

# The Man Who Mistook His Hat for a Meal

My father has always had some questionable eating habits, but this is getting ridiculous.

BY [DAVID SEDARIS](#) JAN 29, 2007



**We're in Paris, eating dinner in a nice restaurant**, and my father is telling a story. "So," he says, "I found this brown something-or-other in my suitcase, and I started chewing on it, thinking that maybe it was part of a cookie."

"Had you packed any cookies?" my friend Maja asks.

My father considers this an irrelevant question and brushes it off, saying, "Not that I know of, but that's not the point."

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"So you found this thing in your suitcase, and your first instinct was to put it in your mouth?"

"Well, yes," he says. "Sure I did. But the thing is . . ."

He continues his story, but, aside from my sisters and me, his audience is snagged on what would strike any sane adult as a considerable stumbling block. Why would a full-grown man place a foreign object into his mouth, especially if it was brown and discovered in a rarely used suitcase? It is a reasonable question, partially answered when the coffee arrives and my father slips a fistful of sugar into the pocket of his sport coat. Had my friends seen the blackened banana lying on my bed, they might have understood my father's story and enjoyed it on its own merit. As it stood, however, an explanation was in order.

**For as long as I can remember, my father has saved. He saves** money, he saves disfigured sticks that resemble disfigured celebrities, and, most of all, he saves food. Cherry tomatoes, sausage biscuits, the olives plucked from other people's martinis; he hides these things in strange places until they are rotten. And then he eats them.

I used to think of this as standard Greek behavior until I realized that ours was the only car in the church parking lot consistently swarmed by bees. My father hid peaches in the trunk of his car. He hid pastries in the toolshed and the laundry room and then wondered where all the ants were coming from. Open the cabinet in the master bathroom and, to this day, you will find expired six-packs of Sego, a chalky dietary milk shake popular in the late sixties. Crowded beside liquefied nectarines and rock-hard kaiser rolls, the cans relax, dented and lint-covered, against the nastiest shaving kit you have ever seen in your life.

There are those who attribute my father's hoarding to being raised during the Depression, but my mother was not one of them.

"Bullshit," she used to say. "I had it much worse than him, but you don't see *me* hiding figs."

The reference to figs was telling. My father hid them until they assumed the consistency of tar, but why did he bother? No one else in the family would have gone anywhere near a fig, regardless of its age. There were never any potato chips tucked into his food vaults, no chocolate bars or marshmallow figurines. The question, asked continually throughout our childhood, was, Who is he hiding these things from? Aside from the usual insects and the well-publicized starving people in India, we failed to see any potential takers. You wouldn't catch our neighbors scraping mold off their strawberries, but to our father, there was nothing so rotten that it couldn't be eaten. It was people who were spoiled, not food.

"It's fine," he'd say, watching as a swarm of flies deposited its hatchlings into the decaying flesh of a pineapple. "There's nothing wrong with that. I'd eat it!" And he would, if the price was right. And the price was always right.

Because she fell for words like *fresh-picked* and *vine-ripened*, our mother was defined as a spendthrift. You couldn't trust a patsy like that, especially in the marketplace, and so, armed with a thick stack of coupons, our father did all the shopping himself.

Accompanying him to the grocery store, my sisters and I were encouraged to think of the produce aisle as an all-you-can-eat buffet. Tart apples, cherries, grapes, and unblemished tangerines: He was of the opinion that because they weren't wrapped, these things were free for the taking. The store managers thought differently, and it was always just a matter of time before someone was sent to stop him. The head of the produce department would arrive, and my father, his mouth full of food, would demand to be taken into the back room, a virtual morgue where unwanted food rested between death and burial.

Due to the stench and what our mother referred to as "one small scrap of dignity," my sisters and I never entered the back room. It seemed best to distance ourselves, and so we would pretend to be other people's children until our father returned bearing defeated fruits and vegetables that bore no resemblance to those he had earlier enjoyed with such abandon. The message was that if something is free, you should take only the best. If, on the other hand, you're forced to pay, it's best to lower the bar and not be so choosy.

"Quit your bellyaching," he'd say, tossing a family pack of questionable pork chops into the cart. "Meat is *supposed* to be gray. They doctor up the color for the ads and so forth, but there's nothing wrong with these. You'll see."

I've never known our father to buy anything not marked reduced for quick sale. Without that orange tag, an item was virtually invisible to him. The problem was that he never associated "quick sale" with "immediate consumption." Upon returning from the store, he would put the meat into the freezer, hide his favorite fruits in the bathroom cabinet, and stuff everything else into the crisper. It was, of course, too late for crisp, but he took the refrigerator drawer at its word, insisting it was capable of reviving the dead and returning them, hale and vibrant, to the prime of their lives. Subjected to a few days in his beloved crisper, a carrot would become as pale and soft as a flaccid penis.

"Hey," he'd say. "Somebody ought to eat this before it goes bad." @img

He'd take a bite, and the rest of us would wince at the unnatural silence. Too weak to resist, the carrot quietly surrendered to the force of his jaws. An overcooked hot dog would have made more noise. Wiping the juice from his lips, he would insist that this was the best carrot he'd ever eaten. "You guys don't know what you're missing."

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Oh, I think we had a pretty good idea.

Even at our most selfish, we could understand why someone might be frugal with six children to support. We hoped our father might ease up and learn to treat himself once we all left home, but, if anything, he's only gotten worse. Nothing will convince him that his fortunes might not suddenly reverse, reducing him to a diet of fingernail clippings and soups made from fallen leaves and seasoned with flashlight batteries. The market will collapse or the crops will fail. Invading armies will go door-to-door, taking even our condiments, yet my father will tough it out. Retired now and living alone, he continues to eat like a scavenging bird.

We used to return home for Christmas every year, my brother, sisters, and I making it a point to call ahead, offering to bring whatever was needed for the traditional holiday meal.

"No, I already got the lamb," our father would say. "Grape leaves, phyllo dough, potatoes--I got everything on the list."

"Yes, but *when* did you get these things?"

An honest man except when it comes to food, our father would lie, claiming to have just returned from the pricey new Fresh Market.

"Did you get the beans?" we'd ask.

"Well, sure I did."

"Let me hear you snap one."

Come Christmas day, we would fly home to find a leg of lamb thawing beneath six inches of frost, the purchase date revealing that it had been bought midway through the Carter administration. Age had already mashed the potatoes, the grape leaves bore fur, and it was clear that, when spoken to earlier over the phone, our father had snapped his fingers in imitation of a healthy green bean.

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"Why the long faces?" he'd ask. "It's Christmas day. Cheer up, for Christ's sake."

Tired of rancid oleo and "perfectly good" milk resembling blue-cheese dressing, my family began taking turns hosting Christmas dinner. This past year, it was my turn, and those who could afford it agreed to join me in Paris. I met my father's plane at Charles de Gaulle, and as we were walking toward the taxi stand, a bag of peanuts fell from the pouch of his suitcase. These were not peanuts handed out on his recent flight but something acquired years earlier, back when all planes had propellers and pilots wore leather helmets and long, flowing scarves.

I picked up the bag and felt its contents crumble and turn to dust. "Give me those, will you?" My father tucked the peanuts into his breast pocket, saving them for later.

Back at the apartment, he unpacked. I thought the cat had defecated on my bed until I realized that the object on my pillow was not a turd but a shriveled black banana he had brought all the way to Paris from its hiding place beneath the bath-room sink.

"Here," my father said. "I'll give you half of it."

He'd brought a pear as well and had wrapped it in a plastic bag so that its pus wouldn't stain the clothing he had packed the day before but bought long before he was married. As with his food, my father is faithful to his wardrobe. Operating on the assumption that, sooner or later, even the toga will make a comeback, he holds on to his clothing and continues to wear things long after they've begun to disintegrate.

Included in his suitcase was a battered suede cap bought in Kansas City shortly after the war. This was the cap that would figure into his story later that night, when we joined my sisters and a few friends at a nice Paris restaurant.

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**"So," he says, "I found this brown-colored something-or-other in my suitcase, and I must have chewed on the thing for a good five minutes, until I realized I was eating the brim of my cap. Can you beat that? A piece of it must have broken off during the flight--but hell, how was I supposed to know what it was?"**

My friend Maja finds this amusing. "So you literally *ate* your hat?"

"Well, yes," my father says. "But not the whole thing. I stopped after the first bite."

An outsider might think he stopped for practical reasons, but my sisters and I know better. Because it didn't kill him, the cap was proven edible and would now be savored

and appreciated in a different way. No longer considered an article of clothing, it would return to its native land, where it would move from the closet to the bathroom cabinet, joining the ranks of the spoiled to wait for the coming famine.

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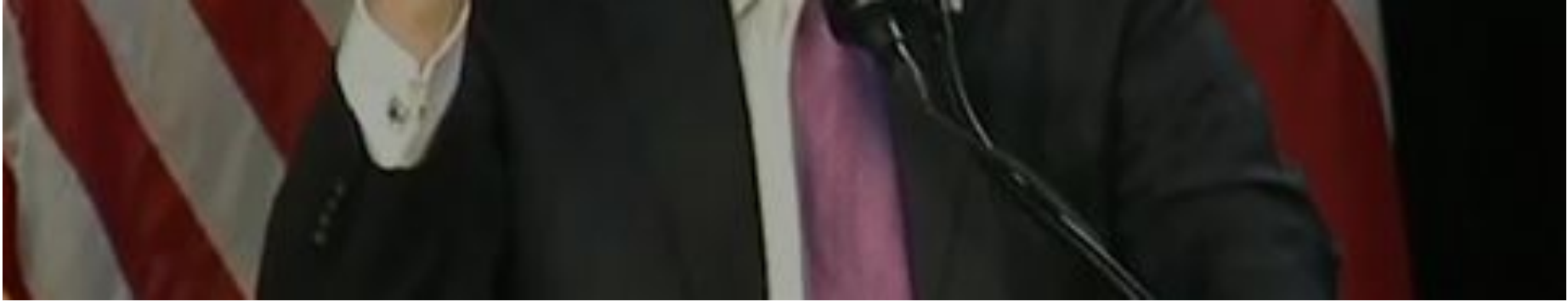
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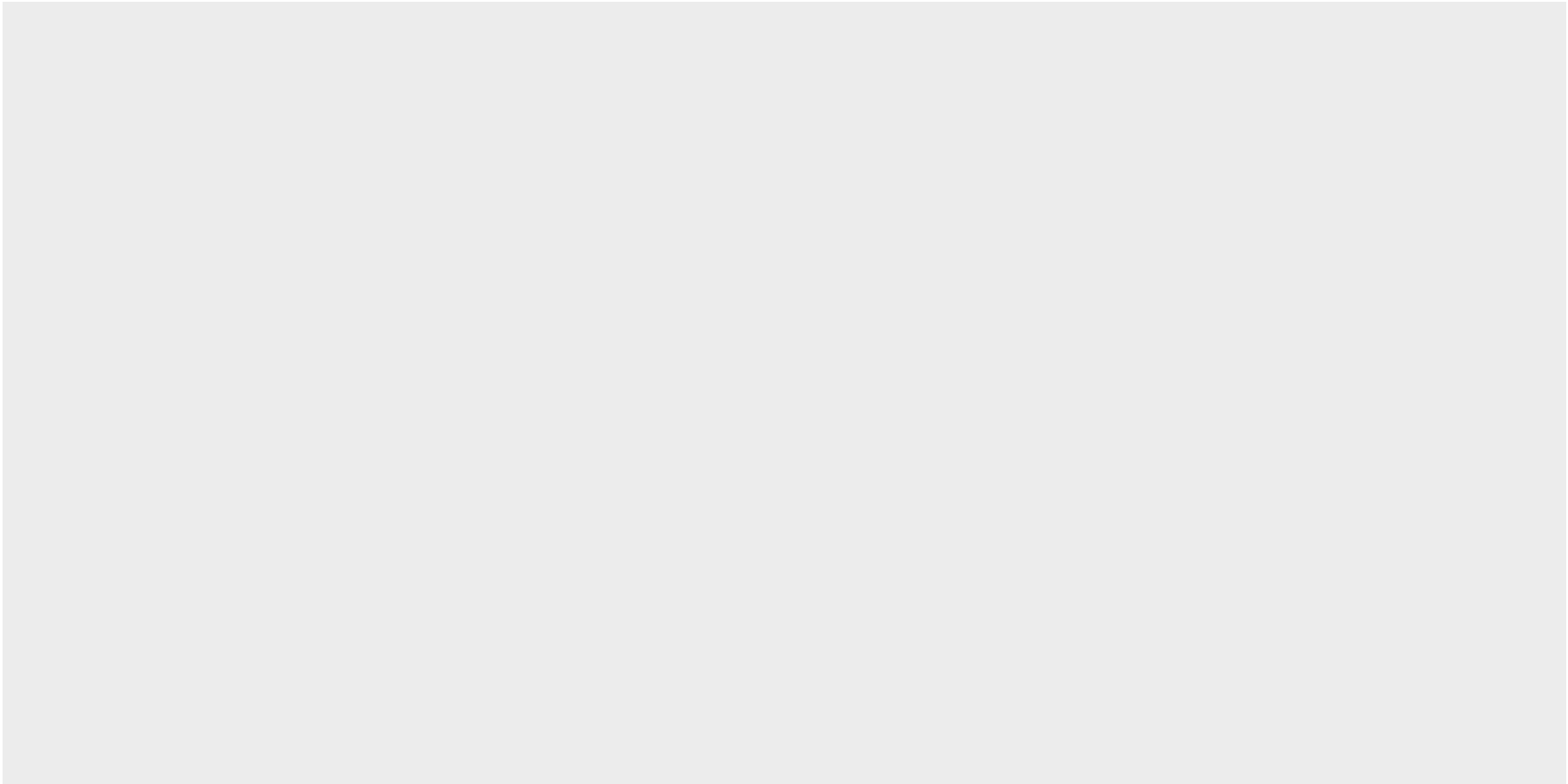
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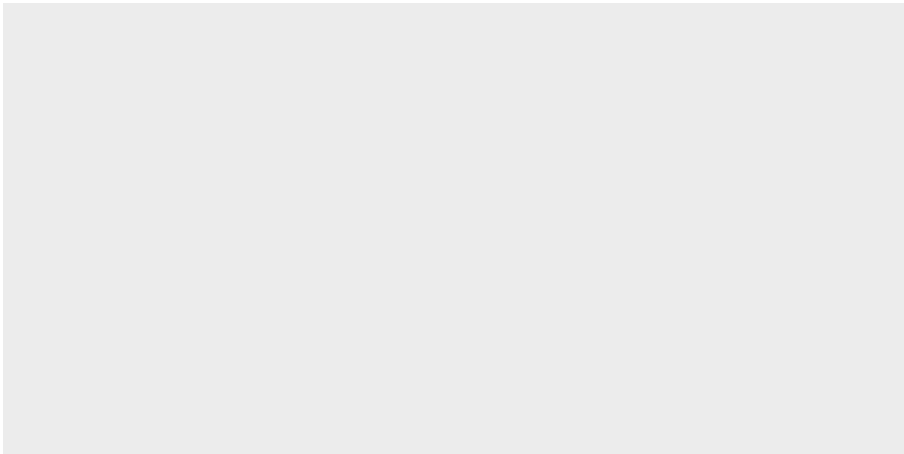
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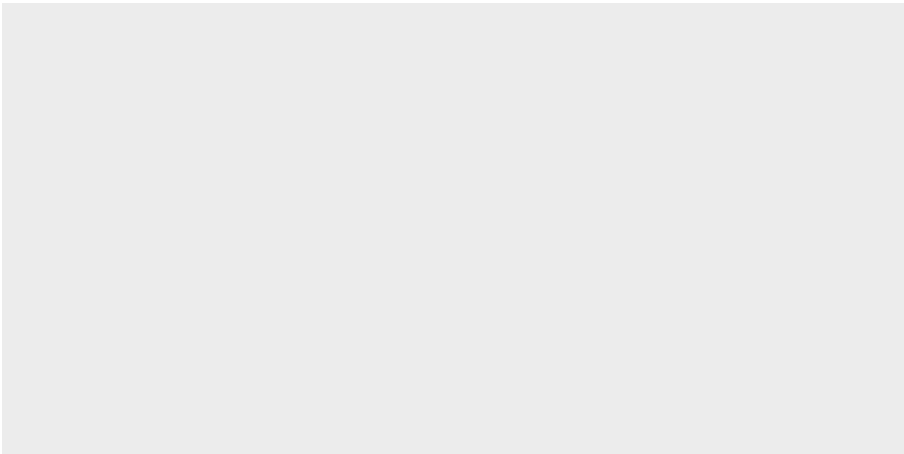
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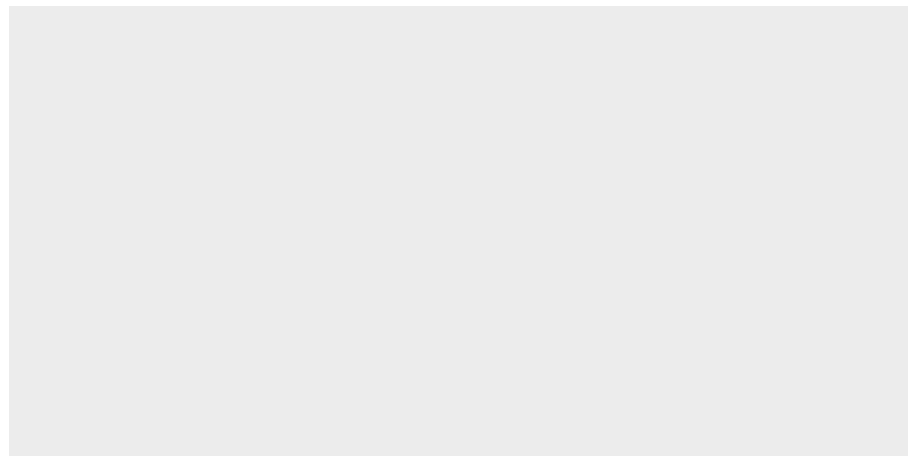


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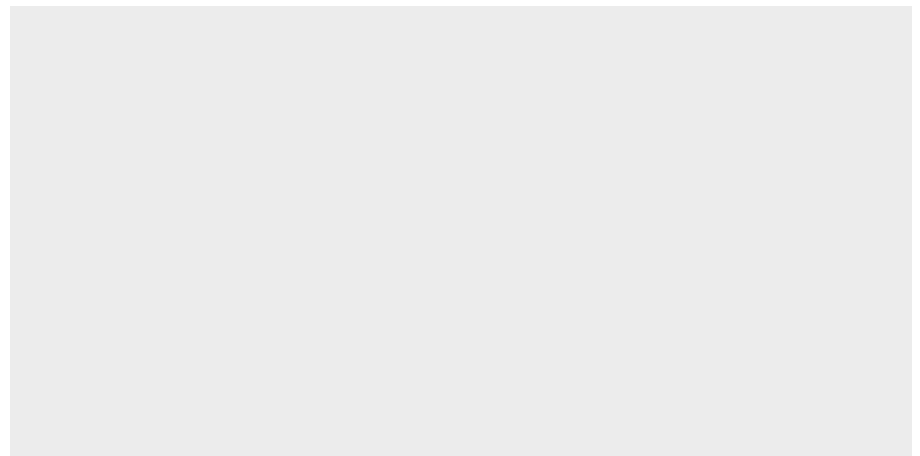


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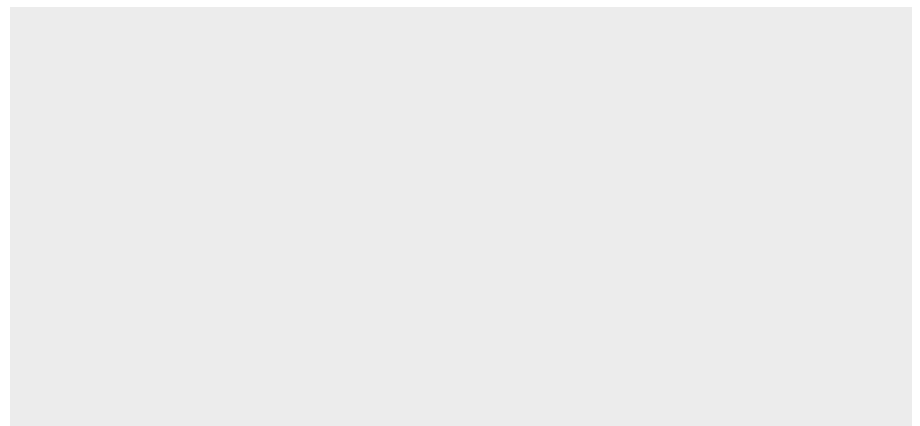
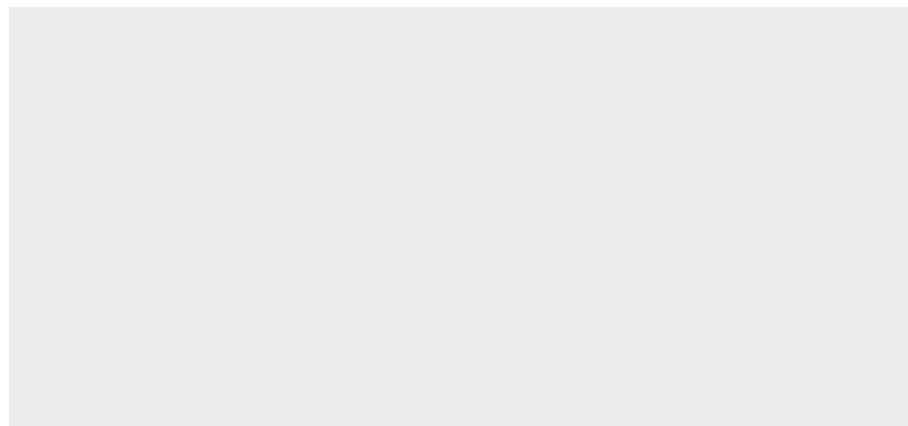
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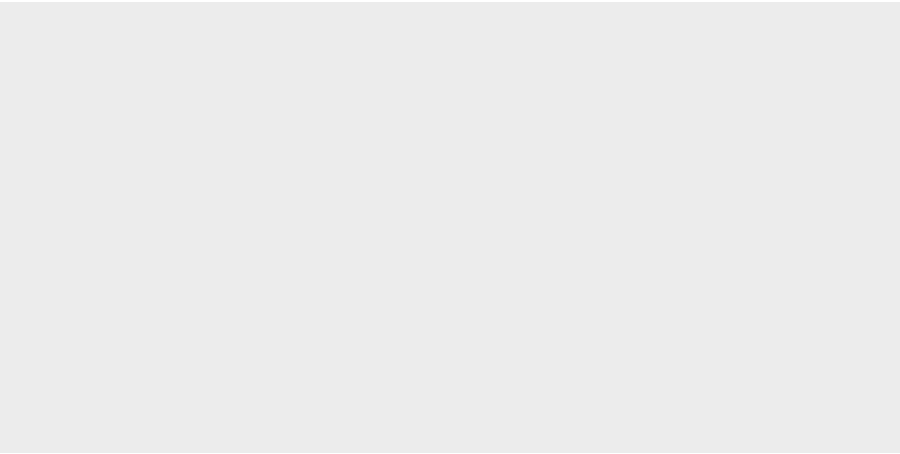
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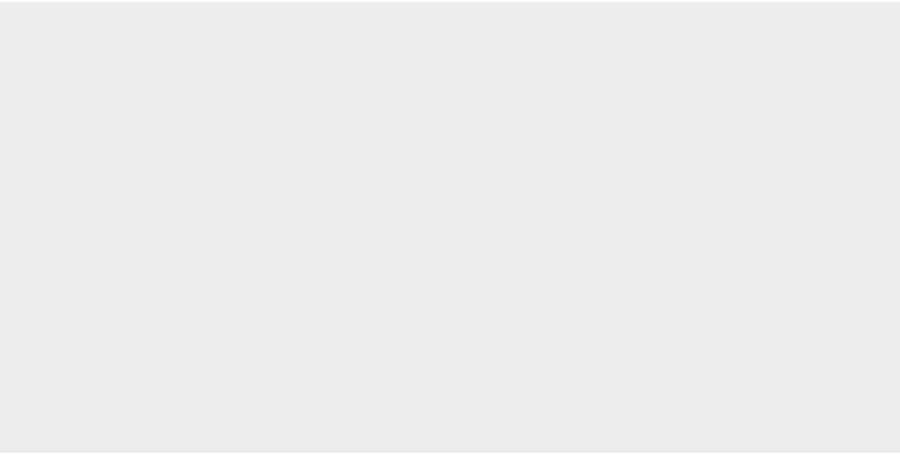
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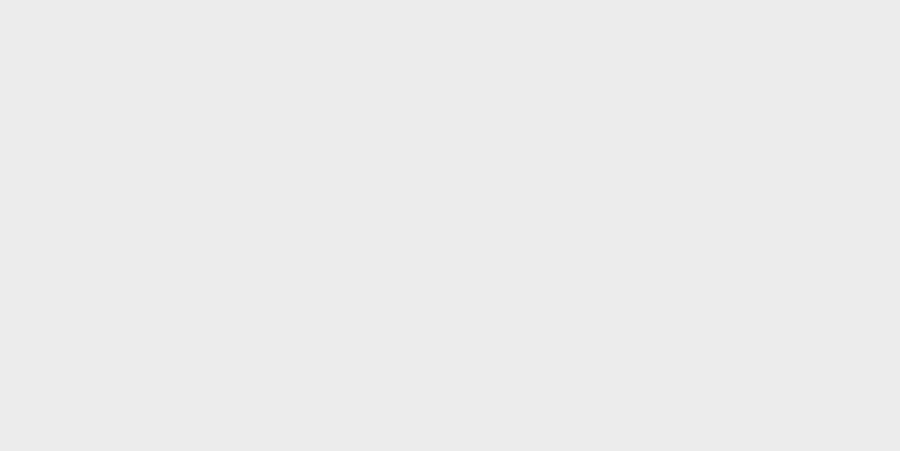
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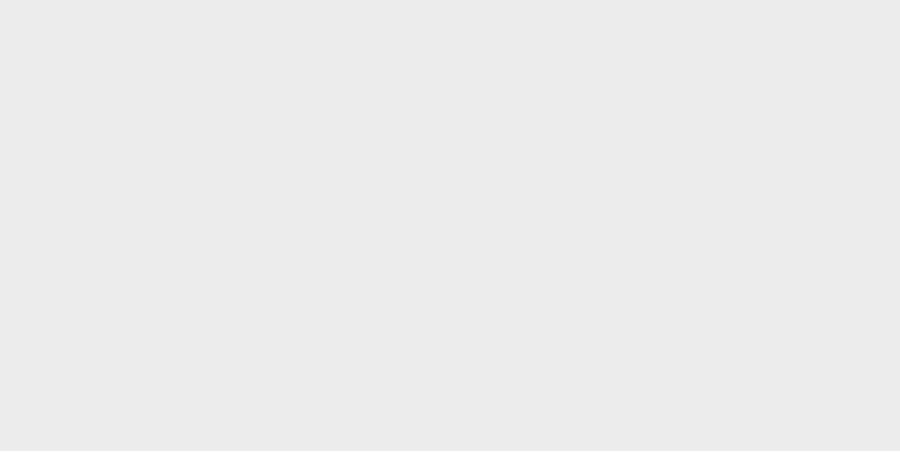
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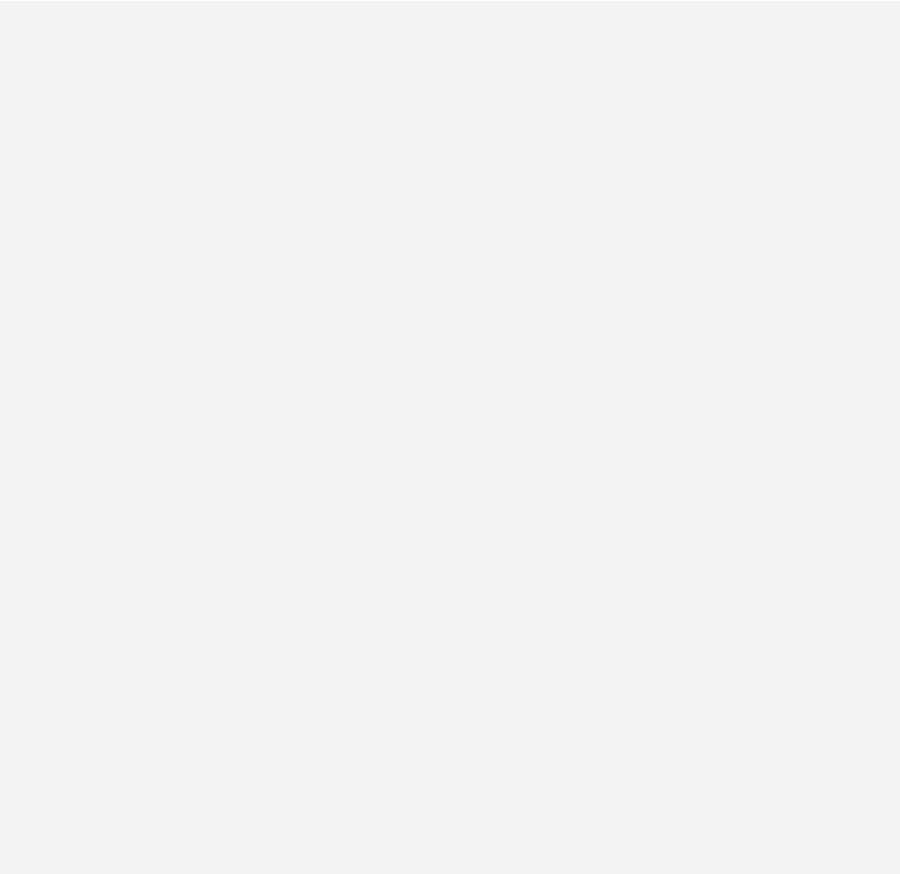
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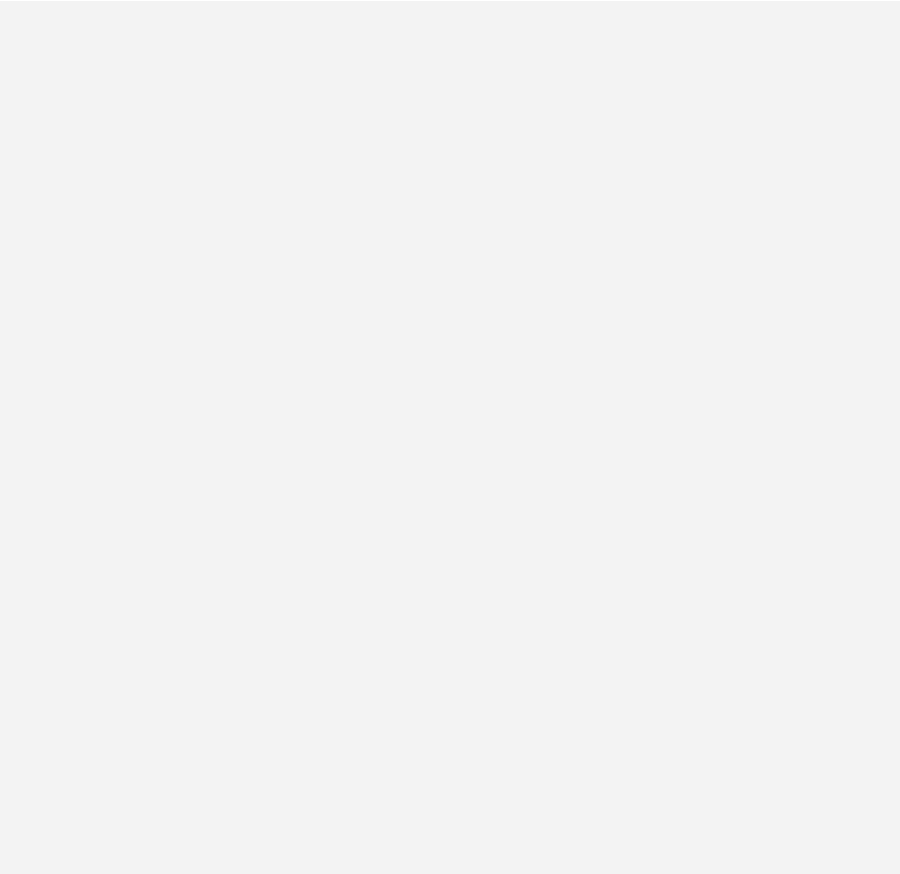
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