

## Can/Could

- ◆ **ability in the present**  
**can = I am able to**

He **can** fly an aeroplane.



- ◆ **ability in the past**  
**could = used to be able to (past repeated action)**

I **could** ski very well when I was young.



- ◆ **asking permission**  
**Can/Could/May/Might I ...? = Do you/Would you mind if ...?**

We use these structures to ask permission to do something. **Could** and **may** are more polite than **can**. **Might** is formal.

- a) (informal)

Can I go swimming?

No, you can't.



- b) (more formal)

Could/May/Might I have a look at this report?

Certainly.



We normally reply with 'Certainly.'/'Of course.'/'Why not.'/'No, I'm afraid you can't.'

- ◆ **giving/refusing permission**

a) **can/may = you are allowed to do sth**  
**May** is more formal than **can**.

b) **can't/mustn't/may not = you are not allowed to do sth**  
**May not** is formal and is usually used in written notices.

You **can't** see Kim tonight, but you **can** see her tomorrow if you like.



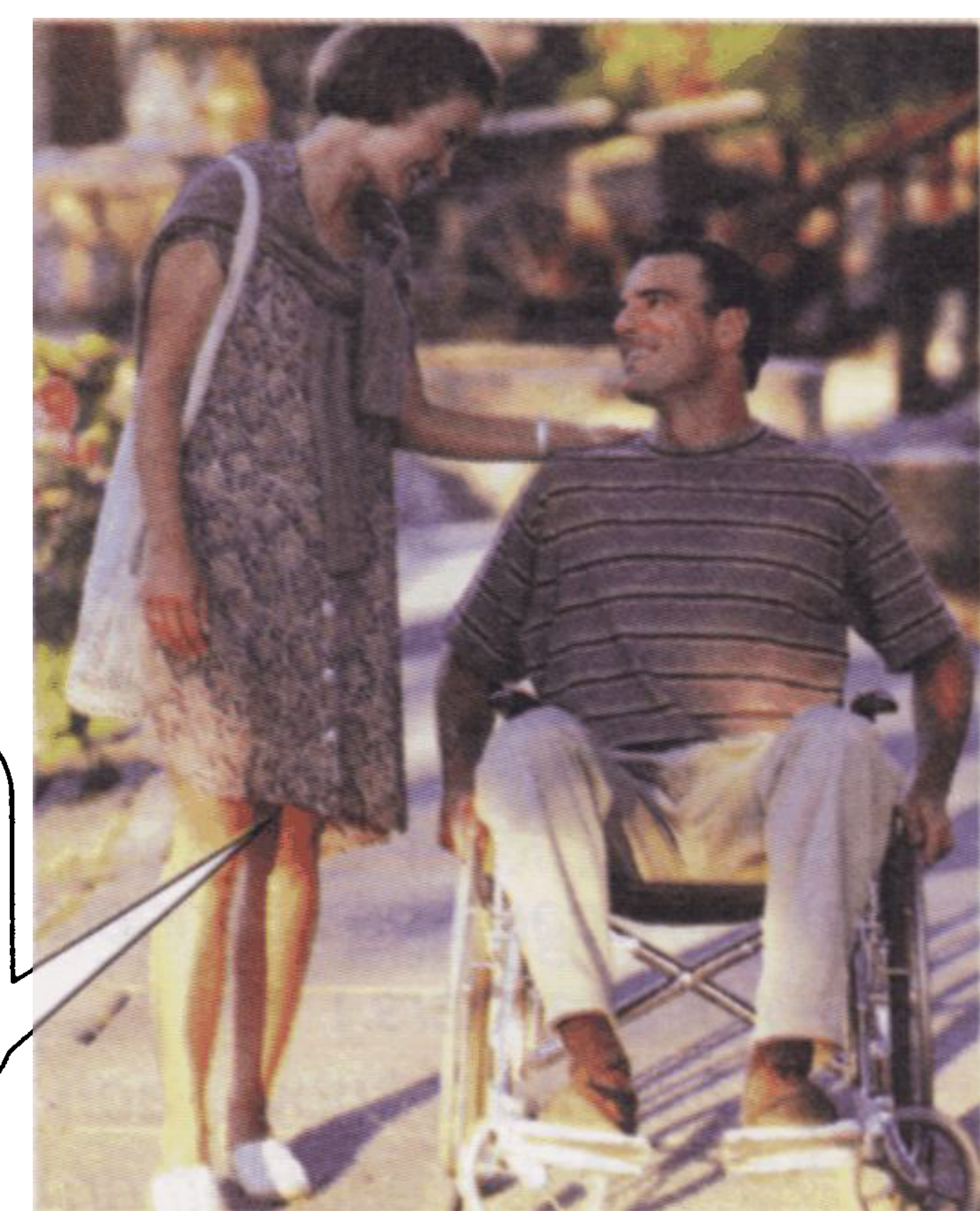
**YOU MAY NOT LEAVE YOUR LUGGAGE HERE.**



- ◆ **offers**  
**Can/Could/Shall I ...? = Would you like me to ...?**

We use these structures when we offer to do something.

Can/Could/Shall I get you anything from the supermarket?



- ◆ **suggestions**  
**We can/could .../Shall we ...? = Let's .../How about ...?/What about ...?/Why don't we ...?**

What shall we do tonight?

We **can/could** go to the cinema.



# UNIT 5 Modal Verbs

## ◆ requests

**Can/Could/Will/Would you ...?**

We use these structures when we ask somebody to do something for us. *Would* and *could* are more polite than *can* and *will*.

Can/Could/Will/Would you help me with my French homework please?



Of course.

We normally reply with 'Certainly'/'Of course'/'I'm sorry, but I can't.'

## ◆ negative logical assumptions

**can't = I'm sure/certain that sth isn't true/real, etc.**

For positive logical assumptions we do not use *can't*; we use *must*.



a) They **can't** be strangers. (= I'm sure they are not strangers.)

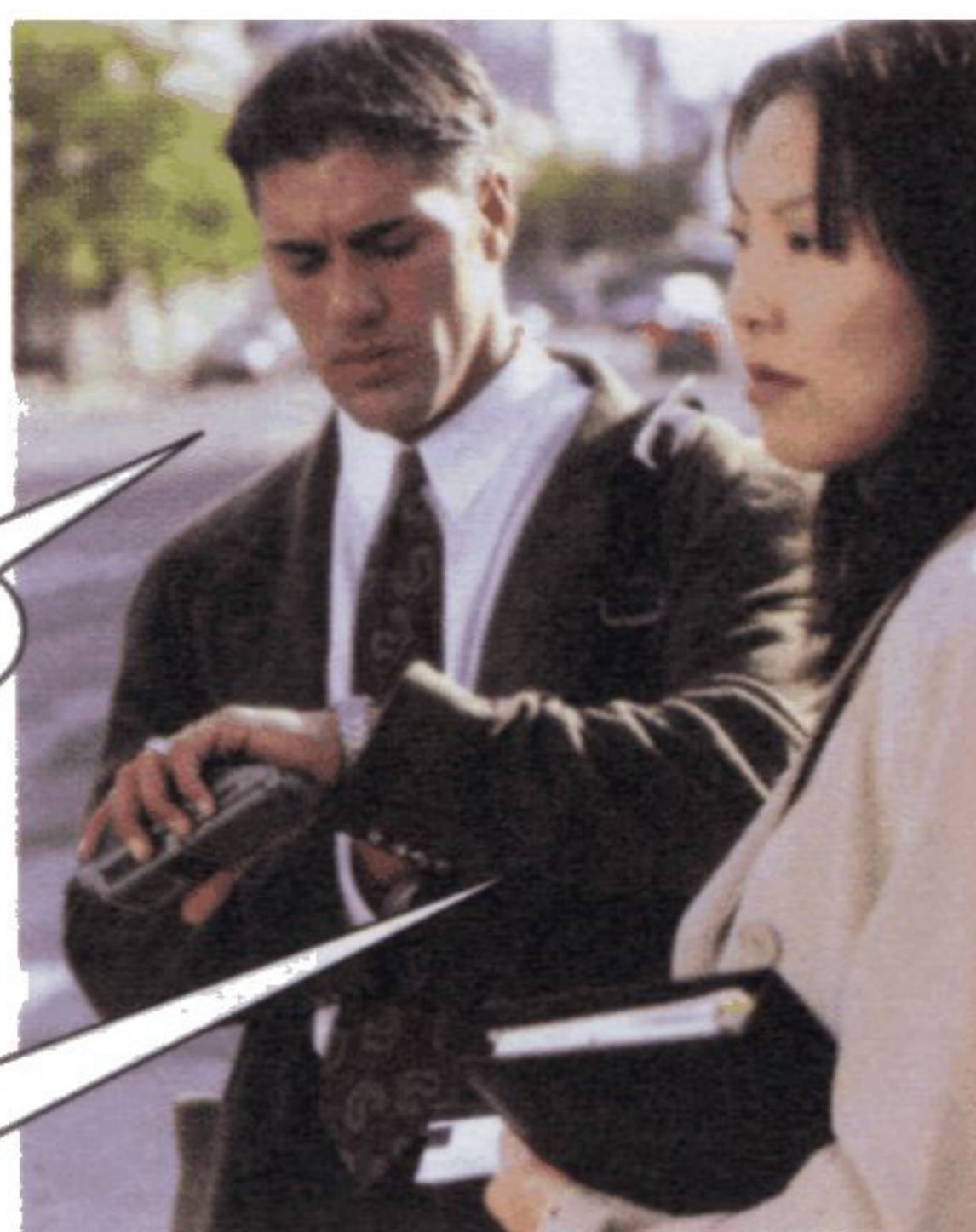
b) They **must** know each other. (= I'm certain they know each other.)

## ◆ possibility

a) **could/may/might + present infinitive = it is possible/it is likely/perhaps**

John is late.

He **could** be stuck in traffic.



b) **could/might + perfect infinitive = it was possible, but it didn't happen**



Yesterday, there was a terrible accident.

The driver **could have been** killed. (Luckily, he wasn't.)

◆ **Can** is used in the present. **Could** is the past tense of *can*. We use **be able to** to form all the other tenses.

e.g. I **will be able to** get a job when I finish school.

present simple: *can, am/is/are able to*

past simple: *could, was/were able to*

present perfect: *have/has been able to*

past perfect: *had been able to*

future simple: *will be able to*

future perfect: *will have been able to*

## 5

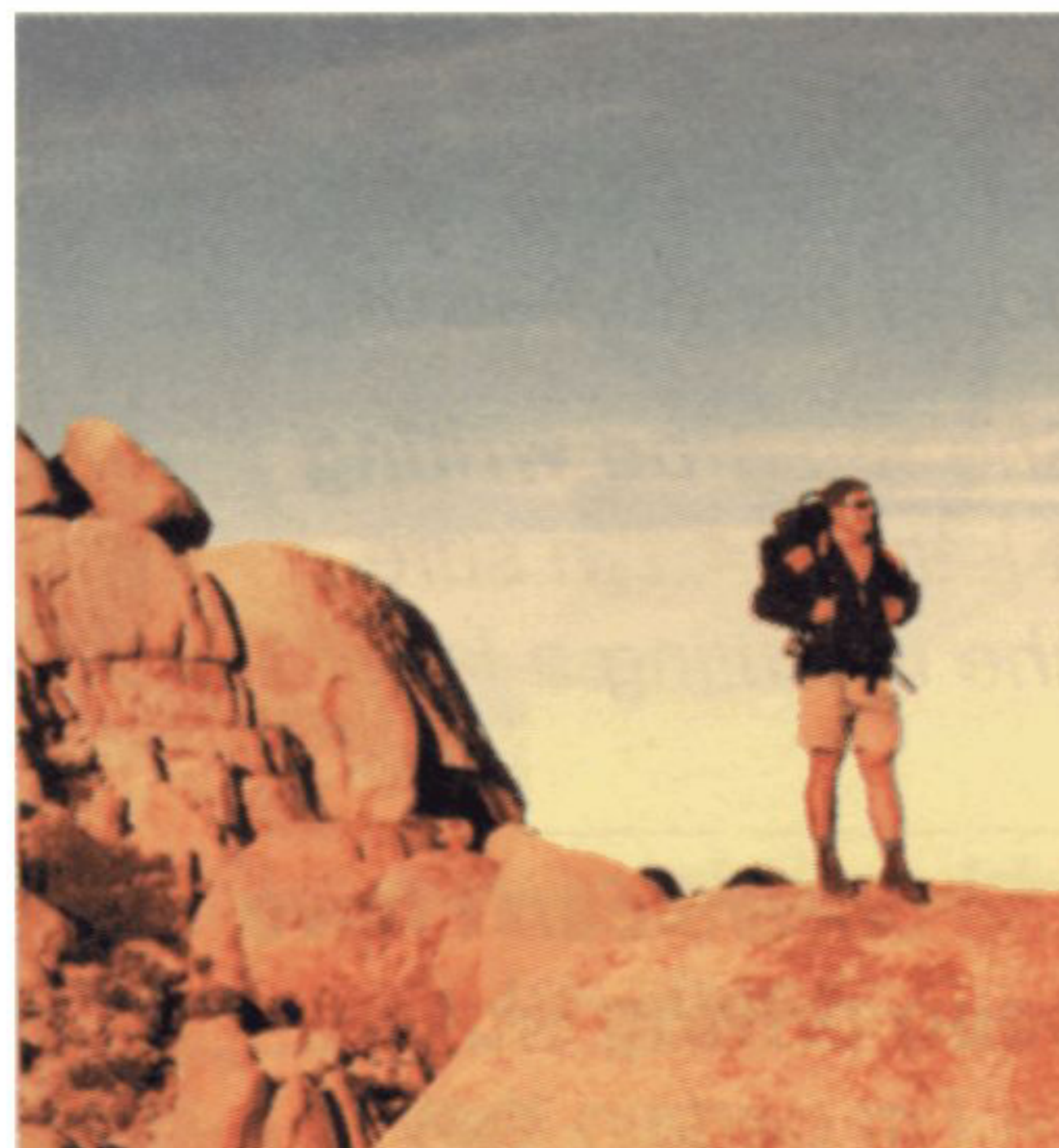
**Fill in the gaps with an appropriate modal verb. Then, say what they express in each sentence.**

- A: ...*May/Can/Could*... I borrow your pen, please?  
*The speaker is asking for permission.*  
B: No, you ..... I'm using it.
- A: I'm bored. What shall we do?  
B: We ..... go for a walk.  
A: No, we ..... because it's raining.  
B: Let's watch a video, then.
- A: My parents told me I ..... go to the party tonight.  
B: Never mind, I ..... go either. We ..... stay at home together, though.
- A: Sir, ..... I speak to you for a moment, please?  
B: Certainly, but later today; I'm busy now.
- A: Excuse me?  
B: Yes?  
A: ..... you tell me where the post office is, please?  
B: Certainly. It's on the main road, next to the school.
- A: Is anyone sitting on that chair?  
B: No, you ..... take it if you want to.

## Could - Was able to

◆ **ability in the past**

We use **was/were able to** (=managed to do) to show that someone had the ability to do something in a particular situation in the past (past single action).



He **was able to climb** to the top of the mountain.  
(= He managed to climb to the top of the mountain.)

◆ We use **could** to show that someone had the ability to do something repeatedly in the past (past repeated action).

e.g. He **could** run very fast when he was young.  
(He had the ability to do this repeatedly in the past.)

◆ We use **could** rather than **was/were able to** with the verbs **see, hear, feel, smell, taste, understand, remember** and **guess**.

e.g. They **could see** the storm coming.  
(NOT: ~~They were able to see...~~)

◆ We use the negative form **couldn't** for both cases.

e.g. My little sister **couldn't** wash herself when she was two. (past repeated action)  
Mark tried, but he **couldn't** find out what was wrong with the computer. (past single action)

**6 Choose the correct answer.**

- 'Todd was a very talented child.'  
'I know. He ...**B**... play the piano well when he was seven.'  
A couldn't                      B could                      C can
- 'I've just taken a loaf out of the oven.'  
'Oh, that's why I ..... smell fresh bread when I came home.'  
A was able to                      B can't                      C could
- 'How was the test?'  
'Easy. All the children ..... pass it.'  
A were able to                      B could                      C can't
- 'What are you doing this summer?'  
'I hope I'll ..... go on holiday with my friends.'  
A could                      B be able to                      C can

**7 Rewrite the sentences using the words in bold.**

- Do you mind if I leave the door open for a while?  
**can** ...*Can I leave the door open for a while?*...
- You're obliged to take notes during the lecture.  
**have** .....
- I'm sorry, but you aren't allowed to enter this room.  
**must** .....
- Jack managed to unlock the door.  
**able** .....
- It wasn't necessary for Ann to cook dinner, but she did.  
**need** .....
- Let's play a game of chess.  
**could** .....
- I'm certain Sarah is bored with her work.  
**must** .....
- I strongly advise you to take up sport.  
**must** .....
- I'm certain Liz isn't interested in your ideas.  
**can** .....
- You may take the car tonight if you want.  
**can** .....

**8 Study the situations and respond to each one using an appropriate modal verb.**

- You want to go on holiday with your friends this year. Ask your parents for **permission**.  
...*Can I go on holiday with my friends this year?*...
- You are at a job interview. You type fast, you use computers and you speak two foreign languages. Tell the interviewer about your **abilities**.  
.....
- Your brother is trying to decide what to buy your mother for her birthday. You **suggest** a box of chocolates.  
.....
- Your jacket is dirty and you want to wear it next week. It is **necessary** to take it to the dry cleaner's.  
.....
- You want to have a day off work next week. Ask for your boss' **permission**.  
.....
- You are in the car with your uncle. It's hot and you want him to open the window. Make a **request**.  
.....
- Your mother is going to the shops. She asks you if you want anything. You tell her it **isn't necessary** to get anything for you.  
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