



BRUSHES AND RUSHES

By Bill Byrne

My wife reminds me, whenever I mention my brushes with the famous, that I am “star struck.” It’s her way of keeping me from making too much of myself or parlaying my brief encounters, my space and time-share with some news-headliners, into anything more than what it is—mostly happenstance, “a mere bagatelle,” or more appropriately, a series of them.

By my own standards, my “brushes” have been considerable over the years. On the streets of Manhattan’s Washington Heights where I grew up, I would visit from outside his first floor apartment window with Herb Kauhry, “Tiny Tim” in later life. I recall that I never saw him outside, although I’m sure he had to venture out occasionally. What I do recall is that he had a teenage crush on Elizabeth Taylor, “Miss Elizabeth,” and shared with me through his apartment window his latest scrapbook collection of movie magazine clippings of her from her *National Velvet* days. Those same streets had me taunting Jacques Dambois, Jacques Ahern when I knew him, with mocking cries of “Jock” and then running as fast I could to avoid being pummeled by him. Our eighth grade dramatic showcase was a truncated version of *Carmen*, replete with Jacques, then beginning to make a name for himself in Balanchine ballet circles, being introduced by me as I bolted on stage shouting, “Escamillo, the toreador is coming!” Jacques and his partner danced ballet-fashion to the music of the song *Habanera*, and I remember being struck by Jacques’ power, grace and athleti-

cism. To get a sense of the dimensions he brought to his stage roles, rent “Seven Brides For Seven Brothers” and watch Jacques at his athletic best.

When I can, I let anyone know that I went to high school in the Bronx with Regis Philbin. For Father’s Day last year, my composer son David sent me a coffee cup he designed with a picture of Cardinal Hayes High School, Regis’ and my high school, situated a few blocks from the soon to be replaced “House That Ruth Built.” There’s a picture of a smiling Regis on the mug also, a sort of mug on mug thing. David has him asking, “Hey . . . weren’t you in my math class?” I don’t think I was, but then again I don’t recall anyone I was in math class with. Brag as I do on you, I have to admit that Regis, “I hardly knew you!”

Years later, armed with an undergraduate degree noting a major in English and minor in Education, I taught at a private Catholic High School in Queens, New York. They didn’t in those days make too fine a point of having you teach your major, so in one of the ironies of my first teaching assignment, I had a schedule heavy on math—algebra and geometry. I fumbled my way through math classes,—“Sorry guys!”—but luckily I was a pretty good baseball player, and the school needed a JV baseball coach. My next brush was with a master of the “brush back,” “Whitey” Ford, Hall of Fame Yankee pitcher. He was contributing some of his baseball equipment to the school, and together with the Varsity coach, I visited with “Whitey” in his Glen Cove, Long Island home. Met his wife and was greeted by his dog “Casey,” affectionately named for Casey Stengel. Strange how I recall the smallest of details of that first visit, so in awe was I of this man who played on one of the world’s biggest stages, Yankee Stadium. That day he had just come from “Toots” Shore’s restaurant and showed us a pearl handled cue stick given to him by “Toots.” I met him again several other times at the Stadium, where he would graciously conduct mini-pitching clinics for several of my high school baseball players and me.

I once waved to President John Kennedy as he was driven

by in a limo, but I don't think that counts as a "brush," more of a "passing nod." I met Bishop Sheen, then in his high-profile TV mini-lesson days, and I wanted to mention to him, but didn't dare, that he needed to use "Head and Shoulders" on his purple and black robes. I had a short conversation with David Letterman about Audi cars on the occasion of the Long Beach California Trans Am races in 1989. I think I mostly talked and he feigned interest.

I did have a prolonged relationship with three-time Indianapolis champion Bobby Unser. We toured the Auto Show circuit together for two years, he as the exhibit's talent draw and I as the Audi of America company representative. He always referred to me as "Father" though we were about the same age at the time. I would ply him with questions about his racing days, sit back, let him reminisce while being careful not to step on his abundant ego, and through him got to meet some other racing notables such as Johnny Rutherford, Mario Andretti, "Big" and "Little Al" Unser, to name a few. Mostly I remember his Teddy Yip stories. Now those who don't know Teddy need to open up Wikipedia and type in his name. In racing and business circles, this man, now deceased, was a legend. Teddy's Hong Kong holdings included travel agencies, hotels, casinos, and trading companies. "The Donald" is a pale reflection of Teddy Yip. Most of Bobby's stories have him and Teddy involved with one romantic adventure or another. What brought them together were similar interests—racing cars and racy women. Bobby confided to me once that if he and either of his sons Robbie or Bobby, Jr. were in the same town at the same time, they divided the women up evenly between them. We're still good friends, and we speak every so often on an Indiana moon. He is sure to finish the conversation by inviting me to visit him in "Unserville," Albuquerque to the uninitiated.

In April of 2006, I attended the premier of the movie *Pittsburgh* at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, a movie that features Jeff Goldblum, Ed Begley, Jr, and Ileana Douglas. My son David had composed the score for the movie, so I had to be

there in all my fatherly pride. In the lobby afterwards, I shook hand with Jeff Goldblum and introduced myself as the score composer's father. Goldblum gave out an audible sigh and remarked that he was relieved because he had mistaken me for Paul Newman. Maybe I vaguely resembled an "old" Paul Newman. There is a picture I navigate around frequently everyday, emblazoned on my computer mouse pad, courtesy again of my creative composer son. It captures me shaking hands with Goldblum under the caption: "Two Hollywood Legends Together!!!"

My contacts with these sports and entertainment icons were in the aggregate superficial, I realize. The initial "rush" of these encounters has long since dissipated. Still, I like to mention them for the "WOW" factor I sometimes get or the "that must have been interesting" remark that follows. Sometimes the listener will share his or her "legendary brushes" and that makes for a connection of sorts between us. Psychologists point out that we do this because we're bored with our own lives and living through the noteworthy is a way of alleviating that boredom. Put another way, we're searching for our own identity. Also, psychologists tell us that because we are so personally disconnected these days, then maybe these fantasy relationships are easier to form than real ones. It also has been suggested that "kissing up" to celebrities makes our adulation cause them to tolerate our closeness better. I don't like to think about that last insight.