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Before Gossip Was Gawkerfied

Hitting the Stork Club and Toots Shor's, coming back with tales of JFK, Grace Kelly, Ty Cobb and plenty more.

By Edward Kosner

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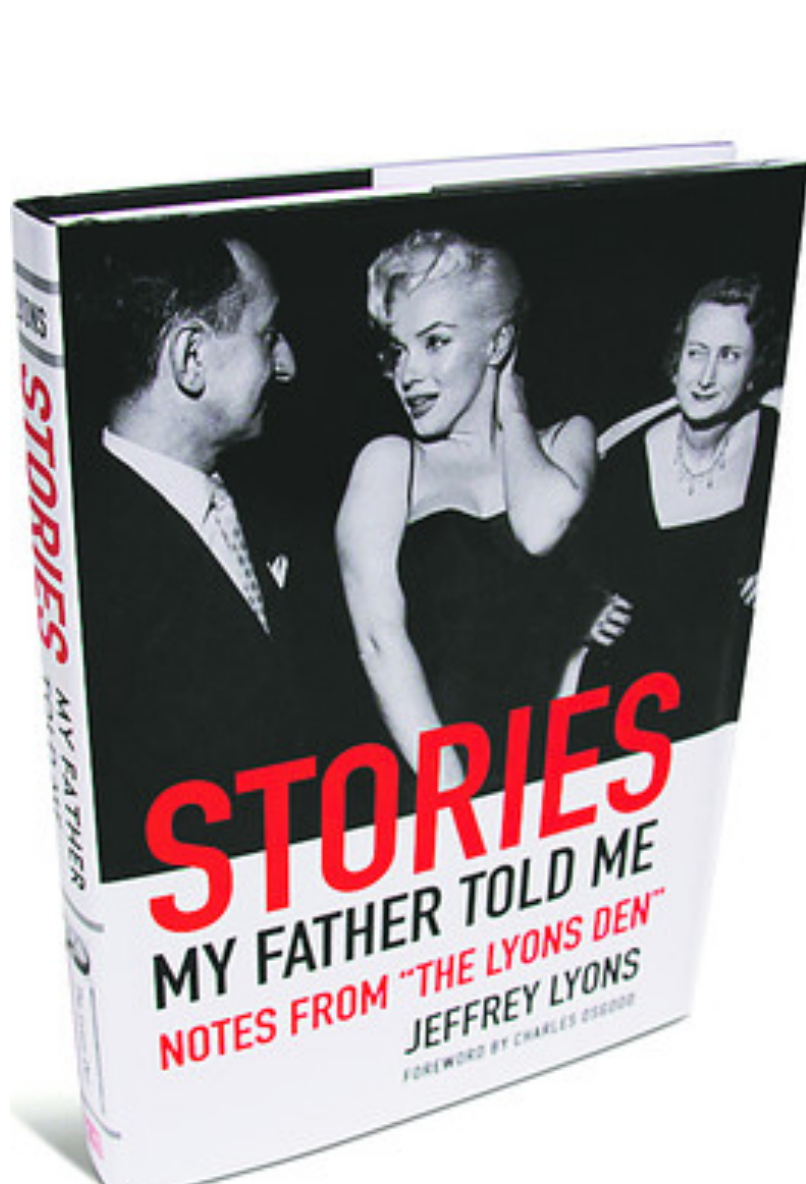
Groucho Marx was once playing pinochle with David Ben-Gurion, Audrey Hepburn and Albert Einstein when he was called away to take a phone call from Winston Churchill. Returning to the table, Groucho noticed Einstein jotting figures on the score pad. "Rethinking relativity, eh, Albert?" quipped the famous comic. "No, no," replied the beloved, frizzy-haired genius, "just checking the score—and you owe me 75 cents, Groucho!"

That imaginary anecdote does *not* appear in Jeffrey Lyons's new book but hundreds of other, equally inane but purportedly true and occasionally charming tales do. Indeed, reading "Stories My Father Told Me: Notes from 'The Lyons Den'" is a bit like watching Woody Allen's new movie, "Midnight in Paris," whose bedazzled hero finds himself magically chatting with Hemingway, Picasso and Dalí in a lost Parisian golden age. Mr. Lyons's cast, drawn from his father's newspaper gossip column, includes those folks plus four decades of other luminaries, from Ty Cobb to Shelley Winters, with Somerset Maugham, Helen Keller, Gen. George Patton, Grace Kelly, JFK, Brendan Behan, Marilyn Monroe and dozens more along for the ride.

Leonard Lyons confected his column six days a week in the tabloid New York Post from 1934 until 1974. Lyons père was a young lawyer writing a weekly column for the Sunday English-language page of the Yiddish Forward when he won a Post contest to find a challenger to Walter Winchell, the vulpine king of newspaper gossip.

A trim, dapper man with the look of a bright-eyed sparrow, Leonard Lyons was the un-Winchell. Without help from PR flacks and other enablers, he made his lunchtime and late-night rounds of Gotham restaurants and nightclubs, jotting down items from the stars (art, lit, musical, political and movie) of his day. They invariably came off as witty, debonair icons of talent and glamour. Never was heard a discouraging—or scandalous—word in the "The Lyons Den," which was affectionately known around the Post city desk, where I worked as a 20-year-old rewrite man, as "The Liars Den."

Thus, one reads a mystifying squib about Cary Grant and his third wife, the actress Betsy Drake, who was sailing to New York on the doomed liner Andrea Doria in 1956 while Grant was filming "The Pride and the Passion" with Sophia Loren in Spain. When Grant learns that Drake has been rescued from the sinking ship, he calls her and begins to cry. "Relax," she says. "I'm fine. Now go take Sophia Loren to dinner." Grant, of course, was conducting a notorious affair with Loren—a juicy detail that Lyons fastidiously spared his readers.



STORIES MY FATHER TOLD ME

By Jeffrey Lyons
Abbeville, 352 pages, \$35

gems. Orson Welles, a friend, writes a guide to the theater for one of Lyons's sons, including: "Like Hamlet, every director tries to persuade his cast to do the show as he rehearsed it." And skeptical Rebecca West on "In Cold Blood": "It's not reportage, it's Capoteage."

Chronically starstruck, Lyons was a connoisseur of weird juxtapositions. In one of his columns, the urbane Noël Coward is introduced by the columnist to "Two-Ton" Tony Galento, the fireplug Jersey heavyweight who once knocked down Joe Louis. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Galento," purrs Noël. "Howdy doody," replies Two-Ton. In another column, Salvador Dalí sends Harpo Marx a harp with barbed-wire strings, and Harpo reciprocates with a photo of himself plucking away with 10 bandaged fingers.

And some of the material is just bizarre.

Lyons has J. Edgar Hoover visiting Robert Stroud, the Bird Man of Alcatraz, and buying one of Stroud's 300 canaries—which refuses to sing when Hoover gets it back to Washington. Meeting heavyweight champ Rocky Marciano at the White House, Dwight Eisenhower whispers: "I envy you." And Douglas MacArthur takes his tiny wife backstage at "Top Banana" to meet comedian Phil Silvers. "Mr. Silvers," the general says, "this is my top banana!"

Did any of these things really happen? Jeffrey Lyons attests that all his father's gleanings were exclusive and those that weren't were fact-checked. It should matter, but somehow it doesn't really. Leonard Lyons conjured a burnished world of beauty, artistry, wealth and worldly success that one would like to think flourished and should have if it didn't. Stars—whether Richard Burton or LBJ, Gypsy Rose Lee or George Patton—spun in their own firmament of authentic achievement. We lived in their refracted glory, glad for their sublime gifts and quips, however unlikely the provenance.

Poor, gentle Leonard Lyons would be driven out of journalism today by a tsunami of snarky blog posts. How can a bon mot from Hemingway or an aperçu from Winston Churchill compete with Dominique Strauss-Kahn's DNA swab or Rep. Anthony Weiner's crotch-tweet as chronicled in Lyons's old paper or by Gawker?

Lyons was old-school. In 12,429 columns, he never once described anyone as a "celebrity"—or so his son Jeffrey claims. A coarser culture gets the gossip it deserves.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire, and the New York Daily News, and the author of the memoir "It's Not to Me."

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