picked up her scissors and moved toward my mane, summoning inspiration. "Maybe a few layers, or an undercut here?" The shears brushed my hair and I recoiled.

"No, *per favore*. No, *assolutamente no*." It was involuntary.

"Okay, okay." Assunta backed away and shot a look at Eufemia.

My face burned. "*Mi dispiace*. It's just taken so long to grow it out, that's all. A big investment. All those months and years and then you don't want to cut it because it's your look. You know how it is, right?"

"Sì, *ho capito*," said Assunta.

She had been so nice. I didn't want to spurn her. "Well maybe my *doppie punte*."

"What's that?" asked Eufemia.

Assunta laughed. "*In inglese?* The ends that are split."

I started dating men with different haircuts. The lawyer with the soft brown locks flopping to one side: *noioso*. The artist with DIY lightning bolts shaved into his temples: *brutto*. The tour guide with the natural 'fro: *inavvicinabile*. By the end of my fourth date, a nurse with a military-style buzz cut, I was demoralized. Nothing in common. No sparks. *Niente*.

I was about to give the whole thing up, the fantasy of every North American woman traveller, an Italian romance — we've seen *Stealing Beauty*, *Roman Holiday*, *Under the Tuscan Sun* (then we've read Frances Mayes' actual book and realized she was married to an American the whole time) — until I met a man with long hair at the Galleria Borghese. It was in front of a painting by Raphael, *La Dama col Liocorno*. The subject's hair was a burnished gold, curled in long cylinders on each side of her face. Baby hairs escaped forward and clung to her cheek. What she held in her lap required a double take: a sheep? A horse? The horn and title should have given it away: a unicorn.

As I gazed at the pet's fur, a man beside me piped up. "It was a dog originally." An Italian in his late 30s: chiselled jaw, tanned face. Dark hair cascading down his cheeks, neck, shoulders. He continued: "And Raffaello abandoned the painting halfway through. Another painter finished it. There have been many modifications over the years."

"*Interessante*," I said.

His head whipped to a group of students tittering over a Correggio painting with an angel and a naked woman. His locks Herbal Essenced. “*Silenzio!*” he boomed.

I jumped.

“Excuse me, sorry, they are my students.”

At least he wasn’t yelling at random twenty-somethings. “You’re a professor?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Yes, it is a cliché. An Italian art history professor.”

“When God gives you sheep, you make wool clothes, right?”

“Is this an English idiom?”

“No.” What was coming out of my mouth?

“The unicorn almost looks like a sheep, doesn’t it?”

Relief. “It does! I was just thinking that.”

Half of his kids were already in the next room. “I’m afraid I must follow my herd, but can we see each other again? *Mi chiamo Giuseppe.*”

His hair was deliciously wavy. One more try. “*Certo, sono* Juniper. Where and when?”

I remember it was right before town, on the highway near the Peavey Mart. So embarrassing. He had one of those low ponytails, right at the nape of the neck. His hair was thin, so at best it was about the size of a roll of quarters, and fizzled out into a wavy rat tail. Every time we went out I was mortified. My friends all had normal dads with normal dad hair, i.e. short. I usually asked him to wait in the car, so I could limit the number of kids who would see him. We were in the half ton, about to get into town, and CKUA was on. Boring, boring talk radio. Why was there even an AM dial? The guy was droning on and on, his lame voice drilling into my head like an auger. I couldn’t take it anymore. “Dad, your hair is gross!” He was caught off guard, obviously, so just looked over to me in confusion. My social barometer was already malfunctioning, so I doubled down: “You can’t still be a hippie with long, gross hair. You’re too old and it’s the nineties!” I don’t even remember how he reacted. I do remember staring out the window and watching the car dealerships roll by. No men in those parking lots had long hair.

I met Giuseppe that night at an *osteria* in Trastevere. He was lovely, the *cacio e pepe* was lovely, his hair was in a ponytail.

“What are the famous Roman cocktails?” I asked him.

He took me through all the drinks Campari figured in, and I ordered each one, drinking them throughout the meal. He opted for wine and forgave my cute American quirk.

“I love the *sbegroni nagliato*,” I said. He looked at me indulgently.

We skipped dessert. I wanted to get home.

I invited him up. No nightcap, no coyly sitting on the couch. I led him directly to the bed, straddled him, and ripped out his ponytail holder, transferring it to my wrist. He winced, but his hair fell beautifully over his shoulders. As we kissed I felt his stubble graze my lips and cheeks. I ground my face harder into his, intensifying the chafe, feeling each whisker. He flipped me under him, presumably to regain control. The light behind his head now illuminated his hair like an aureole: perfect. His locks swung rhythmically with his body. I grabbed one side of his hair and tugged, his neck craning to the left. Then I snatched the other.

I can only imagine now how my dad felt. He took me everywhere. I was his only child. He was always so proud to introduce me to his cronies, parade me around the seed pool, the Co-op Cafe. And I loved him, I really did. But the tweens hit and suddenly you’re an asshole. He cut his ponytail off that week, though I’m not sure he did it. Maybe he went to a salon. He must have. Jesus, he probably cried in the chair; he was a sensitive dude. Not because he was losing his hair, the one vestige of his 70s glory days. Because his little girl was embarrassed of him.

He died two months ago.

Giuseppe grew tired of my hair-pulling, finished, and left quickly. I heard him mutter “*americane violente*” as he tied his leather shoes and jetted.

If I were sober I would have been mortified. Fortunately the Campari cast everything in a rosy haze. I went to the bathroom to clean up, and noticed my right hand was numb. I pulled Giuseppe’s elastic off my wrist. It had left a deep purple imprint. Liquid liner was smeared across my eyelids to my temples. The pillows had backcombed my hair into a staticky beehive, though much still streamed to my waist. A medieval Amy *Vinocasa*. My fingers snagged as I tried to run them through. My mom’s refrain chimed in my ears: *pain is beauty!* I ripped the knots apart. The sound of tearing, that burning pull at the scalp.

The only thing I was accomplishing was snarling my hair further and adding tear stains to my KISS makeup.

He’s dead. My father is dead. My father had a ponytail. I cut off his ponytail. I wear my hair long. I get the boys. All the boys except my dad, because he is dead. My dad is dead. He had brown hair with a slight wave. The brown turned to grey. Then it turned to dead. Is his hair still growing? Can we dig him up to see? I could catch a flight, be there in 12 hours. I should probably see if it’s still growing, shouldn’t I? Is that what people do? *Morte, amore, morass*, moustache.

My Airbnb host really had thought of everything: blow dryer, straightener, *rasoio elettrico*. 5 stars for sure.

I became Britney Spears, tears and shedding and shearing, visions of Shelley’s ponytail, measurement comparisons, undercuts, and overcuts. I ran my hands over my stubbly skull. My fingers trembled. What had I done?

Wigs. I would donate my hair for cancer (I had the foresight to elastic my ponytail before cutting at the nape of the neck). The bound tress hung over the sink’s edge. This plan, a plan, steadied me a bit.

I looked like Dr. Evil’s cat. He’d think I was such a drama queen. He was still dead. This did not resurrect him. I laughed. He could do a mean Austin Powers impression. Wigs, groovy baby.

In the morning I showered the night off me. I grabbed a pashmina I had bought in the Porta Portese market, wound it around my head, and knotted it in place. I did always admire Erykah Badu. I stepped into the Roman pre-dawn and darted from my apartment in Trastevere to Assunta’s shop in San Lorenzo. The five kilometres felt different this early. I passed street sweepers, bone-weary revellers from the night before, and a surprising amount of retirees. I watched the pinks and peaches spill over the sides of buildings as I walked east. The scene filled me with hope. Maybe it took an American pop star breakdown to help me feel lighter. Granted, I had lost a pound of hair. I had also nicked my scalp in a bunch of places I hoped Assunta could disinfect.

My dad had always loved long hair, and not just on himself. When I was a kid, every night after I had my bath he would comb my hair — *but use the boar bristle brush when it’s dry, Juniper, to make it extra shiny!* — and press his finger on my back where my hair ended. *Your hair is this long!* It felt good. Eventually I rebelled against him, against patriarchy, and got a pixie cut.

But this cut wasn't rebellion, it was communion. The loss of my hair, the loss of him, would be transformed into healing for someone else. Maybe a cute cancer *bambina* would wear my old hair.

The steel shears came into view and I saw the *chiuso* sign. Of course Assunta's would be closed, who would want a haircut this early? I ordered a *cappuccino* and *cornetto* at the bar around the corner, and fumbled my way through reading the daily *giornale*. Old men sat at the tables around me, silently sipping their *espresso* or hobnobbing with their cronies.

More and more patrons trickled in to get their daily pastry and slug of coffee. I headed to Assunta's and found her at the back, reading her newspaper and sipping from a cup. Maybe she had a moka pot in the office.

"Buona mattina, Assunta."

"Juniper, hello! Whatever are you wearing on your head? Are turbans in now?" Her laugh was like a wind chime. She looked great, pants tailored exquisitely, so chic.

"It's a funny story, actually."

Her smile drooped. "I don't like the sound of that. Do you need to sit in a chair?"

I blushed. "Sì, certissimo."

"Perdio, what have you done?" She sat me down and moved her hand toward my scarf. "May I?" She had learned her lesson about my skittishness.

I nodded.

She gently unwound the pashmina until she could see my head, the slow unwrapping of a mummy. She gasped so loud two of her colleagues came to see what the fuss was about.

"Juniper, *carina*, what happened to you?"

"I did it."

"But why?" She ran her fingers over my uneven shave. "You have cuts. *Dio*."

"It's a long story. Can you fix it?"

"There is no fixing," said Assunta's redheaded colleague. "Fixing is past."

"Shh, Francesca. Yes, of course I can fix. It is my job."

She led me over to the sinks and ran tepid water. She delicately wet my scalp and smeared soap over it. I winced.

"I know it hurts, but it is for babies. It only baby hurts."

If this was baby shampoo, I quaked at the thought of using the normal bottle ever again. She washed my head and gently massaged in an oil meant to restore scalp health.

I was suddenly the salon's stray dog. Women fluttered around me, cooing. One hairdresser made me a *cappuccino*; another massaged my hands with moisturizer while Assunta did her work.

Back at Assunta's chair, she threw my pashmina over the mirror. "We don't need to see right now. You will like it afterward."

I could tell she was using an electric razor, I assumed to even out my choppy job. After that she used a smaller implement here and there. Was she attending to my cuts? She couldn't be feathering what little hair I had left.

After what felt like an eternity, she finished and spun me around. "Are you ready?"

I nodded and put my glasses back on. Her colleagues beamed behind her. *Dio*, what was I in for? She whipped the pashmina off the mirror. My buzz had been evened out, not a single tuft askew or shaggy. As I turned to the left, I saw a regular pattern incised around my ears down to the nape of my neck. It was remarkable. How had she made those shapes with a little razor? The pattern was abstract but repeated, curving lines ending in various points.

"Ti piace?" she asked.

"Incredible."

"It's fire, for your Shelley."

"Shelley, poet Shelley?"

"Yes, the writer Shelley, for his Prometheus play."

She remembered I'd been to the Keats-Shelley museum and had fallen in love.

"*Prometeo liberato*," she said

Yes, they were flames, if you looked. But not like a terrible 'tribal' tattoo or motorcycle decal. Not like the DIY lightning bolts. These were so abstracted they were almost geometric, and just in the right spots. Not too much. "It is a work of art, Assunta, thank you." I sniffed. "I don't know what came over me last night, but you made something amazing from it."

The hairdressers smiled and clasped their hands.

"I almost forgot!" I reached into my bag and took out my tress. "Another good thing will come from this. I saved my old hair, so I could donate it for cancer wigs."

The hairdressers' smiles dissolved. I held my arm out, like a dad trying to fist bump his daughter. They left me hanging.

"Sorry, we don't accept donations here," said Assunta. Her face was apologetic.

But the cute cancer *bambina*. "No?"

"We do not have the set up. You could try a larger salon."

I imagined going into a new parlour, ambling in like something out of *American History X*. Even if the manager could get over my eerily-similar-to-a-skinhead look, what would our conversation be? Me stammering basic Italian, trying to explain the fact that I shaved off my hair because my dead dad had a long ponytail that I cut off decades ago? Me repeating "*cancro*, *cancro*" until he mistook me for a cancer patient and gave me a pitying frown? At what point would I whip out the severed tress?

The redhead spun me back to my reflection. "It is *bellissima* though, isn't it?"

It startled me this time. Somehow I still expected my long hair. My hand retreated feebly into my bag and I pushed the tress somewhere between my wallet and keys. I didn't want to look at myself anymore. Not groovy baby. My eyes prickled and I stood up. "*Grazie*, Assunta. How much do I owe you?"

The redhead tried to unclasp my cape as I rooted around my bag for my wallet.

"Nothing."

She couldn't get the snaps to release around my neck. "*Grazie*," I pulled the cape from her sharply, "I'll do it." I found a 20 Euro note and put it on the station. I managed an "*Arrividerci*," my voice breaking on the penultimate syllable, before the tears came.

By then I was running through the streets of San Lorenzo. Why couldn't they just take the damn ponytail? I was trying to help. Italian bureaucracy at its finest. I ran my fingers over my skull and let out a sob. My beautiful hair. I slowed down to rummage in my purse for a Kleenex. My fingers caught in the ponytail. I flicked my hand until I could be free of it, the ponytail reeling to the ground. Into a puddle. A fucking puddle.

The *canadese* trudges into the late morning, hunched over her phone to check the cancellation policy on her Airbnb, and to avoid eye contact with passersby. Assunta calls Eufemia to make sure she has the number of a counselling service to give to her students, and to confirm they're still on for the Wednesday rally. Francesca, the redhead who works in the salon part-time to help her sister, feels her breasts for lumps in the bathroom and remembers the asbestos mine her father used to work in. On the other side of town Giuseppe sits on the edge of his bed, shirtless, head in his hands, wondering why that woman from last night was so rough, and why he has to be treated so gently. Sergio stands in front of the Colosseo Quadrato, eating a prosciutto *tramezzino* today, and wonders if he should have given up that Fendi internship a decade ago. They scratch their heads, run their fingers through their hair.



Rome warms its citizens as the sun reaches its zenith. No one under that Italian sky feels it, but the hairs on 2.627 million heads grow half a millimetre.

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