

HIGH SOCIETY

The Life of Grace Kelly

Donald Spoto



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Spellbound by Beauty: Alfred Hitchcock and His Leading Ladies

Otherwise Engaged: The Life of Alan Bates

Joan: The Mysterious Life of a Heretic Who Became a Saint

Enchantment: The Life of Audrey Hepburn

In Silence: Why We Pray

Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi

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Lenya: A Life

Falling in Love Again—Marlene Dietrich (A Photo-Essay)

The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams

The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock

Stanley Kramer, Film Maker

Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man

The Art of Alfred Hitchcock



High Society

THE LIFE OF GRACE KELLY



DONALD SPOTO



HARMONY BOOKS  NEW YORK

FOR MY SISTERS-IN-LAW

Lissi Andersen and Hanne Møller,

with great admiration and loving gratitude

Acknowledgments

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY MAJOR DEBT OF GRATITUDE IS TO GRACE KELLY GRIMALDI, Princess of Monaco, who granted interviews without which this book would not be possible.

Many of those who knew or collaborated with her are no longer with us, but I was able to discuss Grace with the following before or during research for several other books. I acknowledge, therefore, the late Jay Presson Allen, Peggy Ashcroft, Anne Baxter, Ingrid Bergman, Herbert Coleman, Joseph Cotten, Hume Cronyn, Cary Grant, Tom Helmore, Alfred Hitchcock, Evan Hunter, Stanley Kramer, Ernest Lehman, Simon Oakland, Gregory Peck, Peggy Robertson, James Stewart, Jessica Tandy, Samuel Taylor, Teresa Wright and Fred Zinnemann.

All of Grace's directors, along with almost everyone who acted with her, are deceased. I am especially grateful, therefore, for the reminiscences of those actors and friends of Grace still available to supplement my interviews—among them, John Ericson, Rita Gam, Edward Meeks and Jacqueline Monsigny.

THANKS TO GARY BROWNING, assistant visitor services manager at the Museum of Television and Radio, Beverly Hills, I was able to see many of Grace's television appearances. Mark Genovese and the staff of the Archive and Research Study Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, made additional kinescopes of her performances available to me.

As so often, I was welcomed and helped by the dedicated staff at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills—in particular by Stacey Behlmer and Barbara Hall.

Tom Smith provided research assistance in England, and Jonathan Boone in the United States; I acknowledge their thoroughness and alacrity.

In 2007 the Forum Grimaldi, Monte-Carlo, mounted a tribute in dozens of rooms of its vast conference hall—a celebration of Grace's life and career twenty-five years after her death. For the first time, Prince Albert and Princesses Caroline and Stéphanie made public some very important documents, letters and photos.

Claus Kjør and Stine Nielsen at the Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen, provided important assistance during my research.

My friend the actress Diane Baker first introduced me to the prolific French writer Jacqueline Monsigny and her husband, the actor Edward Meeks. At Grace's request Jacqueline wrote and Edward costarred in Grace's last film—*Rearranged*, which has remained unavailable to the public since its production not long before the death of the princess. Thanks to Jacqueline and Edward, I was able to see this remarkable movie several times and to treat it at length in this book. They were close friends of Grace for

over twenty years, and my interviews with them have provided unique and valuable material.

Not for the first time, and surely not for the last, my brother-in-law John Møller devoted his time and considerable talents to several important tasks in preparing this book for publication. Once again, I salute his artistic and technical gifts.

For various acts of kindness, I am grateful to John Darretta, Lewis Falb, Sue Jett, Irene Mahoney and Gerald Pinciss.

MY NEW YORK AGENT, ELAINE MARKSON, has been a devoted friend and trusted confidante for over thirty years. I am equally fortunate in the constant help and affectionate encouragement of her associates, Gary Johnson, Geri Thoma and Julia Kenny.

Elaine introduced me to the good people at the Harmony Books division of Random House, where my publisher is the highly respected and perceptive Shaye Areheart. Shaye and my superbly attentive and ever-vigilant editor, Julia Pastore, have offered warm support of me and my work. They have my great gratitude.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO my sisters-in-law, Lissi Andersen and Hanne Møller, who have been as devoted to me as they have been enthusiastic followers of my career. They and their husbands, Søren Andersen and John Møller, welcomed me with open arms from my first day in Denmark, where I am blessed to share my life with Lissi and Hanne's brother, Ole Flemming Larsen. He watched Grace's movies with me, he listened patiently to portions of the manuscript, and he provided pointed suggestions for its improvement. Ole's artistic eye for detail and his amazing language proficiency are but a few of his many talents, and his commitment to me and to our life together means more than I can say. Grace, who always placed family first in her life, would have admired and loved Lissi, Hanne and Ole, as does

...

D.S.

Sjælland, Denmark

Christmas 2008

INTRODUCTION

DURING OUR LAST MEETING, I ASKED GRACE KELLY GRIMALDI if she planned to write an autobiography or to authorize a writer to compose her life story. “I’d like to think I’m still too young for that!” she said with a laugh. Without any hint of a dark premonition, she then added, “Donald, you really ought to wait until twenty-five years after I’m gone, and then *you* tell the whole story.” I have honored her request for a delay: Grace left us in September 1982, and I started work on this book early in 2007.

I spent many hours with this remarkable woman over several years, beginning with our first meeting during the afternoon of September 22, 1975; in a short time she offered me a friendship that deepened over the years. At our introduction, at her home in Paris, she was preparing to relocate from her apartment on the Avenue Foch to another residence nearby. There were packing boxes, and movers working with quiet efficiency, and my tape recording of that afternoon indicates that there were only three brief interruptions in our long conversation.

First, an elderly attendant, the only servant I saw that day, inquired what he might offer for refreshment, and Grace asked if I would like tea and biscuits. Then, a few moments after we began the interview, Grace apologized as she went over to a sliding glass door to the terrace, to admit her cat, eager to check out a visitor. Later, Grace’s youngest child, ten-year-old Princess Stéphanie, emerged from her room. “Mommy, I can’t find my yellow sweater.” Grace told her to try the obvious place—the drawers of her dresser. Stéphanie returned a few moments later, unable to find the beloved sweater. Grace excused herself and went to Stéphanie’s aid and returned moments later, the ward robe problem having been quickly resolved.

The matter had not been attended to by a servant, nor had one been looking after the child during my visit. “I hope you don’t mind these little interruptions,” Grace said that afternoon. “We just don’t like the idea of turning the children over to nannies and minders. We like to help them ourselves—and then of course we know what to tell them when they ought to do something on their own. They don’t always have everything done for them, I can tell you that!”

My visit that day was an important part of the research for my first book, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, the first full-length treatment of all the director’s movies. Knowing that she gave interviews but rarely, I had not much hope when I wrote from my home in New York to Grace’s secretary at the palace in Monaco. Up to 1975, my writing résumé listed only a few magazine articles and one essay in a book—hence I had little hope for an interview with the princess, who was constantly besieged with such requests.

Two weeks after I wrote, however, I received a reply from her secretary, Paul Choisit, asking if I would like to meet with Her Serene Highness in Paris that September. You bet I would. I went to visit Grace shortly after spending two weeks with Alfred Hitchcock, while

he was directing (as it turned out) his last film, *Family Plot*, that summer of 1975. I told him that I had an appointment to interview Grace. “That should be interesting,” he said with a wry smile.

MY FIRST CONVERSATION with Grace that September afternoon was mostly about her three films for Alfred Hitchcock, made between July 1953 and August 1954. Her memories were sharp, picturesque, amusing and full of telling anecdotes. That day and later, she also spoke about other directors, especially Fred Zinnemann and John Ford, mostly to compare their methods and manners with Hitchcock’s. There was no doubt about her deep respect, affection and acute understanding of Alfred Hitchcock the director and the man. Later she also spoke quite frankly to me about her life and about incidents for which she asked my confidence “as long as I’m around,” as she said. I gave her my word.

At that first meeting, Grace impressed me with her total lack of affectation and of anything like a regal manner. She wore a simple navy blue suit and, as I recall, very little jewelry. She put on no airs, she was funny and ironic, she had an extraordinary memory for detail, she told some delightfully risqué tales of Hollywood, she was realistic and completely unstuffy—and she was as interested in my life as I was in hers. I was completely at ease with her. We sat on a comfortable sofa, and we sipped tea and munched delicious little cookies, on and off, all through the afternoon until dusk.

But there was one enormous surprise for me as I prepared to depart.

As we came to the end of the afternoon, Grace asked if anyone was going to write a foreword or introduction to my work. I replied that, as *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock* would be my first book, I had given no thought to the matter of a foreword by anyone—I had been lucky just to find a small independent publisher. “I am constantly asked to endorse products,” she continued, “and to comment on books, or to say something about a movie. I cannot do that, for many reasons. However, in your case, I would make an exception. If you will send me your manuscript when it’s finished, would you like me to write a foreword to your book?”

In December, I sent her the final draft of *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, and on January 16, 1976, a diplomatic courier arrived at my New York apartment, bearing her introduction to the book and a charming cover letter: “I am enclosing the foreword,” she wrote, “as well as the galley sheets that I very much enjoyed reading. It will certainly be a great book about Alfred Hitchcock.” The book was published in August of that year, with Grace’s remarks right up front. Thirty-three years later it is still in print. Doubleday purchased it from the original publisher; foreign translations appeared; and Grace’s introduction still honors my debut as a writer. Her generosity was a significant addition and brought the book attention from some who, I am certain, would otherwise have ignored it. And yes, she said, of course I could exploit both her words and her name in promoting the book.

IN THE SUMMER of 1976, Grace invited me to the palace in Monaco, where I presented her with the second copy of the published book—the first, of course, went to Hitchcock. It was a torrid, humid day, and she returned from her country house especially for our reunion. As

was shown into the family quarters, Grace was standing in an orange chiffon outfit, trying with difficulty, to fasten a bracelet. “Oh, Donald,” she said, smiling and extending her wrist when she saw me, “would you please help me with this?”

“What shall we have to drink?” she said afterwards, as we settled onto a settee facing open French doors to a terrace and trying to catch a breeze. We decided on sparkling water. That day I also met Princess Caroline, who came in, fresh and alarmingly beautiful and briefly joined us. Her mother was proud to show off her intelligent, poised daughter, then a university student in Paris. I was booked into Grace’s schedule for an hour in the late morning, but she insisted that I remain for lunch.

From 1975 until Hitchcock’s death in 1980, I was a kind of go-between, delivering messages back and forth from Monaco to Hollywood during my various visits with Hitch and Grace. With the probable exception of his wife, he did not easily confide in anyone—but I was an acolyte, and he dropped the mask of diffidence with me, especially at the elaborate lunches prepared just for the two of us in the dining room of his offices at Universal Studios. At such times he was more frank than if we were doing a formal interview. He rarely laughed, but I saw tears run down his face when he spoke, for example, of his recently deceased sister.

Grace, on the other hand, was consistently more forthright and unguarded once she felt confident of my trust. I think this was one of the reasons she offered to write the foreword to my book, and to entrust me with details of her association with Hitch and of her life and career.

WHEN GRACE DIED, I WAS asked by National Public Radio in the United States to compose and broadcast a tribute to her. It was one of the most difficult assignments of my life, before or since. I spoke briefly of our friendship and of our many conversations about the great and small things of life.

The book you are holding is the story of a working life, from Grace’s days as a model and television actress to her final film, made not long before her death. Although that last movie has never been released, it leaves no doubt that Grace was one of the foremost talents of her time, our time, any time. I am fortunate to be able to treat this last unavailable movie in considerable detail here, as well as a wide selection of her television appearances, which have been, up to now, completely ignored by biographers.

With very few exceptions, Grace’s story has not, I think, been generally well served by writers. Apart from an astonishing array of factual errors and omissions, there has been an accumulation of imagined events and fantasies about all kinds of things—love affairs, particularly, most of which turn out to be utterly without basis in fact. She was, as I have written here, certainly a healthy, beautiful young woman with normal desires—and most of all, a deep capacity to love and to be loved. As she told me, she “fell in love all the time” before she married Prince Rainier of Monaco. But falling in love did not always mean falling into bed. I have tried to correct the record on this and other more important issues without fudging the truth—she would have hated that.

Grace’s achievements were singular in several ways—not least in the sheer volume of her

movie work within a very short period. She worked for two days on a film during the summer of 1950, and then—from September 1951 to March 1956—she appeared in ten films in just four years and six months. But there was a one-year hiatus during this period so it is more accurate to state that she made ten films in forty-two months. By any standard of assessment, that is a formidable record. In addition, she also appeared in no fewer than thirty-six live television dramas and two Broadway plays between 1948 and 1954.

High Society: The Life of Grace Kelly has been a privilege to write, for it is both a testament to our friendship as well as a biography. To exploit a cliché: Grace was far more than just a pretty face.

“The idea of my life as a fairy tale is itself a fairy tale.”

—GRACE KELLY GRIMALDI, PRINCESS OF MONACO, TO DONALD SPOTO

PART I



Fade-I
1929 — 195

As a New York fashion model, age 18 (spring 1948).



I never really felt pretty, bright or socially adept.

—GRACE

IN THE LATE 1920S, THE HAHNEMANN MEDICAL COLLEGE, at the corner of Broad and Vine Streets in Philadelphia, was one of the largest private hospitals in the United States. Unusual luxuries characterized the private rooms: a telephone and radio were installed at every bedside; nurses could be summoned and addressed by call-buttons and two-way speakers; and high-speed elevators whisked visitors to the wards. Although Hahnemann accepted emergency cases from every socio-economic class, it catered, unofficially but famously, to the demands of the rich from the counties of eastern Pennsylvania.

Early in the morning of Tuesday, November 12, 1929, John B. Kelly escorted his wife Margaret Majer Kelly, to Hahnemann, where, after an unexceptional labor, she bore her third child and second daughter. On December 1, the Kellys took the baby to St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Church, a three-minute, half-mile drive from their home in the upscale neighborhood of Philadelphia known as East Falls. The infant was baptized Grace Patricia, in memory of an aunt who had died young, and (so Grace Kelly believed) "because I was Tuesday's child"—who, according to Mother Goose, was "full of grace."

On the banks of the Schuylkill River, East Falls has always been a quiet residential neighborhood, known for its easy commute to downtown Philadelphia. The most respected established families—Protestants with "old money" like the Drexels, Biddles, Clarkes, Cadwaladers and Wideners—lived across the river, in western suburbs along the so-called Main Line, in eighteen communities (among them, Overbrook, Merion, Wynne woods, Ardmore, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, Rosemont and Radnor). The river was very like a social dividing line.

But membership in Philadelphia's elite depended more on history than geography: one was "in society" only if a family could be traced back to colonial times, before the War of Independence. The class distinctions were so immutable that the Kellys knew they would never be accepted into high society, no matter the extent of their wealth. The Kellys were Irish, Roman Catholic and Democrats; Philadelphia society was English, Episcopalian and Republican. "We could have been members of the social register—the so-called Four Hundred—if we'd wanted to," Grace Kelly's mother said. "But we had other things to do." If she really believed this, she was astonishingly naïve. Her husband knew otherwise; instead, he set out to "do well" in business, athletics and politics.

WHEN GRACE WAS born, the entire country was in the throes of a terrible financial crisis. At the

end of October the stock market was in almost total collapse, signaling an economic disaster that led to the Great Depression. Scores of banks failed overnight; innumerable companies shut their doors forever; and millions of Americans were suddenly homeless and jobless, pitchforked into abject poverty and facing a future without prospects. The United States was steeped in despair, and newspapers chronicled a tragic epidemic of suicides.

Some families, however, were untouched by the gruesome facts of national life, and Grace's was among them. Her father, John B. Kelly, had never speculated in the stock market, and his wealth—achieved in the construction trade during the boom time after the Great War—was held in cash and government bonds. His seventeen-room brick mansion at 3901 Henry Avenue was set amid lush, undulating lawns, and the property featured a tennis court and elaborate recreational equipment for active children. The house was mortgage-free, like Kelly's seaside vacation home in Ocean City, New Jersey. The family sailed through the Depression enjoying a genteel, privileged life: the Kelly children attended private academies, there were household servants and workers to tend the grounds and gardens; and the children wore only the finest new seasonal wardrobes.

Grace had two older siblings: Margaret ("Peggy"), born in September 1925; and John Kelly junior ("Kell"), born in May 1927. The family was complete with the birth of Elizabeth Ann ("Lizanne") in June 1933. "I wasn't a strong child like my sisters and brother," Grace said years later, "and my family told me they thought I was practically born with a cold—I was always sniffing and sneezing, clearing my throat and fighting some kind of respiratory ailment." Her mother routinely reserved the juices of the family roasts for fragile young Grace, in a constant effort to improve the child's strength and stamina.

"My other children were the strong ones, the extroverts, but Gracie was shy and retiring," her mother recalled. "She was also frail and sickly a good deal of the time." The girl filled the hours of her frequent confinements by making up stories and plays for her collection of dolls. "Grace could change her voice for each doll, giving it a different character. She loved attention for all this, but she didn't cry if she didn't get it."

Thin and withdrawn, Grace preferred to read myths, fairy tales and books about dance and dancing; indeed, her favorite dolls were fashioned like tiny ballerinas, complete with pointe shoes and delicate tutus. She also loved to read poetry and tried her hand at verses:

*I hate to see the sun go down
And squeeze itself into the ground,
Since some warm night it might get stuck
And in the morning not get up!*

Grace was largely indifferent to physical activity: "I liked to swim, but did my best to avoid other sports and games." This attitude made her something of an outsider. Her father had been an Olympic athlete, her mother a champion swimmer and physical education teacher, and their children were strongly encouraged—indeed, they were expected—to excel at competitive sports. Grace's preference for books and imaginative games did not go down well with her father, a man who had little interest in cultural or intellectual matters.

BORN IN 1889, John B. "Jack" Kelly was the youngest of ten children born to Irish immigrants

Quitting school in early adolescence, he worked in the family firm as a bricklayer while perfecting his skill at sculling (rowing on the river), and during army service in the World War, he became a champion boxer. Returning to civilian life, Jack rejoined his father's company, Kelly for Brickwork, and the postwar building boom of the 1920s quickly made him a millionaire. He did not, however, achieve this on his own, as he often implied, nor was he a self-made American success story. "They've latched on to the bricklayer theme and won't let go of this Horatio Alger idea," said his brother George, who directly confronted Jack's self-glorification. "What's all this talk about you getting callused hands laying bricks? The only times I remember you having calluses were from long hours of scull practice on the Schuylkill River!"

Wealth freed Jack to spend those long hours rowing. After winning six national championships, he headed for the Henley Regatta in England, the most celebrated event in the sport of sculling. But in 1920 his application for inclusion was rejected at the last minute when the judges determined that his years of manual labor and muscular development as a bricklayer gave him an unfair advantage over "gentleman" athletes. The true reason for his dismissal, however, was that the English authorities did not want to risk giving a prize to an Irish-American Catholic. The consequential outcry was so loud that by 1937 the rules of Henley no longer excluded manual laborers, mechanics or artisans as unfit for the competition.

More determined than ever after this rejection, Kelly proceeded to the 1920 summer Olympics at Antwerp, Belgium, where he won a gold medal in the single scull and, half an hour later, a second gold medal in the double scull, in which he rowed with a cousin. His family later swore to the truth of the anecdote that he mailed his racing cap to King George V with the message, "Greetings from a bricklayer." Four years later, during the summer of 1924, Kelly and his cousin repeated their success at the Paris Olympics—an achievement that made "the Irish bricklayer" the first rower to win three Olympic gold medals. With that, he became one of the most famous athletes of his generation, and his name was included in the United States Olympic Hall of Fame. Later he was appointed National Physical Fitness Director by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who regarded him as a good friend.

Before his Paris triumph, Kelly renounced bachelorhood (but not his avocation as a womanizer) when he married Margaret Majer on January 30, 1924, at St. Bridget's Church. She was nine years his junior and as strikingly beautiful as he was darkly handsome. They had first met at a swim club, where she successfully competed; she was also one of Philadelphia's most successful cover-girl models. With her degree in physical education, she became the first woman to teach that field at the University of Pennsylvania and at Women's Medical College. She converted from Lutheranism to her fiancé's religion just before the wedding.

"I had a good stiff German background," Margaret said years later. "My parents believed in discipline and so do I—no tyranny or anything like that, but a certain firmness." Proper appearances, unflinching decorum, the importance of manners: these were almost religious observances for Margaret Majer Kelly. She trained her children to control themselves, to hide pain and disappointment, to suppress their emotions in public, to disguise effort and to strive for perfection without seeming to do so. Her tutoring was more successful with Grace than

with the others.

Margaret's discipline was apparently unremitting. Kell nicknamed her "the Prussian general" for her heavy hand, and Grace recalled her mother's insistence that her daughter learn not only the fine points of competitive sports but also those of sewing, cooking, dressmaking and gardening. "My mother was the disciplinarian in our family," she said. "My father was very gentle, never the one to spank or scold. My mother did that. But when my father spoke—boy, you moved." Life among the Kellys was to be enjoyed by the constant development of new skills and by the quiet assumption of responsibilities, and Margaret's chief occupation became the training of her children. Jack, meanwhile, was involved in local politics, business, sports and a social (and amorous) life that excluded his family.

When Jack was at home, famous athletes from all over the world frequently visited. For the parents and for Peggy, Kell and Lizanne, these people were stimulating company; for Grace, they were tiresome and left her feeling more alienated than ever. "I never really felt pretty, bright or socially adept, and all that talk of sports, politics and business left me cold. People often mistook Grace's shyness for an attitude of superiority and, later, of snobbery. The truth was that, in addition to her quite different interests and hobbies, she was exceedingly nearsighted: without her hated glasses, very little was clear and she could not recognize people. "She was so myopic she couldn't see ten feet in front of her" without glasses, recalled Howell Conant, who later became her favorite photographer.

Grace's estimation of herself was also formed by her father's favoritism, and this, as with any child, caused her some insecurity. "My older sister was my father's favorite," Grace reflected years later, "and then there was the boy, the only son. Then I came. After that, I had a baby sister, and I was terribly jealous of the attention she got. I was always on my mother's knee, the clinging type. But I was pushed away [by my mother], and so I resented my sister for years."

"Of the four children, Peggy was Jack's favorite," recalled Dorothea Sitley, a longtime family friend. "Grace was the introvert, the quiet, serene one, and she felt left out. It was always Peggy and her father together." Jack admitted his preference for his firstborn child: "I thought it would be Peggy whose name would be up in lights one day. Anything that Grace could do, Peggy could always do better"—or so he thought.

"According to him, Peggy was destined to be the star of the family," recalled Grace's close friend and publicist, Rupert Allan (later also the Monégasque consul general in Los Angeles). "Jack never paid much attention to Grace—he accepted her, but he never understood her. But she adored him and always sought his approval." Jack Kelly was "a very nice man," recalled Grace's friend Judith Balaban Kanter Quine, "but he was a man without much sensitivity."

As much as she must have been aware of her father's preference for Peggy, Grace longed for her older sister's approval as much as for his. "I used to help my sister sell flowers to passersby to raise money for my mother's pet charity, Women's Medical College and Hospital of Pennsylvania. Naturally, most of our customers were the neighbors. Little did they know that some of the flowers came from their own gardens. I used to be sent by my big sister Peggy to raid the nearby gardens at night, and quite unashamedly we sold these same flowers back to their owners next morning."

Just as she tried to befriend her sister, "Grace admired her father," according to her close

friend, the actress Rita Gam. “But she thought he really never appreciated her. He always preferred Peggy and never approved of Grace’s career—and her mother was a very tough lady, rather critical and not terribly warm. Both her parents said they were surprised and puzzled by Grace’s later success. When she talked about this, there was a certain wistfulness in her voice, but she was an extremely loyal person and very protective of her family.” What might be called Grace’s marginal status in a family of hardy, rah-rah competitors evoked a touching desire for demonstrative affection. “As a child,” recalled her sister Lizanne, “she loved to be held and cuddled and kissed.” This longing for physical tokens of affection increased with the years.

Grace and her father remained virtual strangers to each other until his death in 1960. She never addressed the topic directly, but she said that her father liked to be with rough, self-confident children who could tumble on a playing field and bounce right back up. The implication was clear: that was not a description of Grace at any age, and she felt outside the orbit of his approval. Judy Quine agreed: “Jack Kelly didn’t cozy up to Grace. He understood business, politics and sports. He knew what these things were about, but he never ‘got into’ about Grace. Toward the end of his life, he accepted her. He saw her impact on the world and he showed her some respect. That’s what they shared at the end of his life—deep respect.”

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that a senior family servant named Godfrey Ford became something of a father figure. Addressed as “Fordie,” he was the Kelly chauffeur and factotum, evoking enormous affection from all the youngsters—and especially from Grace. “He kept their cars polished,” recalled the Kellys’ childhood friend Elaine Cruice Beyer. “He could serve, put on a big party, supervise bartenders and buffets and keep the gardens in beautiful condition.” Grace’s respect and fondness for the African-American Fordie instilled in her a lifelong hatred of racism.

On Thursdays, when the children’s nanny was off duty, Fordie was entrusted with the task of putting the children to bed. “Gracie asked my opinions about this and that,” he recalled years later. “I’d tell her what I thought, and she’d usually follow my advice.” Later he gave her driving lessons in front of the house and in the long driveway, “but she was never good at parking.”

SHORTLY BEFORE Grace marked her sixth birthday, in November 1935, she began her education, joining Peggy at the Ravenhill Academy, a convent school for girls less than a half-mile away on School House Lane. Built in the nineteenth century as a family home by the millionaire William Weightman, Ravenhill is a grand High Victorian Gothic mansion with dark paneling, ornate fireplaces, dramatic staircases and formal parlors. Weightman’s daughter later donated the vast residence to the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Philadelphia, and when Dennis Dougherty was appointed archbishop in 1918, one of his first acts was to invite the Religious of the Assumption—an order of teaching nuns with whom he had worked as a bishop in the Philippines—to come from Manila and establish a school for girls at Ravenhill, which they did in 1919. Admission was strictly controlled, and at its peak there were but fifty students in the entire first through twelfth grades.

“They were remarkable women,” Grace said, “and I was enormously fond of them. They were strict about our studies, but also very, very kind. Their long black habits were simple

the formal garb of an exceptional group of teachers, and however rigorous their religious life, the nuns understood young girls and devoted themselves completely to our educational and spiritual welfare.” The nuns insisted, among other elements of proper decorum, that the girls wear white gloves to and from school—a convention already familiar to Grace from her mother’s home training.

At Ravenhill, Grace’s teachers encouraged her wide reading, her drawing, her hobby of learning to arrange flowers for classroom and chapel, and her custom of filling a notebook with simple lyrics:

*Little flower, you’re the lucky one—
you soak in all the lovely sun,
you stand and watch it all go by
and never once do bat an eye
while others have to fight and strain
against the world and its every pain of living.*

*But you too must have wars to fight
the cold bleak darkness of every night,
of a bigger vine that seeks to grow
and is able to stand the rain and snow
and yet you never let it show
on your pretty face.*

In 1943, Grace began four years of high school at the nearby, nonsectarian Stevens School. At that time it was unusual for a Catholic family to send a child to a non-Catholic school, especially after the years at Ravenhill. But the Kellys were not particularly devout. “Aside from going to Mass on Sundays and saying our prayers before going to bed, we didn’t do anything else,” Lizanne recalled. “We didn’t eat meat on Friday, but even then Mother wasn’t too demanding. She said, ‘If you happen to be visiting someone and it’s Friday and they serve meat, eat it. I don’t want them feeling uncomfortable because of you.’” To Margaret’s credit, this was good religious common sense—and such a “liberal” viewpoint was not the common attitude of the day among American Catholics.

“My dad was not a very great religious person,” Kell said years later. “He attended church more for the children, my sisters and myself, rather than for great sincerity in his beliefs. My mother, of course, was not a Catholic until she married my father. She went through the routine and did the basic minimum, but she is not an active Catholic today [1976]. People who don’t know her are inclined to think she is [devout]. But she is not upset over my separation from the Catholic religious point of view—except that it makes her look like something less than a perfect mother.” As for Grace, thanks to both her family and the wise nuns at Ravenhill, she never had the neurotic, haunted sense of guilt that often afflicts the scrupulous. On the other hand, she always took her faith seriously—even more so as demands and disappointments accumulated.

At fourteen she had nearly reached her full adult height of five feet, six inches; blue-eyed, lithe and poised, with blond hair turning light brown, she had mostly outgrown her childhood respiratory ailments, but they had left her with a flat, nasal tone it would take years to

counter.

As local hospitals were crowded with World War II casualties, volunteers appeared from every station in life, and many schoolgirls devoted several hours each week to helping overworked nurses and aides. Shy and sensitive, Grace was nevertheless coolly efficient when dispatching indelicate chores in the wards. In addition, she quickly understood how much her presence meant to the young men, for she was, after all, a disarmingly attractive young woman.

The Stevens School, located on Walnut Lane in the adjacent neighborhood of Germantown, had been established “for young matrons who are interested in establishing ideal, satisfying homes and in administering them efficiently and scientifically.” This rather grandly stated agenda, written at the turn of the twentieth century, was effectively the program for little more than a finishing school for the daughters of wealthy Philadelphians, although by Grace’s time things had taken a somewhat more academic turn. She did well in her four-year course of studies, except in science and mathematics, which bored her.

“She is one of the beauties of our class,” states the school yearbook for 1947. “Full of fun and always ready for a good laugh, she has no trouble making friends. A born mimic, she is well known for her acting ability, which reached its peak this year in her portrayal of Peter Pan in our Spring Play.” Grace was also a member of the glee club and the hockey and swimming teams, she excelled at modern dancing, and she was named “Chairman of the Dress and Good Behavior Committee,” which must have pleased her mother. Her favorite actress and actor she said that year, were Ingrid Bergman and Joseph Cotten, who had appeared together in *Gaslight*, a picture she saw many times. “Ingrid Bergman made an enormous impression on me,” Grace said. “I couldn’t imagine where that kind of acting talent came from.” Her favorite summer resort was Ocean City, the family’s summer residence; her preferred drink was a chocolate milkshake; among classical music selections, she loved Debussy’s “Clair de Lune”; her favorite orchestra was Benny Goodman’s; and she especially liked the singer J. Stafford.

But it was acting with the school drama society, and the parts she played with local amateur groups, that most appealed to Grace. Her parents were almost mute with astonishment as their shy, retiring daughter flourished not by competing, but by participating in the joint effort that a cast makes onstage to create a memorable impact on an audience. As it happened, she drew her primary inspiration from one of her father’s brothers.

HER THEATRICAL mentor was not, as is commonly believed, her uncle Walter Kelly, who was sixteen years older than Grace’s father. The family had seen him act onstage and in a few films, but he was something of an embarrassment. A nationally known vaudevillian, he had made his fame in a series of monologues that could not be performed in later decades, for they were openly and frankly racist. Dough-faced and corpulent, Walter Kelly played “The Virginia Judge” in a constantly changing series of sketches in which he mimicked not only the judge but also a legion of black men characterized as ignorant and slothful. Both the magistrate and the malefactors, all played by Kelly, appeared in a mock court where the “colored folks” tried unsuccessfully to defend themselves against various spurious accusations.

Walter's sketches about "darkies" and "pickaninnies" (his words) were a staple of club theatres and music halls for over twenty-five years. He also made a number of wildly successful recordings, and he appeared in seven Broadway shows and a half-dozen movies. Grace saw some of his acts and a few of his pictures, but she found only one production both amusing and oddly congruent: the 1935 film *McFadden's Flats*, about a successful bricklayer who earns his fortune as a builder of apartments. Walter Kelly died in January 1936, succumbing to injuries after being hit by a speeding truck on a Los Angeles street. He was sixty-five, had never married, and, owing to his sumptuous living, had depleted a fortune.

The mentorship offered to Grace came from another of her father's brothers, whose family has more deservedly survived—George Kelly, who became Grace's theatrical guru and lifelong champion. First as an actor and then as one of America's most successful playwrights, George was a completely different man from Walter; indeed, they had so little in common that they never made any efforts to keep in touch.

"George Kelly was a very gracious, highly educated person," recalled Rupert Allan, "well read and very witty, but also exceptionally elegant and cultivated. Grace just adored him." Rita Gam agreed: "George was a perceptive and enormously kind man, and he took a great interest in Grace's youthful dramatic escapades."

George Kelly was born in 1887 and toured nationally as an actor from 1911 on. After military service in France during World War I, he wrote, directed and starred in his own one-act plays, several of which (*The Flattering Word*, *Poor Aubrey*, *Mrs. Ritter Appears* and *The Weed Spot*) have stood time's test and are occasionally presented in repertory and by school and amateur groups. His first full-length Broadway play, *The Torch-Bearers* (1922), which he also directed, is a mordantly funny indictment of amateur theatricals and self-absorbed nonprofessionals. The play reflects George's profound respect for the stage and his light-veiled contempt for untalented amateurs; ironically, ever since its premiere it has been most often performed by precisely the nonprofessional "little theatre" groups it skewers. "I love that play as much as I loved Uncle George," Grace said, passing over any mention of Walter when she discussed family history.

Two years after *The Torch-Bearers*, Kelly directed his play *The Show-Off*, which had a Broadway run of almost six hundred performances and was staged with equal success in London; like *The Torch-Bearers*, it has been revived very often. This was soon followed by his production of *Craig's Wife*, which won the 1926 Pulitzer Prize for drama and was the basis for the 1950 movie *Harriet Craig*, which gave Joan Crawford one of her most intense roles as the archetypal middle-class, middle-aged, domineering wife who places domestic perfection above all relationships.

More plays followed, but the last decades of George Kelly's life, while comfortable and personally fulfilling, were professionally static. His plays were neither epigrammatic nor vulgar, and audiences had to sit patiently, listening to long acts in which both characters and social commentaries were revealed through dialogue. He was, in other words, a man of a specific kind of theatre, ferociously moralistic and poorly suited to the later different styles of (for example) Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and William Inge. "I won't put my plays out for production because the theater has changed so much," he said in 1970. "I just don't want to become involved [in an era] that is frightful, shallow and sensationalistic." The truth

was that the styles of popular comedy and drama had moved beyond him, and he had no desire to keep up with changing theatrical fashion.

One might presume that Margaret and Jack Kelly took pride in their connection to George. But in fact they were less than enthusiastic about him, for he was exclusively homosexual. Living for decades with his partner, William Weagley. At that time, having a gay relative was too terrible to contemplate for all but a few enlightened American families, and a man who was “sensitive” (the tip-off code word) could be endured only if the most insistent silence about the awful truth was maintained. When George died in 1974, Weagley was not invited to the funeral; he crept into the church and took a back seat, weeping quietly and completely ignored. He died a year later.

During her childhood and adolescence, Grace heard the whispers and cruel giggles about Uncle George. These she deeply resented, cherishing his visits to Henry Avenue, when he advised her on plays to read, cued her lines when she was in rehearsal, made lists of roles she might undertake in the future and was the only one in the family to take her acting aspirations seriously. “I am so proud of my niece Grace,” he said toward the end of his life. “She is not only a very fine actress but is a human being with considerable qualities. Had she stayed on the stage and continued her career, I think we would have seen some very fine performances from her.”

Even on his deathbed, George could give quite a performance on his own. When another niece came to visit him, he addressed her with words worthy of Oscar Wilde: “My dear, before you kiss me good-bye, fix your hair—it’s a mess.”

“To me, he was the most wonderful person,” Grace said. “I could sit and listen to him for hours, and I often did. He introduced me to all kinds of things I would never have considered or been exposed to—classic literature, poetry and great plays. He loved beautiful things and refined language, and these he shared with me in ways I never forgot. He was also one of the few people who stood up to my father, disagreed with him, contradicted him. I thought Uncle George was fearless.”

George spoke to Jack about allowing Grace to act in local amateur productions: her grades at school were fine, so why should she not indulge her love of the theatre? And so, soon after she entered Stevens, Grace was seen in a one-act comedy, now forgotten, called *Don’t Feed the Animals*, written by Bob Wellington and staged by the Old Academy Players on Indian Queen Lane, East Falls. It was no coincidence that the Players—a group that had performed every season since 1923 (and still maintains an impressive schedule)—were passionate partisans of George Kelly, with repeated productions of his works already in their history.

Uncle George remained Grace’s favorite member of the family. She persuaded the entire Kelly clan to travel to New York on February 12, 1947, for the opening night of a Broadway revival of *Craig’s Wife*, which George directed. (The title role was played by Judith Evelyn, who later assumed the role of “Miss Lonelyhearts” in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*.)

Grace’s teenage scrapbooks, which she preserved and which her children placed on exhibit in 2007, give some idea of her love of theatre during her school years. On December 9, 1944, for example, she saw F. Hugh Herbert’s comedy *Kiss and Tell*, at the Locust Theatre in Philadelphia, and she went to as many productions of Uncle George’s plays as she could.

IN 1943, Grace's social life flourished. At that time, the word "dating" did not imply a casual sexual affair, but innocent activities like moviegoing, dancing and parties. According to her mother, "Grace's first date was with a young man named Harper Davis, who went to the William Penn Charter School and often took her out to a basketball game or a dance." Three years older than Grace, Harper was one of the most popular and handsome young men in her social orbit, and her scrapbook includes many souvenirs of her dates with this good-looking teenager. He gave her a bottle of perfume at Christmas and signed the gift card, "To Grace with love, Harper." She pasted into her scrapbook the school dance programs for which Harper was her date, a stick of the chewing gum package he gave her on New Year's Eve, and the business card from the store at which he bought her a silver charm on Valentine's Day. She also pressed into her memory book remnants of the flowers he brought her on this occasion. Grace's passion for floral arrangements and preservation dates from these early years and was later the subject of her volume *My Book of Flowers*, published in 1980.

At that time, dating among polite young people was conducted according to a complete etiquette that was in fact a subject taught at schools like Stevens and William Penn. Girls and boys learned to dance and were told which subjects were appropriate for civilized conversation. Young ladies were instructed on proper posture, how to walk and sit, how they should hold their white-gloved hands, and what to say to a young man at the door, at the end of an evening. Boys were trained in the right way to ask a girl to dance, and classes in decorum were routinely held in schools.

In the spring of 1944, at the height of World War II, Harper graduated from school, joined the navy and was sent abroad. Not long after returning, he contracted multiple sclerosis, from which he suffered until his death in 1953. Grace visited him often during his confinement and attended his funeral. "He was the first boy I ever loved, and I'll never forget him," she said.

The relationship with Harper, like other dates during her high school years, was entirely chaste, for Grace had not yet tested the waters of sexual experience. Such reticence was typical of the time, especially in polite circles: young people's sexual urges did not tend to lurch into full throttle, nor did they race, as it was said, to go "all the way." Reliable methods of contraception were not readily or widely available, and the fear of pregnancy, venereal disease and an indecent reputation kept the reins on youthful impulses. In addition, penicillin, later the drug of choice against sexually transmitted infections, had only recently been developed, and it was reserved for men injured in combat. Civilian physicians had access to it for the general public only after 1946.

This is not to say that the standards of Queen Victoria and Mrs. Grundy were everywhere observed; it is simply to state the obvious—that sexual intercourse for American teenagers in the 1940s was not as commonplace as it later became. When Grace graduated from high school, she was still a virgin, although she had easily and often fallen in love. "My sister Lizanne loved only one, the boy she married—but Peggy and I were in and out of love every other day."

On June 5, 1947, Grace graduated from Stevens; her classmates predicted, in the senior yearbook, that she was certain "to become a stage and screen star." The following month, she made her first trip to Europe, along with her entire family. The journey was occasioned by Kell's entry into the Henley Regatta after he had received the James E. Sullivan Award earlier

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