



Star Grazing

Close Encounters with the stars among us.

I suppose anyone who travels around the US for business or pleasure will occasionally fall accidentally into the orbit of famous people, movie stars, politicians, captains of industry. Here is a collection of my star grazing's for what they are worth. Moments, really, in an accident-prone life.

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The year was 1960, April 20th. I was living in El Paso Texas. Word spread that **Elvis Presley** was coming to El Paso to perform. He was traveling by train and due to arrive on a Wednesday evening. His train rolled into the depot at 10:45pm. The crowd was wild with anticipation that had been building for more than four hours. I was on the platform not far from where his train car stopped and Elvis was already on the rear platform waving to his fans. For the next hour he attempted to shout greetings over the screaming fans, alternatively fighting off women pulling at his clothes, kissing the pretty ones and signing autographs. After an hour of this he retreated into his private train car and just after midnight the train pulled out of the station. There was to be no performance. Rumor spread that the El Paso sheriff refuse to allow Elvis off the train to perform because of his reputation for sensual gyrations. That rumor later proved to be untrue.

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I was in New Orleans at a conference in April of 1978. After a long day, I left friends at a local night club in the French Quarter intending to return to my hotel and turn in for the night. I was walking along a semi-lit Decatur Street by myself, when suddenly noticed approaching me on the same sidewalk three of the largest black men I had ever seen. I am 5'10, these guys were well over 6' and wide as a house. Not only that, but they were walking side by side blocking off the entire sidewalk, not to mention the light from a nearby street lamp. I considered briefly crossing the street and running for my life, but instead pushed aside the coward in me and continued walking. They stopped, I stopped facing them and said with all the courage I could muster, "Good Evening Gentlemen" (*positive thinking*). The gents on either side mumbled good evening in return, but the guy in the middle stuck out his hand and practically shouted, "and how are you this fine evening, Sir". I shook his oversized hand which was like putting my hand in a vice. I said, "that's quite a grip you have there". He laughed and said, "That's because I am a fighter. I am **Mohamad Ali** and I am the greatest fighter that ever lived".

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Dining with friends at Del Frisco Grille on Ocean Avenue in Sant Monica, our conversation was disrupted by a gaggle of girls swirling past us to occupy the next table. Well, not actually girls, more like fashionable young women, six by count, desperately California attractive ones at that. There were two in fact whose faces were very familiar; **Julia Louis Dreyfus** of Seinfeld fame,

and **Christie Brinkley** recently divorced from Billy Joel. I tried not to stare, but I did, taking flak from my dinner companions. The ladies, sadly, noticed me not at all.

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Lunch with friends in the main restaurant at the Waldorf Astoria, great seafood burrito. Heading back to the conference area but wanting to stop at my room first. Sent my friends on ahead and turned to the elevator bank oblivious of the yellow construction platform and bright lights, must be remodeling. Stopped in front of an elevator likely to be next to open based on the floor indicator lights. The elevator door opened, and I found myself face to face with **Sean Connery**. I heard someone off to my left yell, “Cut! Get him out of there. Who is supposed to be watching the hallway?” The cameras were rolling at the time giving truth to my life-time of boasting that I was in a movie with **Sean Connery**, even if I ended up on the cutting room floor.

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Passing through a recreation room in a dorm on the campus of UCLA, I came upon **Richard Anderson**, a.k.a. Oscar Goldman, Lee Majors control in the Six Million Dollar man. He was shooting pool with his son who was a student at the university. We exchanged pleasantries and I can only hope I didn’t say something star-struck-stupid.

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Famous test pilot **Chuck Yeager** was guest speaker at an Apple event at the Regency Grand Cypress Resort in Orlando. I got to meet him and was part of a small group gathered around him listening to tales of daring flights and near missed accidents. He was very friendly and gave us each an autographed copy of his book called Yeager of all things.

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President Richard Nixon came to State College, Pa in March of 1969 to attend his uncle Ernest’s funeral. I was a grad student at Penn State at the time, and like thousands of shameless others, lined the sidewalks of College Avenue hoping to get a look at the great man. As it happened his limousine passed within ten feet of where I was standing. His window was rolled down and he was waving at the crowd using the famed “V” sign with his fingers. Our eyes met for an instant, and I swear he was asking me for help. Or maybe not. In any case it was a thrill to stand so close to the leader of the free world.

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I’ve met **Steve Jobs** on three occasions, the third of which was the most memorable. I met him the first time at small education conference in Snow Mass, Colorado, an intimate gathering of educational technologists. A few years later in a reception line at an education conference held in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, Steve introduced me to **Ross Perot** who was running for President at the time. On the third occasion, we were at a special Apple event in San Francisco. Steve asked me if I had tried the sushi? He had arranged to have reportedly the best sushi chef in San Francisco cater the event for his guests. An honest answer would have been that I had never tried sushi and couldn’t get by the notion of eating raw fish. But Steve being Steve, took me by the elbow and walked me to the sushi bar where he introduced me to the chef, who picked up a plate and with Steve’s recommendations loaded it with a selection of his finest creations. I ate it all while they watched me and became a life-time sushi fan at that.

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My years Cornell overlapped the tenure of **Carl Sagan**. I can’t say I knew him well, but given the smallness of the college community, I did have several opportunities to chat with him at various social functions and once in the lounge of the Pittsburgh Airport where we frequently found ourselves waiting for a connecting flight to Ithaca. I shared a table with him and his wife

Ann Druyan at an event at Ithaca College in 1995 where he was the keynote speaker. I have an autographed copy of Contact to remember him by.

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On evening in the fall of 2002, I was at a stage-side table in Nashville's Wildhorse Saloon when someone behind me said, "Excuse me, can I get by your chair?" The someone, it turned out, was Hank Williams Jr.

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I found myself in Lowes Vanderbilt Hotel in Nashville in 2003 where a community event headlined by **Vince Gill** was taking place in the main ballroom. At some point I made my way to the lobby men's room to recycle a beer or two and was suddenly aware that Vince was using the next urinal. We nodded to one another, not looking down of course, but I got great pleasure for years afterwards telling friends that I used to hang out with **Vince Gill**.

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Peter Drucker was professor at NYU and a famous management guru at least famous in the circles of business professionals. In 2001 I was Chief Learning Officer for Corpedia Education, an online learning provider located in Phoenix. We had a unique opportunity to record some of the wisdom of the master for a voice over on a premier management module. The problem was that Peter was 96 and no longer traveled away from his home in Burbank California. So, we flew a crew to his Burbank home to do the recording. After many hours of recording, Peter advised us that at 4pm sharp without fail he would make use of his swimming pool and we were welcome to join him. The catch was, he said with a grin, that he bathed in the nude and expected his gusts to do likewise. We caught an earlier flight home.

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I graduated from high school in 1957 at the age of 17. I had a techie job with a small electronics company called Lehigh Valley Electronics. I did a lot of crafting and wiring custom-made equipment for outside clients. One day I was introduced to this skinny college researcher who wanted to build rat-behavior-test equipment. I worked with him along with several other tech employees over a period of about nine months building what we called rat-boxes.

Six years later in a freshman biology course, I opened a textbook and saw a picture of a box I had built. The professor's name was **B.F. Skinner**; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B. F. Skinner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._F._Skinner).

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