

Ernie

Ernie's dad kept a lifelong diary. He started it when he was a kid, 11 or 12 years old, and would brag that the only time he missed a day was on a trip to Yugoslavia when he went to a soccer game and then out drinking with some locals and he woke up in another town and didn't know up from down.

The diaries were the cheap appointment-type books that people pick up at the end of the year. Each day had a designated amount of space, and it wasn't a lot, but Ernie's dad kept it simple . . . one or two highlights, such as who he might have run into on his walk or who he talked to on the phone, and if anything interesting was mentioned. Sometimes he'd include a baseball score if the game was exciting, and he'd name the winning and losing pitchers.

Occasionally there were random notes for the novel he was going to write. That was the whole point of the continuous diary, he enjoyed telling people, that you'd look back through it and your off-the-cuff ideas had germinated.

Ernie wasn't aware of any novel ever getting off the ground. But his dad did talk about qualifying into *The Big Book of Alternate Records*, that you never knew, since who else kept a daily diary for half a century.

Ernie figured if you got in *The Big Book of Alternate Records* you'd be more famous than if you actually wrote a novel . . . and his dad hired a consultant at one point but nothing happened.

One other thing Ernie's dad included in his diary entries were his female conquests--the names of the women he bedded down, and enough of the specifics that you got the idea.

There were the women *before* his mom, and the women after, and his dad's pace didn't change much.

Ernie knew all this because he read a whole bunch of the diaries when he was 17, which confirmed what he'd suspected for a while.

He'd gotten his driver's license and he had his own set of keys to his dad's car, but sometimes he'd end up with his dad's set, which had a small extra key on it.

So Ernie made a copy of that key and from then on would sneak into his dad's attic study and open up the

bottom drawer of the gray heavy-duty industrial desk and read what his dad had to say.

Ernie supposed his dad would be considered a handsome man--though not *that* handsome--and his mom was more ordinary looking--but not *that* ordinary. Either way it was shocking how successful his dad had been at fornicating with other women . . . unless he was making it up, but Ernie was pretty dang convinced he wasn't.

There was even the woman up the block. She and her family moved away years ago . . . but man, *her*? She was sure nice those times a ball went in her yard and Ernie and his friends had to ring the bell to retrieve it. And generous with the Halloween candy. Good spirit, big smile.

Also in the mix was a vivid reference to one of Ernie's elementary school teachers. Not a main one, but a woman who came in part time and taught French. He put it together that his dad was on the school board for a couple years, so that must have been the groundwork.

When Ernie poured through those diaries at 17 years old he thought about two things.

One, he wanted to kill his dad.

Two, he wondered should he tell his mom.

He carried both considerations around for a while, and eventually neither one made sense. If he killed his dad--and got away with it--who would benefit, ultimately? Anyone?

And he decided his mom *had* to know, how could she not . . . and him telling her would only make things worse, since *she'd* know now that *he* knew.

Ernie told his friend Joe, and Joe didn't have a big problem with it, since his parents were divorced and he likely would have taken a bad dad who was at least *living* with him, which Ernie hadn't thought of.

So Ernie told his girlfriend Clara, and she dumped him a week later and he wondered if laying that on her had something to do with it, though there were other issues, there always were.

Ernie started and stopped college a few times and finally went to culinary school in the Napa Valley and became a reasonably skilled chef.

He worked at a ritzy Asian-fusion place in Bel Air and then a seafood waterfront one in Fort Lauderdale, until the head chef made a comment he didn't like one night and he walked out of there, and resurfaced a few months later at a resort in Kennebunkport, Maine.

Sometimes in the summer, during the day, he would double up as one of the tennis pros. He'd never been a great player but figured out how to teach it, it wasn't complicated as long as your students weren't very good . . . and in the rare instance when one was, he'd redirect them to the real pros.

It was a Tuesday morning in July and he checked in with the desk gal in the pro shop. The way the resort worked it, she handed the pro a handwritten card for each lesson, and Ernie thought it was classy and the handwriting was stylish, big looping cursive with the names of today's students and the time slots.

He gave his first lesson, then the second, and hadn't thought about the name of the third student until she was coming down the steps onto the court from the viewing deck. She was an older woman but fit and tan and wearing all white, everything in place.

Molly Hightower.

Now of course you could have multiples of those, it wouldn't be the all-time rarest name . . . but his dad was a pretty avid tennis player . . . so that, combined with reading all about *some* Molly Hightower in one of the year's diaries--you had to wonder.

It would be unfair to squander any of the lesson time asking questions, so Ernie proceeded as normal. Molly was athletic, had a solid backhand--she'd developed the two-hander, which wasn't easy when you'd likely learned tennis in the one-handed era--and hit the forehand hard but was erratic.

It was Ernie's last lesson of the morning so they had time to sit on the bench afterwards, and Molly Hightower explained that she had a touch of bursitis in her shoulder, which is why she'd been off her game on the forehand side.

"But you were nailing the ball," Ernie said, "that part doesn't hurt it?"

"Surprisingly I'm okay there," she said. "It's more of a coordination issue, apparently. My radar is haywire."

“I got you,” he said. “Where did you *learn* tennis? I mean, initially?”

He was tempted to ask a more direct question-- something like *Where did you play tennis with my dad*--see where that might lead . . . but the timing was inappropriate.

Molly laughed. “Oh, back in the dark ages, do you mean? Rolling Hills, in Orange County.”

Ernie was familiar with it, southern California, pretty neighborhood packed with high-end estates. Some big names came out of that club, including Pete Sampras.

“Good then,” he said, “that about wraps it up. Nice job. Any questions?”

She got her stuff together and said, “Well how about you?”

“Where’d *I* learn, you mean? Or more, how about you period?”

She smiled. “The second selection.”

“I *get* that, from different students. For some reason they want to know the backstory, like what circuitous route landed me *here*, which shouldn’t be all that

interesting . . . since I mostly stand still and feed balls out of a basket, and sometimes ask the student if they ever knew my dad.”

It was still inappropriate, but it popped out, and there you had it.

Molly took a moment. You couldn't tell for sure if she was reacting, putting it together--or if that was her normal pace.

She said, “You have freedom. Always something to envy.”

And she headed back up the steps to the clubhouse.

The resort hosted a Wednesday night social event, and Ernie started off in the kitchen and then manned the carving table at the buffet.

Molly and her husband came through and she introduced Ernie to Jack, very polite fellow, and eventually there was dancing to a three-piece band, the musicians wearing white tuxedos.

Ernie was on a break smoking a cigarette outside and Molly found him and she said, “They dimmed the

lights when the music started. We older folks take our chances.”

“That’s what downward-spiraled my dad,” Ernie said. “He was trying to get a frisbee out of a tree, and he skidded down the trunk and broke his hip.”

“You have a wild imagination,” she said, “but how is your father?”

If there *was* still a question mark, this took care of it.

He said, “He’s hanging in there. Like I told someone, I thought about pushing him off a cliff at one time, but the risk/reward ratio wasn’t there . . . Were you banging him *before* my mom, or after? I can’t keep the periods straight.”

“Afterwards I’m afraid,” she said.

“Well . . . how was it? I’m not talking about the act . . . I guess I’m saying, the companionship, did you have fun?”

“Your father was marvelous company. Yes.”

“Actually,” he said, “I never asked anyone that question before.”

“So, you’ve similarly encountered, other friends of his?”

“Just one, who would qualify.”

“There's no need to tell me about it, if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“I will anyway. I was working a dog track in Orlando? Feeding info sheets to the track announcer. My dad's in town so I bring him. There was a vet on site, an attractive woman, kept to herself. I found out later my dad put the moves on her, and they had a thing. Didn't last long of course, by default.”

“Gosh,” Molly said. “Did you reach out to this person later? Your co-worker?”

“Confront her? That’s what I’m trying to tell you, no.”

“But you did so . . . with me.”

Ernie said, “What were you looking for, when you screwed my dad?”

“You ask the difficult questions . . . Would *love in all the wrong places* work?”

“Not sure. Did you fool around elsewhere, beyond it?”

“I did.”

“And any *right* places turn up?”

“Jack is a wonderful man,” she said. “It will be 23 years in November.”

“You didn’t quite answer my question there. You know that, right?”

The band started playing the old Five Satins tune ‘In The Still Of The Night’. The song was out of the 1950’s, but Ernie knew a lot of those. He was in a rock band in high school, and they figured out if they learned oldies they could get paying gigs.

Everything was wrong with it, but he slid his arm around her waist and she was okay, and her hand was on his shoulder, and he pulled her in just a bit and they moved to the music . . . and you could hear dogs barking in the distance and Ernie thought he heard a train, but there wouldn’t be one around here, it was something else.

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