

MY AUNT

KAT

Katharine Hepburn
21 - 27-1967

Tracy Tynan - I got your
 letter - I am trying not
 to be sad - at least not
 to be sad in front of people -
 because actually life is a
 very difficult business for all
 of us - and death is sort of
 unexplained - it is total silence
 so when someone you love
 dies - it is the sad of anything
 we know - or that makes
 it very very difficult to accept
 like a bad street - you

A letter Hepburn sent Tynan after Spencer Tracy's death, in 1967, continued on next page

Tracy Tynan's new memoir, *Wear and Tear*, chronicles her childhood amid New York's and London's high society. With the book's publication in July, Tynan speaks about her godmother, **Katharine Hepburn**, and shares a personal letter from the actress mourning her lover Spencer Tracy's death, exclusively in *Bazaar*.

I MET MY GODMOTHER, Katharine Hepburn, only once. I was a toddler, and my parents brought me to her hotel room in London, where we lived, while she was visiting from New York. She greeted me with open arms and said, "Come to Auntie Kat!" Terrified of this strange woman, I burst into tears and ran in the opposite direction.

The moment my mother found out she was pregnant, my parents decided that they would name me after Tracy Lord, Katharine's character in *The Philadelphia Story*. It was partly because my mother was enchanted by Tracy's independent spirit and partly because my father, a theater critic, was fascinated by Katharine. He had interviewed her when *The African Queen* came out in 1951, and they struck up something of a friendship, seeing each other from time to time in theater circles. (She later posed for *Persona Grata*, the book he did with Cecil Beaton, my godfather.) The next year, just a few weeks after I was born, Katharine was performing *The Millionairess* in London. My father went to see it and asked her to be my godmother on the spot. She told him that she had in fact chosen the name Tracy for *The Philadelphia Story*. After her career dipped, Katharine masterminded a comeback by optioning the Philip Barry play on which the film was based and turning it into a Hollywood hit. But she didn't like the leading lady's name. Looking out her window in New York one day, she saw Tracy tugboats chugging up the East River and thought, "Tracy. That's a good name." ▶

Photograph by Richard Avedon

Katharine Hepburn, actress, New York, March 2, 1955, from the July 1955 issue of *Bazaar*



W

hen Katharine passed away, the Academy contacted me to say that they'd found a letter of mine in her papers—all those years, she had kept it."

have finally got to turn around - go back a way - & then get on the main highway again - I think I am in the process of going back a way - My father who was a urologist - a surgeon - used to say that when you learn to accept the fact that life is one damn thing after another and you determine to be happy in between - you have grown up - Well I have been very very lucky - I've had a remarkable friendship with S.T. It was rich - & had a great & weird sense of humor - He could tell what I was thinking & that kept me hopping - It was the best actor I've ever seen - like a column in the Parthenon - Simple & Perfect - No BUNK - I have to go & play tennis - Aunt Kat

Tracy Tynan's memoir, *Wear and Tear*, is due out July 12 from Scribner



Hepburn with Spencer Tracy in *Without Love*, 1945

After that early hotel encounter, though, Katharine and I had no contact for more than a decade. My only tie to her was a dented christening cup (it had been used as a projectile in one of my parents' fights) that now holds pens

on my husband's night table. I got to know her primarily through her movies, that fiercely independent woman in *Adam's Rib* who seemed so modern and brave. (And all my boyfriends had to watch *The Philadelphia Story*.)

So I was touched—puzzled, really—by how personally Katharine wrote to me following the death, in 1967, of Spencer Tracy, the actor she'd had a 26-year professional partnership and love affair with. I was 15 and in boarding school when we exchanged letters. Katharine and Spencer were very private; he never divorced his wife and lived with Katharine only at the end of his life, once his health had deteriorated. But I found it charming that they lived the way they wanted to. "He could tell what I was thinking & that kept me hopping," she wrote. "He was the best actor I ever saw—like a column in the Parthenon—simple & perfect—no bunk." She signed off, with her dust-yourself-off attitude, "I have to go & play tennis."

When my own father died, in 1980, Katharine's letter took on new meaning. "My father," she wrote, "used to say that when you learn to accept the fact that life is one damned thing after another and you determine to be happy in between—you have grown up." It was because of my father that I had this bond with Katharine. He'd died young, of emphysema, like Spencer, and Katharine had put us in touch with all the specialists. I loved looking at Katharine's portraits, like the one in *Bazaar* by Dick Avedon, another family friend (who bought me my Russian Blue cat when I was a child, and in my 20s gave my photography the kindest, gentlest critique). I was thankful for the semi-relationship I shared with her.

In 2003, when Katharine passed away, the Academy [of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] contacted me to say that they'd found a letter of mine in her papers—all those years, she had kept it. "Dear Aunt Kat, I was so thrilled to get your

letter... It made me feel at home with you," it started. It was rather embarrassing, but I stand by what I wrote. Her note now hangs in a frame by my desk and still makes me feel at home. **As told to Romy Oltuski**

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