

Boldfaced Name Droppings

When you live in Los Angeles, you trip over celebrities almost as often as on the city's poorly maintained sidewalks.

Life becomes an endless game of "Six Degrees of Separation." For example, my hairdresser's husband's late brother was married to **Charo**.

What's a "Hollywood memoir" without boldfaced names? So I've saved impatient readers time by gathering all my random celebrity brushes into one chapter.¹

So in no particular order:

Long before *Saturday Night Live* turned them into boldfaced names, **Beck Bennett** and **Kyle Mooney** were acting students at University of Southern California, as well as a fledgling stand-up comedy team.

During my stint as USC's busiest student-film star, I was cast opposite them in a bizarre short called *Inside Leo Kremplin's Brain*, as an emotionally stunted accountant who lives in his head so much, he eventually finds himself literally trapped inside his own brain.

Beck and Kyle played Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum-like personifications of Leo's babbling subconsciousness. We shot it in one long night, all against a green screen. I was impressed by how committed they were to looking foolish. I thought they'd probably go far in the stand-up scene (even though I have zero knowledge of that world) because they were genuinely witty and constantly "on." Plus, they were a good match visually, with Beck's yuppie WASP persona and Kyle's Jewish nebbish vibe.

¹ I include only actual interactions, not random celebrity sightings, like **Lisa Kudrow** eating at Nate & Al's, **Tom Hanks** and **Rita Wilson** at a stoplight, or **Carole Cooke** and **Ruta Lee** dining at Hamburger Hamlet. Those don't count (but are fun nonetheless).



Working with two future stars of late night

Other than their manic comic energy, the shoot and the film were unremarkable, and I forgot all about it when it was done. Literally.

Until almost ten years later, that is. Several seasons after they joined the cast of late-night TV's long-running comedy show, Laurence paused the opening credits one Saturday night as Kyle's name and face appeared.

"Didn't you once make a movie with that guy?"

I had to look it up. "Yeah, yes, I did, and Beck Bennett too!"

I'd been a fan of this Famous Actor² for years, and enjoyed watching him move from art films to mainstream sci-fi epics.

When I started working at the entertainment law firm, I was stunned to see his name on the client list. A film he was making had fallen apart during shooting. The scary foreign producers were suing Famous Actor for production costs, claiming alcoholism was to blame, while Famous Actor accused the producers of mafia-like behavior.

One day, we got an urgent call from the senior partner during the arbitration. He had forgotten some important files. Could I please grab them off his desk, jump into my car, and rush them to the Santa Monica arbitration office?

But of course, sir!

I finally found parking, scooped up the files, and headed to the designated building. As I entered the lobby, I spied a shaggy, possibly homeless man in a faded

² Attorney-client privilege prevents me from divulging his name. But trust me, you know him.

flannel shirt and ill-fitting ripped jeans hovering near the stairwell. Avoiding eye contact, I made my way to the elevator.

“Leon? Those for me?”

The voice was unmistakable.

I turned to face the assumed-homeless man. The face behind those long, stringy strands of hair and long beard belonged to Famous Actor!

“Y-y-y-yes, sir,” I replied. I handed him the files.

“Thanks, bro. Wish me luck.”

But before I could, he disappeared into the stairwell.

My first Hollywood movie-star encounter! And boy, what a sad one.

When Laurence and I lived in San Francisco, we frequently came to LA for screenings at the Paley Center for Media. Following a tribute to Mary Tyler Moore, I was gob smacked to find myself standing next to – *and talking with!* – my idol-since-childhood, Ms. **Valerie Harper**.

She asked my name, if I was an actor, and what I was working on. (*What I was–??* I could barely remember my name!) I asked where we could see *her* next.

“I’m working on a new talk show for Lifetime, all about women’s issues, gay-rights issues, you know, things *you* and I really care about.”

I was tempted to tell her I was married with three kids, but honestly. Who’d believe *that*?

Jump ahead 10 years. I’m newly relocated to Los Angeles and attending SAG’s annual holiday party in a futile attempt to network. Every year, a prominent member of the union acts as host/ess. That year, it was none other than Ms. Harper.

I drag Laurence to any party where I don’t know anyone. As we entered, I heard Ms. Harper’s distinctive voice welcoming us to the party.

“Thank you, Ms. Harper! We’re happy to be here.”

“Call me Valerie, please. And let’s see – it’s *Leon*, isn’t it?”

Whaaaaaaaaaaaat? I’ve blanked out the rest of the party, and I didn’t have a single cocktail. That Ms. Harper would remember my name from one single encounter a decade earlier was enough to throw me into fan-boy shock.

She was one classy dame.

While in San Francisco, I replied to a casting notice seeking extras for a costume-party scene in *Jack*, the Robin Williams comedy directed by famed **Francis Ford Coppola**.

I was still a relative newbie looking for on-set experience, and I had a killer Wonder Woman costume. I was summoned to Lucasfilm Ranch in Marin County and told to bring my costume and wig. After finally locating and parking at the well-hidden complex, I was taken to a changing room and asked to put on my costume.

When I came out, the costume assistant said “Wow! You got ta-tas!” And I was hired.

About a month later, I was having make-up applied by none other than Lynda Carter’s make-up artist from the short-lived 1980s SF-based TV show *Partners in Crime*. (“Lynda loves when drag queens do her!”) Then I joined the 100-plus costumed background artists assembled at Club Bimbo in San Francisco’s North Beach. We endured an exhausting 14-hour day – which was to be expected as the scene *was* rather epic!

Cast and crew stayed jubilant. It must have been the costumes. It truly felt like a party. I was stunned to see Mr. Coppola in one of his trademark colorful camp shirts, walking amongst us mere mortals, arranging and placing the extras himself.³ Then he approached me.

Mr. Coppola took my arm. “Come with me, Lynda!”

Everyone burst out laughing as he guided me to a spot near the bandstand.

Sadly, after 14 hours in that costume, I don’t think I’m visible in that opening scene. But it was well worth it, just for that one fabulous moment with Mr. Godfather himself.

Robin Williams wasn’t on set during that scene in *Jack*, but co-stars **Diane Lane** and **Brian Kerwin** were. They couldn’t have been lovelier. Instead of rushing to trailers between set ups, they spent most of their time mingling and chatting with the extras.

At one point, Ms. Lane and I struck up a conversation. She complimented me on my costume and seemed shocked when I told her I had made it myself. The topic

³ An assistant or second assistant director usually handles this chore.

then turned to the recent TV production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* starring Jessica Lange, with Ms. Lane as Stella.

“I thought you were great,” I gushed. “But – I’m sorry – I worship Jessica Lange, but it was like watching a quarterback playing Blanche Dubois.”

What the fuck was I thinking?

Ms. Lane turned her back to me to chat with a pregnant bunny rabbit standing behind her.

I thankfully became much less star-struck after moving to Los Angeles.

I was zooming down multi-lane Olympic Boulevard, making the long drive back home to West LA after a late-afternoon audition in Hollywood. I’m a good 15 miles over the speed limit, as is my wont, when a dark BMW zoomed past me in a blur.

Not to be outdone, I put the pedal to the metal, and my small but powerful Honda Prelude began to gain on the BMW. I saw a wild tangle of light blonde hair blowing furiously through the driver’s opened window. As I got closer – okay, it was a woman, that much I could tell.

So I was already impressed. But then, I got a good look inside. It’s **Cybill Shepherd!** Sensing she’d been recognized, or perhaps annoyed to be out-gunned, she zoomed ahead even faster. By now, I’m doing over 65 mph in a 40mph zone. *Enough tickets*, I thought, and slowed down, conceding defeat to Ms. Shepherd.

But take my word for it. That woman could be a NASCAR driver.⁴

I’d agreed to read a role in my friend Courtney Flavin’s very good new screenplay at a staged reading. I was delighted to learn her close friend **Gordon Thomson** (aka *Dynasty*’s Adam Carrington) would be on stage, reading stage directions with that fabulous voice.

Backstage before the reading, I was determined *not* to turn into a fan boy. *I will not ask him about Joan Collins!* When introduced, I merely shook his hand and mentioned I’d enjoyed his work on *Dynasty* and had been a loyal viewer. That was all it took. He immediately launched into fun stories about Ms. Collins. I almost hated to be called to places.

⁴ Years later, **Ian Buchanan** told me, “You remind me of my good friend Cybill Shepherd. She’s crazy, you know, but we all love her!” Was that a compliment or an insult?

A few years later, I sent Gordon an offer to guest star on *Old Dogs & New Tricks* (we'll get there soon!) along with some scripts. His email declining the offer was so polite and well-written, I couldn't be offended that he said my scripts "read like soft-core porn."

Bai Ling. International sex pot. Internet sensation.

When *Deer Season* director Arvin asked me to assist on the set of his sci-fi short *Vultures in the Void* starring Ms. Ling, I immediately said yes. I wanted to see how Arvin, a master of patience and self-control, would handle directing an actress who, I was sure, would be an international hot mess.

The joke was on me. Ms. Ling arrived early. She knew her lines, asked very intelligent questions about character and plot, and made clever suggestions. I marveled she could even walk in her sky-high leopard-print pumps.

In typical Arvin fashion, Bai wrapped her scenes early. After she left, I asked Arvin if he thought she was frustrated with her reputation as a wild child.

"She knows which image gets her the most press," Arvin wisely replied.

She's one smart cookie, indeed!

Never tell an actress you've been a fan since childhood.

I made that mistake with **Jenny O'Hara**, the prolific character actress who's worked on stage, in TV and features since the 1970s.⁵

I was playing a British human lightning rod in a hilarious one-act called "Victims" in a program of one-acts at Company of Angels, LA's oldest member-run theatre. As I turned the corner to the entrance of the theatre, I saw my scene partner, Maryam Dalans, sitting and chatting with – *Oh my God, that's Jenny fucking O'Hara!!*

"Oh my God, you're Jenny fucking O'Hara!"

"Why, yes, I am," Ms. O'Hara replied, smiling sweetly.

"I've been a fan of yours since I was a kid!"

The smile on her face didn't change, but the oxygen between us seemed to evaporate.

"Yeah, uh, Jenny's a friend of mine," Maryam said, trying to smooth over the moment. "Leon and I are in the same one-act together."

⁵ Google her. You know her even if you don't know her.

Jenny politely nodded. I was determined to redeem myself.

“May I ask you a question? In that TV movie you did with Lynda Carter, when you find out your son fell into a well and died, and you literally grab onto the ambulance and let it drag you across the dirt field – how did you prepare for that scene? You were so amazing.”

“Thank you. I was, wasn’t I!” she said in a way that didn’t seem at all boastful.

We talked a bit about it before I ran into the theatre and got into make-up.

After the show, Maryam said Ms. O’Hara told her she thought I was hilarious!

So all was forgiven, I guess.

I was much more careful with Ms. **Charlotte Rae**.

We were well into Amanda Gari’s fabulous cabaret show at Gardena in Hollywood when my friends nudged me. “Charlotte Rae is sitting immediately to your right!”

To turn to look at her would’ve been blatantly obvious. Out of the corner of my eye, she certainly didn’t *look* like Mrs. Garrett to me.

“Shhh!” I hissed to my friends.

The show ended. As we rose to give Amanda a much-deserved standing ovation, I was able to get a good look. It *was* Charlotte Rae! She was struggling to stand, so I offered my arm. She took it and thanked me.

Afterwards we chatted briefly, mostly about how good Amanda was. Ms. Rae was just as charming and sweet as you’d expect, but with a tough-as-nails New York edge. She asked my friend Scotia to hail an Uber on Ms. Rae’s phone; when Scotia had difficulties, Ms. Rae briskly snatched her phone away from Scotia and sought Laurence’s assistance instead.

He got her the car. I helped her into it, as she was struggling to walk with a cane.

“Oh! And what wonderful hair you have!” she cooed in her familiar sing-song voice before I closed the car door.

I met **Frances Fisher** at the very first meeting of SAG’s LGBT caucus. She’s an amazing supporter of the community. When we chatted afterwards, I refrained from saying I was a long-time fan, but *did* say I admired her work in Henry Jaglom’s

wildly uneven mid-1980s indie feature *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?* starring Karen Black.

“Oh, we were so *young* back then, weren’t we?” she laughed.
She said it, not me!

Martin Short is a comic mastermind. I’ve never met him, nor talked to him. Yet he caused my most jaw-dropping star-struck moment anyway, on a live radio talk show, no less.

Amanda Gari and I were being interviewed by Sheena Metal. The topic was how fans wanted to see more of Amanda’s character, “Lydia Lasker,” on *Old Dogs & New Tricks*.

“I just got an email from Martin Short,” said Amanda nonchalantly. “He said ‘Let’s see more of our gal on that show!’”

“Wait, what? *Martin Short* said that?” I stammered.

“Yeah,” Amanda said, like it was no big deal.

“*Martin Short*?!”

“Yes!”

“He did not!”

“Yes, he did!”

“You mean Martin Short – *the* Martin Short – has watched *Old Dogs*?!”

“Of course. He’s a friend. He loves it.”

I could barely speak through the rest of the interview.

It was flabbergasting, don’t you know, just knowing he’d seen the show, I must say!

There are even less glamorous, less consequential encounters: Charlotte Rae’s costar **Mindy Kohn** at the local Starbucks (thinner and prettier than you think); “The Mamas & The Papas” **Michelle Phillips** over glasses of wine at our neighbors’ parties (who gleefully told Laurence “I love talking about myself!”); **Renee Taylor**, at the first Women’s Day march (still sharp as a tack); Blondie drummer **Clem Burke** before a Portland concert (who bummed a cigarette and smoked it with me in an alley outside the auditorium); soap hunk **Scott Reeves**, who came into my office to use my phone (wearing ripped jeans that left little to the imagination); **Fred**

Willard, who was all smiles when he walked in to see *Carved in Stone* in LA (but who left with a frown and not a word to anyone); **Cloris Leachman**, whom I passed on the way out of a fancy WeHo restaurant without saying hello – despite the expression on her smiling face which suggested she'd welcome the intrusion (I still regret I didn't).

“Wait a minute! Where’s your celebrated *contretemps* with that certain former child star?” you ask? “That’s why I bought this book!” If you’re impatient for a bold-faced name *with* drama, jump ahead to “A Very Brady Debacle.”