

CARRIE

The first "Star Wars" movie opened in May 1977, and ticket sales broke box office records. My 11-year-old son sat through the adventures in a galaxy far far away at least four times. He was in love with Princess Leia.

I never found time to see "Star Wars" that summer. My job at the State Fair of Texas kept me busy with preparations for the fall event. The calendar that year featured a championship steel drum band from Trinidad and the annual State Fair musical, a revival of "Annie Get Your Gun" starring Debbie Reynolds.

The 1977 Fair proved to be a sunny weather success. On the final Sunday around 10 a.m., I arrived at the public relations office in a small building on the far side of the Music Hall parking lot. The rest of the staff wasn't due in until noon, and I planned to finish some paperwork, but before I could get started, the phone rang. It was Tom Hughes, the Fair's theatrical director, "Miss Reynolds' daughter, Carrie Fisher, is here and would like to have a tour of the grounds. Could you have someone come over with a golf cart and pick her up?" "Of course," I replied, knowing that the someone would be me. "It's Carrie's 21st birthday," Tom added. "Be sure to notice the gift from her mother. It's parked near the stage door and has a big pink bow on it."

Indeed, there was a shiny new Mercedes parked near the door. "Must be nice," I thought as I waited for my passengers. A young woman, followed by an assistant carrying a tote bag, exited the building and after brief introductions joined me on the golf cart. Without makeup or the iconic "Princess Leia" braids, Carrie Fisher looked

like your average teenager. She was pleasant but not especially talkative. Her first wish was to go backstage at the freak show on the midway. As it happened, I had been there the previous week and knew my way around. We met several of the performers who were getting ready for afternoon shows. After speaking to the bearded lady and the sword swallower, Carrie seemed uncomfortable and indicated she was ready to move on.

We checked out the barn animals, sampled some freebies offered in another building, shopped for awhile at the craft market. Carrie selected an inexpensive wooden plaque for a friend, and her assistant paid for it. There was nothing unusual or particularly memorable about our little tour, except for the fact that we had interchanges with vendors and rubbed elbows with the crowds for almost two hours, and not a single person recognized the star of Hollywood's biggest box office hit.

As we drove back to the Music Hall, I asked Carrie if she would sign something for my son. She agreed and invited me into her mother's dressing room where Debbie was getting made up for the matinee performance. Carrie found a Sharpie and looked around for something to write on. She picked up an 8x10 glossy photo of her mother, turned it over and wrote on the back, "To Steve — May the Force be with you, Princess Leia, Carrie Fisher."

Some 40 years later, when the news came that the actress and author had died after suffering a massive heart attack on a flight from London to L.A., I texted my then 51-year-old son, "Do you still have your Carrie Fisher autograph?" His response: "I still have it, and I am truly sad."

Debbie Reynolds died the next day. Except for seeing her sitting in that makeup chair, I can claim no personal connection. She was one of Hollywood's brightest stars in the 1950s . . . "discovered" while a student at Burbank High School in Southern California. Burbank was the next door suburb to my hometown of Glendale. Some of us thought if stardom could happen for Debbie, it could happen for us. Obviously, it didn't.

Still, I felt something of a personal loss at the passing of this mother-daughter team. Not because I was a fan of "Star Wars" or "Singing in the Rain," more likely I'm remembering high school and singing along on "Abba Dabba Honeymoon" when it was a big hit for Debbie and Carleton Carpenter. Or maybe I'm thinking of the October day in 1977 when a working mom secured a prized autograph for her son.

The passing of touchstone personalities is a marker of our own mortality.

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48 PERSONAL ESSAY