

# NEW ALEC BRADLEY PROJECT 40 MADURO

## Cigar Industry (cigar-industry)

### Passing the Torch

| By David Savona (/author/david-savona) | From Air Sick, Jul/Aug 02 (/issue/jul-aug-02)

**S**an Pedro Sula, northern Honduras, 1962. A 20-year-old John Oliva Sr. watched as his father, Angel, examined a shipment of candela tobacco that awaited transport to the United States.

The green leaves were going to Tampa, Florida, heart of the American cigar industry, and they were ready to leave the following day. Rather, they were supposed to be ready. But workers had failed to pack the leaves properly, and the frail wrappers risked damage on the boat ride through the Gulf of Mexico to Florida. The 55-year-old founder of Oliva Tobacco Co. declared that he and his son would have to repack the shipment. All 144 cartons.

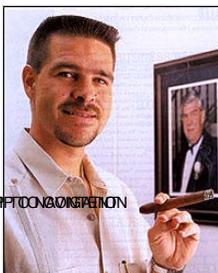
"We proceeded to repack that tobacco," Oliva, now 60, remembers. "We started at 8 o'clock in the morning, him and I, and we sat there and we repacked. We took off an hour for lunch. We continued to repack that tobacco until 7 o'clock at night. We ate dinner. We came back with my mother and my wife. We brought in a guy from the street to help us. We finished at 3 o'clock in the morning."

The tobacco was ready, and Oliva was spent. "Hardest I ever worked in my life," he says. "I fell asleep on the way to the bed."

Having a perfectionist for a father is never easy, and it's only harder when that father is a legend. Angel Oliva was a lion of the tobacco industry, the man who bought the entire 1960 crop of Cuban tobacco -- some 3.85 million pounds -- and won a lifetime's worth of respect by declining to gouge cigarmakers who bought that crop.

Today John follows in his late father's footsteps, running Oliva Tobacco Co. from its headquarters in Tampa and providing some of the world's best cigarmakers, from Arturo Fuente to General Cigar to Altadis, with cigar tobacco. His Sumatra-seed Ecuadoran wrapper is the dark, oily covering for the hot Ashton Virgin Sun Grown brand. Oliva owns farms in Nicaragua, Honduras and Ecuador, growing nearly 2,000 acres of tobacco every year and brokering more.

In a nook in grandson John Oliva Jr.'s office, Angel stares out from a black-and-white photograph. His cane leans against the wall. Oliva Sr. turns serious when asked for the best lesson Angel ever taught him. The answer comes easily. "The most important lesson he taught me, brother, is to live by your word," he says. "It's nothing new or earth-shattering, it's just what he did his whole life. And that's what we try to do. If you can do that, then you can stand up in front of anybody."



David Perez stands next to a picture of his late father, Alfredo, whom he feels still looks after his company.

Five hours south and east, in Miami, David Perez sits in his office at the headquarters of A.S.P. Enterprises Inc., smoking a miniature Villager filtered cigarillo. It's an odd cigar, if for no other reason than it was made without any A.S.P. tobacco.

Perez shares something with Oliva other than running a major tobacco company. He, too, is following his father. Large, poster-sized photographs of Alfredo Perez are everywhere at A.S.P.'s offices. The burly, white-haired man, wearing a tuxedo, seems to stare out from every wall, looking down on his family as they carry on his work.

Perez died in April 2000 from a heart attack following a bout with pneumonia, leaving David to run the company. (David's grandfather Silvio still plays a role at A.S.P., but David runs the operations on a day-to-day basis.) A.S.P. (short for Alfredo and Silvio Perez) grows tobacco in Mexico, Nicaragua and Ecuador and sells to a host of companies -- which David declines to name. He doesn't mind staying anonymous.

Perez and Oliva could be considered the Coke and Pepsi of the premium cigar tobacco industry, but there is not a shred of competitive malice between the two. Instead, the two companies enjoy a mutual admiration. "They respect us and we respect them," Perez says of the Olivas. Says Oliva of his competition in Miami, "I think they're phenomenal growers and I think they do a phenomenal job. They're a first-class outfit." Oliva's son John Jr., 38, and David are buddies, and the two hunt deer every year on the Olivas' former candela farm in Quincy, Florida. The companies have many similarities and enough differences, and each is an integral part of the modern-day cigar business.

### An Angel's Shadow

Oliva Tobacco was built on the solid spine of Angel Oliva, a tireless man who grew up in Cuba, working hard from an early age. "There was no money, no toys, no time to play," he said in 1996. He collected manure for two cents a bag, gathered tobacco seed and threw out scrap tobacco leaves on a farm his father supervised in San Juan y Martinez, the finest wrapper land in Cuba. In 1925, at age 18, he left Cuba for the United States, taking a \$7-a-week job in a Tampa grocery store. In 1929, he went to work in a struggling tobacco warehouse, then in 1934 he struck out on his own, forming Oliva Tobacco to broker the sale of Cuban tobacco to customers in the United States.

An early Oliva customer was Frank Llana, who first bought tobacco from Oliva in 1939, when the company sold unstripped Cuban filler tobacco from the Vuelta Abajo for 60 cents a pound. "Angel was like a father to me," says Llana, the patriarch of Villazon & Co., now a unit of General Cigar Co. and the maker of such venerable brands as Hoyo de Monterrey and Punch. Angel, says Frank, "was very honorable, and he never hurt a farmer, so he had a tremendous rapport with them."

The elder Oliva bought tobacco directly from farmers, rather than brokers, and developed a knack for finding a home for every leaf in a field. Rather than cherry-picking certain prized primings, Oliva would buy an entire crop. "He worked it all the way from the seedbed to the finished product," says Llana. "He sold to everybody."

John began working for Angel at age 12, shaking tobacco leaves in Cuba for \$3 a day, an unglamorous, tough job that left him covered in tobacco dust and sneezing brown gunk. Angel liked to pay his workers personally, on Saturdays, and John lined up with the rest of the workers to collect his salary. When his turn came up, Angel looked at the foreman. "Did this guy earn his money?" he said. When the foreman said yes, Angel paid his son.

John's pride was stung. "I took the money and I gave it back," he says. "I said, 'You've been here all week watching me work and you have to ask that? I don't want the money. I'm not coming back to work next week.'" John laughs heartily at the memory. "He didn't make me come back. And I didn't take the money. I think he got a kick out of that, and he let it go."

John didn't want to become a tobacco man. An industrial engineer by training, by 1968 he was working in the computer business, and his brother Angel Jr. was an architect. John was mulling an offer that would pay him \$40,000 a year, if he would move to Houston. In the meantime, Angel brought in potential buyers for the company.

"The old man said, 'You people aren't interested in the business, I'm going to go ahead and sell it,'" recalls John. "And these people came down, looked at it, made an offer on it. I told him, 'Don't sell the company -- I'm going to come work for you.'" His starting salary was \$15,000 a year. And the business proved harder than he thought.

"When I came into this business, I said, 'Man, this is nothing.' But it's hard. No two crops are the same."

John Oliva Sr. is a powerfully built man, who once played offense and defense for the University of Florida football team, but he always found it a challenge to outwork his father. Even in his 80s, the man could stand for eight hours, watching workers sort tobacco.

"Let me tell you, bro," says John, leaning back in his chair, thin glasses perched on the end of his nose and thick arms behind his ears, "he had no limit when he started to look at tobacco, no limit to when he stopped. He could work incessantly, and he could fall asleep standing up. And you couldn't sleep within three blocks of him. He snored like a bear." Angel was also frugal, so on their first trip to Honduras, John had to share a hotel room with his dad. "I couldn't beat him to sleep," he says. Angel's log sawing ensured that John didn't sleep a wink. Bone tired the next morning, John put his foot down, telling his father he wouldn't work until he got some decent sleep in his own hotel room -- and he offered to pay out of his own pocket. Says John, fondly remembering his father: "He just thought that was the funniest thing in the whole world."

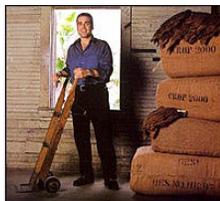
John learned how to live with his father's snoring, and built his own reputation as a workhorse in the tobacco business. In his youth, he was known for walking up to a group of workers unloading a container full of tobacco, stripping off his shirt, flexing his muscles and moving the tobacco himself.

John computerized the company, keeping Oliva Tobacco current with the times. But contracts never became a part of the business. (Laneza, who has done business with Oliva for more than six decades, has never signed a contract with the company.) The Olivas remain big believers in the handshake deal.

"What's so special about the Olivas is their integrity, their honesty and the love and pride in what they do and who they are. They're just incredibly honorable people," says an admiring Carlos Fuente Jr. "They produce tobacco that customers want. They know how to grow tobacco the Cubano way."

Fuente considers Angel Oliva one of his greatest mentors. "Being around Angel Oliva was like being around Babe Ruth," he says. As a 21-year-old working in Nicaragua, he slept in the Olivas' house, and it wasn't until the elder Oliva gave Carlos his blessing that he went ahead with the purchase of Chateau de la Fuente, his Dominican wrapper farm. The Fuentes bought it from the Olivas in 1992, but Fuente says the tobacco growers refused to take his family's money until 1994. "The Olivas have always been there for me," he says.

John Oliva's son, John Jr., says he tries to be there for the little guy as well. Back when he was in the seafood business, John Jr. was stung by Ecuadoran shrimp farmers who refused to see him, so he vowed to give small customers at least a moment of his time. In his warehouse, he keeps a few open bales of tobacco to sell small numbers of leaves to hobbyists who roll a few cigars at home. (He says one customer is a Navy SEAL who rolls cigars for his commando team.) Other small orders go to the tiny one-, two- or three-roller *chinchalles* that make a small number of cigars a year.



John Oliva Jr. is among the third generation of family to join its tobacco business. The line of tobacco men almost died with his grandfather.

As he walks out into the hot, springtime sun, a woman walks up to him. She's looking for tobacco dust, which she claims is a great way to keep bugs out of the garden without bothering her dogs. Oliva Jr., who has leaves but not dust, points her to the neighboring Cuesta -- Rey cigar factory, one of the last places in a town-built on the backs of cigarmakers -- that actually still makes cigars.

Tampa has changed extraordinarily over the years, but Oliva Tobacco has tried to remain the same, despite the cigar boom of the mid-90s, when it could have doubled its business. "I had people who would have paid anything for tobacco," says Oliva Jr.

The Olivas say they didn't expand during the cigar boom, save for increasing their plantings in Ecuador. "We expanded in Ecuador because," says John Sr., placing a booming emphasis on the last word, "we felt Ecuador was going to be the future for wrappers. I still feel it's the future for wrappers. I think you have to ask God what's so special about Ecuador."

Oliva's mantra is flavor. "We try to focus on maintaining the consistent quality as far as taste is concerned. And it's difficult to maintain the quality as far as taste and as far as looks; if we have to pick one out, we have to maintain the quality of the taste. If we have to sacrifice the quality of the looks to maintain the quality of the taste, we'll do that. At least that's what I feel the smoker wants. I think the people that spend money, that know how to smoke, I don't think they're smoking with their eyes," he says. His Sumatra-seed tobacco, grown in Ecuador, is flavorful, but a nightmare in terms of appearance. "Sumatra is the most difficult seed in the world," he says. "It gives you a rainbow of colors. If you want to pull out a box of cigars that's all one color, it's virtually impossible to do that."

Not that planting in Ecuador is easy. The soil on one farm is rocky. "You dig out one rock and there's another," says Oliva. Another is hilly. "You have to plant by hand." All of the five Oliva farms in the country sit hours away from civilization, accessible only by a rough ride over spotty roads that are too dangerous to drive at night. So why plant there?

"Hey," he says, "the good rule of thumb is, man, when the country's fun to go to, and the climate's perfect, and the political situation is great, tobacco ain't worth a shit there."

### Under the Eyes of Alfredo

When Angel Oliva died in 1996 at age 89, he and his family were prepared. Angel had even called John Sr. and had him distribute the year's Christmas gifts on August 8. He died on August 31. John was fully ready to take over the reins held by his father. David Perez wasn't as lucky.

Alfredo's death at age 54 in 2000 was a shock. Shortly before his heart attack, he had recently leased a new Cadillac, something he always wanted. David, who took over the business and now drives his father's car, was 29.

Trophy fish, including a shark caught with David, are mounted on the walls -- fishing was a passion of Alfredo's. He has been gone for two years, but in the mind of his son he is still very much a part of A.S.P.

"We do it for him," says Perez, an intensely spiritual 31-year-old with a quiet confidence. He has the jutting jaw of a Marine and a flattop haircut to match. "Every time we see a good crop, he's watching over it."

While John Oliva Sr.'s father was bruised by his sons' lack of interest in joining the family business, David Perez's father actually tried to keep him away. "He wanted me to become a lawyer," says Perez. "I made a deal -- I said, 'You put the money aside for me to go to law school. If the business goes bad, I'll go.'"

Perez repeats an old Cuban saying when speaking of his desire to stay with the family company, rather than working for a giant corporation. "*Cabeza de ratón, es mejor que cola de un león*. Better the head of a rat than the tail of a lion."

Perez's modesty aside, his company resembles an elephant, more than a rat. A.S.P. grows tobacco via a joint venture in Mexico, and grows on company-owned farms as well as land that it rents in Nicaragua, but Ecuador is the company's pride and joy. There, A.S.P. owns a 4,000-acre farm called Casjuca, which is literally changing the industry. Vast and efficient, free from the blue mold that has plagued farmers in North and Central America, Casjuca is taking away business from many Connecticut farmers.

"Everybody's growing less tobacco in Connecticut now," says Llaneza, the cofounder of Villazon & Co. and one of the world's most educated cigar men. "Most of the manufacturers in Europe are now using Connecticut [seed] Ecuador grown by the Perezes."

Casjuca is vast. A.S.P. grows about 900 acres a year, leaving the rest of the land fallow or using it for grazing property for hundreds of Zebu cows that the company raises for meat. An army of workers pick the ripe, wide leaves under the eternally cloudy sky at the foothills of the Andes, the rhythmic snapping of each leaf the dominant sound as the workers move about quietly.

In the most valuable part of the farm, two short women, heads nearly hidden under large straw hats, reach up to the flowers of the tobacco plants that loom over them and carefully pollinate the flowers. The leaves are odd, ungainly, some of them tiny, others four feet long, nearly splitting under their own weight. It's the Perezes' experimental plot, where they test various crosses and hybrids.

The experimental area -- a kind of island of Dr. Moreau for tobacco -- is an extension of a Perez family tradition. "On Sundays, the kids would play in the river and my dad would do the seeds," says David. His father's constant experimentation with tobacco crosses is the heart and soul of A.S.P.

The experimental area is the birthplace of the Davidoff Millennium Series wrapper, a hybrid based on a Cuban seed that Alfredo Perez developed along with Hendrik Kelner, maker of Davidoffs, over five years.

"It's not cost effective. And we still have not made a penny from that wrapper project. But it's a matter of pride," Perez says. "Tobacco growing is risky -- not hard. If you know how to do it, it's not hard. If you don't know, it's impossible. If you have the know-how, it's almost routine."

Perez is planting much less than he did when his father was alive, as cigar sales have slowed back to more manageable levels. He has about 100 customers now, down from 270 during the cigar boom. Inventory is an ugly word to him. "We only grow what's ordered," he says, shrugging when a visitor asks to see his inventory. "It's labor intensive and cost intensive to have inventory. So if you don't put in an order one year in advance, it's very rare that we'll have tobacco for you. During the boom, people didn't understand that we didn't have extra. A lot of the newcomers said, 'How can you not have tobacco if you're one of the largest tobacco growers?'" Popular advertising copy in the cigar business raves about Cuban seeds, preaching proximity to the motherland and a purity of the tobacco grown outside of Cuba. The Perezes eschew this approach, and instead talk about how they have worked on their seeds in the years they've been in business.

"The biggest asset A.S.P. has is our seeds. It has kick. It's an original Cuban seed, crossed many times," says Perez, who guards his seeds like executives of Coca-Cola protecting the secret formula. Tobacco seeds are smaller than candy sprinkles, and just as easy to steal. (Stories abound about people leaving Cuba with enough seed sewn into a money belt to grow acres of tobacco.) It's common for people to sneak into a tobacco field, remove the flower, which holds the seeds, and sneak them away.

That won't work on a Perez farm: Unlike most farmers, who cull their next year's crop using seeds from choice plants in the field, the Perezes use fresh seed from the seed production lot each year. Like the citrus farmers who have mastered the science of growing seedless oranges, A.S.P. grows tobacco plants that don't have fertile seeds. "We only grow [plants with] male, sterile seeds," says Perez. Should someone sneak seed from one of his farms, it will be worthless. The seeds slated for the next crop are kept in several safes in various locations.

One of Perez's favorite seeds is the one he plants in Esteli", Nicaragua. It grows a plant with a reputation for power.

"Their *ligero* is like *ligero* from Cuba," says Nick Perdomo Jr., speaking of the most powerful type of filler tobacco. "The strongest Dominican tobacco is like their weakest tobacco." Perdomo, owner of Tabacalera Perdomo, makes many cigars in Nicaragua using Perez's tobacco, including Perdomo Reserve and the C.A.O. L'Anniversaire line. "Their tobacco is a real powerhouse."

The Perezes share several similarities with the Olivas. Both companies lost farms in Cuba, both lost everything again in Nicaragua. Each spreads its assets over several nations to limit the risk of another catastrophe.

The two struggled in 1997, when El Niño turned the steady mists of Ecuador into a perpetual rain, making tobacco fields look like rice paddies and toppling young plants into the primordial muck. Both growers are awaiting the new El Niño effect. Neither is afraid.

"What can I do about worrying? I can't change nature. You gotta be like the United States Marine Corps -- you gotta be able to adapt and overcome," says Oliva Sr. "You gotta improvise."

Says Perez: "I'm concerned, I'm not worried. This is one of the years you have to suffer through."

His father's passing still sits heavily on David's shoulders. "It's been very hard," he says. Around his neck, he wears a gold tobacco leaf, decorated with a gold cigar and a few diamonds. His mother designed it for his father, and one was cast for David and for his grandfather Silvio as well, the jeweler breaking the cast each time to keep the piece unique. David's brother Joe now wears Alfredo's leaf. "My father is with us every day," David says.

"We lost everything in Cuba. We lost everything in Nicaragua. We'll probably lose everything again. Who knows?" says Perez. "We came in the world naked, and we'll leave here naked."

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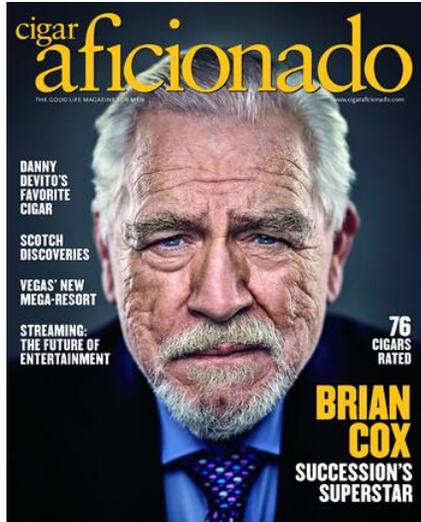




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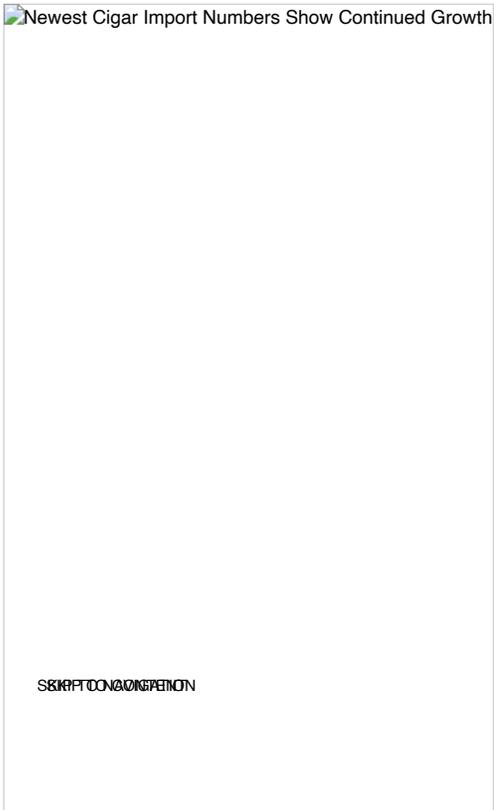


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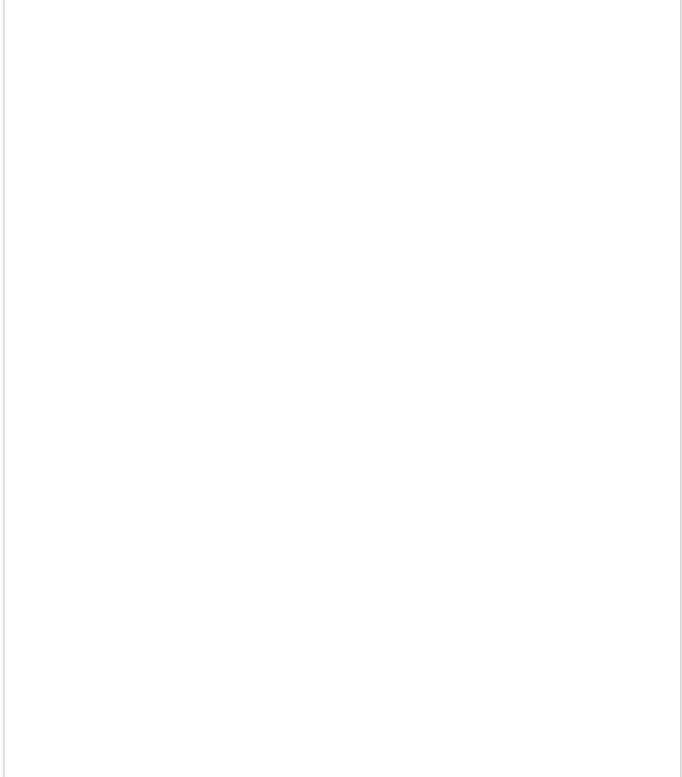
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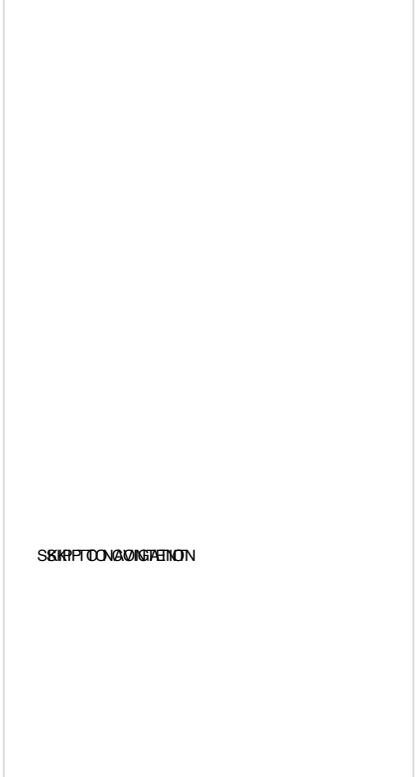
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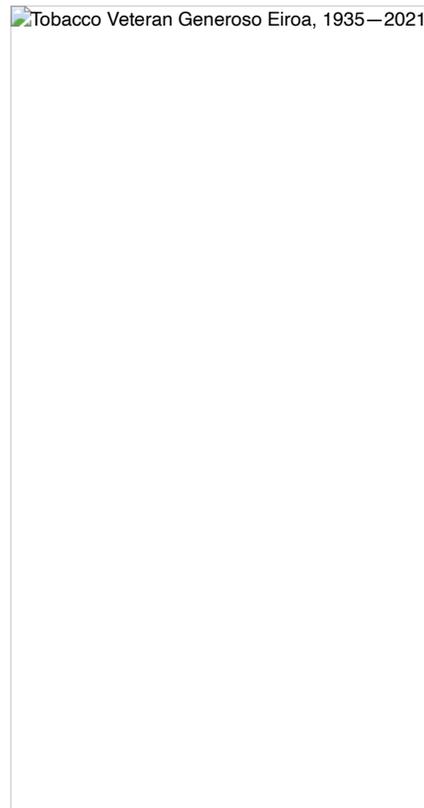
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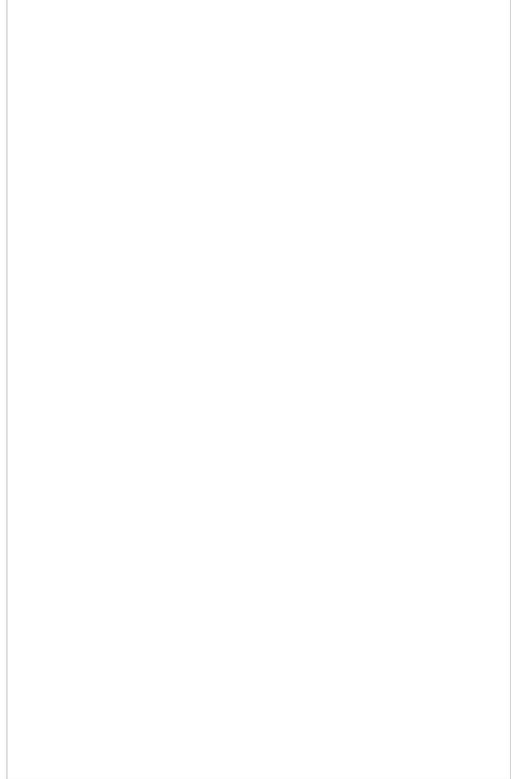
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