



MY ROOTS

Dad and Liberace

We were a Liberace family when I was growing up in Miami. He was from the Midwest like my parents. Like my dad, he was a piano player, only successful. In the 1950s, he had his own television show, which we watched religiously, Dad grinning at Liberace's flamboyance while admiring the musical chops. My mom, her hair up in bobby pins, took notice of Liberace's mother beaming from the front row. You had to like a boy who was so kind to his mother.

Just a kid, I felt lucky to be watching. My favorite song was the "Liberace Boogie Woogie." My dad enjoyed the Moonlight Sonata, and my mother grew misty-eyed during his usual show closer, "I'll Be Seeing You."

I named my pet rabbits after Liberace and his brother, George, who played violin on the TV show and sometimes led the orchestra. George and Liberace never made a run for it when I let them out of their backyard hutch, and they never bit or scratched. When they disappeared one day, I was sad. "We got them a good home," my mother said. "A farmer." I was too young to imagine my beloved pets roasting on a spit.

My dad played piano in nightclubs from Key West to Madeira Beach but mostly in Miami, where he called himself "Ernie Bergen," a name



An autographed photo of Liberace my dad got for me. Photo courtesy of the Klinkenberg family.

more likely to fit in a newspaper ad than our long last name. Like virtually all musicians, my dad failed to make a living with his art and needed a day job.

In 1954, the lavish Fontainebleau Hotel opened on Miami Beach. A World War II mess sergeant, my dad got a position running the kitchens for the executive chef. On opening night, Liberace was the headliner.

For years, Liberace was a regular at the hotel, which is how my dad acquired his famous Liberace story. It was about 1962. Liberace had been hired to play for a week at the hotel's showpiece La Ronde nightclub. My dad's job was making sure the nightclub's kitchen and bar was fully stocked and ready for the opening evening.

Hours before the show, my dad was finishing up his preparations in the La Ronde, accompanied by employees, mostly Cubans who addressed him as "Mister Ernie." Mister Ernie looked around and sat at the ivory-white grand piano on the stage. Grinning dramatically like a certain famous pianist, he began playing "I'll Be Seeing You."

The audience for my dad's La Ronde debut included pop-eyed employees who had no idea he could play. One employee turned to a stranger who listened closely from the shadows.

"Mister Ernie," the Cuban told the stranger, "he play good. Si?"

Liberace nodded. Snapping out of his reverie, my dad leaped from the piano in embarrassment.

"No," Liberace said, "keep playing."

Mister Ernie returned to the piano and played for Liberace. Big time.

Dad and the Crawlspace

Before I tell you about the mango tree, and the fruit rats, and some impetuous youthful behavior, you need to know that my dad loved Florida. He really did. For some reason our state never quite returned his affection.

Soon after we moved from Chicago to Miami in 1951, he killed a harmless green snake in our yard. He never slew another one, but the wheels of karma were already set in motion. Nature was going to play some dirty tricks on the snake slayer.

We lived in a modest little house built after World War II, one of those two-bedroom, one-bath GI specials that went up in about twenty minutes. It was an okay house except for cracks just wide enough for all manner of outside creatures to venture inside. When the roaches

weren't rearranging the silverware, they liked gliding across the living room like kamikazes and landing on my dad's bare chest. That's when it dawned on him. Nature was settling a score.

Ever throw bread to a duck? Nothing to it. Bread lands on lawn. Ducks quack happily. When my dad fed them, they flew up at his face impatiently, quacking in anger.

One time, on a Sunday drive, he rolled down the window of our old Nash Rambler so we could enjoy the balmy breeze. Almost immediately a wasp sailed through the window and stung him through his shorts in a delicate place.

One night, as he stood in our above-ground pool, he noticed a large tree frog clinging to the trunk of a nearby coconut palm. "Isn't that frog smart?" he marveled. "It's up there next to the spotlight where it can catch bugs." The frog chose that moment to spring off the tree and land on Dad's chest. The frog survived the ensuing panicked swatting and churning backstroke.

On camping trips, after consuming beans and weenies, we always played cards at the picnic table. What could be simpler? Turn on the Coleman lantern and deal. Sure, the occasional moth might fly into the light. Nothing scary about moths. Suddenly, my father shrieked and pitched backward, almost bringing down the table with him. As he thrashed on the grass, some kind of never-before-seen insect—surely it must have hailed from the deepest reaches of the Amazon—clung to his eyebrows. About 6 inches long, the creature boasted multiple legs and nightmarish, bulbous eyes.

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If you are squeamish or easily frightened, please stop reading now and make yourself a cup of warm milk. I am about to tell you the famous Miami mango tree story.

In our neighborhood, everybody loved our mango tree. My dad planted it in 1953. Within a decade it towered over the house. We ate mangoes at breakfast, and in salads, ice cream, and milk shakes. Dad took boxes of them to work. I brought boxes to school. We put them on a table next to the street. "Help Yourself," the sign said, and motorists did.

The rats loved our mangoes too. At dusk, they would leap in waves from the telephone wires into the tree and commence gnawing. By morning, dozens and dozens of rat-mangled mangoes lay on the lawn.

My mother, a city girl, feared rats above anything. After they ate our mangoes, perhaps they would eat her family. “Ernie, you’ve got to do something,” she said.

“Oh, Bea!” he said. “They’re outside. They can’t hurt us.” “I hate rats. You have to poison them.”

Poisoning rats is usually a bad idea, especially outdoor rats. They eat the poison and look for someplace dark and dank to die.

He put out the poison anyway. A week passed, and we smelled something awful. It was summer, damp and hot, and the odor of decay wafted through the house. The smell was especially acute under the bathroom.

We had a crawl space under the house. All the houses on my block did. They were for ventilation, not storage. Nobody in their right mind ever crawled under a south Florida house. But my dad was going to. He needed to recover that stinking rat. Of course, word got around. Neighbors showed up to watch the drama.

My dad marched into the yard dressed like an extra from *Lawrence of Arabia*, wearing a long-sleeved shirt and long pants tucked into his socks. He wore boots, a scarf, garden gloves, hat. Rat tools included a flashlight, cardboard box, and the kind of tongs one uses to pick up a steaming ear of corn. He stood anxiously before the crawl-space door, approached it, thought better of it, and backed away. He approached it again, backed away, working on his courage while trying to quiet his imagination.

What might be waiting for him under the house? Other than a dead rat? Cockroaches, of course, probably albinos. Newts, toads, witches? Perhaps. Surely something with dripping mandibles lurked in the darkest corners. The great man knelt with resignation, took a deep breath, and began the slow crawl toward the opening.

I must have been thirteen or so, stupid and insensitive. Or just a pawn in Mother Nature’s practical joke. From a few feet away, I leaned against the rake with which I had been gathering rat-gnawed mangoes from the lawn.

Dad's head disappeared reluctantly into the crawl-space darkness. Followed by his neck and shoulders. With the rake I reached over and touched the small of his back.

For a moment, dead silence. And then, from the crawl space, came a cry, a howl, and what sounded like someone speaking in tongues. His cursing filled the humid summer air, and not just run-of-the-mill profanities, but the special stuff usually heard only in army barracks during the craps games.

Now he tried to stand in the little crawl space, as if he could lift the entire house upon his shoulders. He failed, of course. He had to retreat on hands and knees. Then he was standing. Then he was running in my direction.

I was running, too—like an Olympian, like those guys fleeing the dinosaur in *King Kong*. Arms pumping and mouth agape, I somehow leapt the garden fence in a single bound. Never looking back, I continued running, one block, two, all the way to Biscayne Canal, where I hid for several hours under the Sixth Avenue Bridge.

At nightfall I limped home, prepared to accept my fate, whatever that might turn out to be, an orphanage assignment or a beating with the belt.

He was sitting in his easy chair and calmly reading the evening paper. The smell of dead rat was gone. Every time I buy a mango I think of him.

The Beatles in Miami

That Christmas, Sharon Alford received the best present in the history of Christmas presents, a boss portable hi-fi with fold-out speakers. A sophomore at Hialeah High, she could now listen to her new records endlessly. Lying in bed in February 1964, she studied the photo of beautiful Paul on the back of her new album, *Meet the Beatles*.

As the cutest Beatle, Paul could have his pick of any girl. Sharon was a pretty blonde, but she had a practical streak. Could she really hope to win Paul's heart? Probably not. John was too brainy and unfortunately