





# "I Look Forward To Life, I Look Forward To Death. So I've Got Them Fooled."

## A Conversation With Katharine Hepburn On The Absolute Non-Occasion Of Her Birthday

### The Glenn Plaskin Interview

**M**ADAME IS propped up in bed, granny glasses perched on the patrician nose, popping chocolate turtles into her mouth and

savoring a hearty laugh as she reads her mail. A letter from a woman reminds Madame the "pearly gates" are waiting, "that I should reaffirm my faith in Jesus before it's too late and I go to hell."

A proper Connecticut Yankee who answers her mail in bed each night — shunning engraved Tiffany letterhead for Xerox-quality bond stamped with square red letters: KATHARINE HOUGHTON HEPBURN — Madame politely writes back that she never thinks about death at all.

"Death will be a great relief," she says sweetly. "No more interviews."

The world of Katharine Hepburn has no grays: "It's perfectly clear to me," she declares, "what we're supposed to do on this planet."

"What is decency?" she demands, chin upthrust. "It is trying to do your share, add to the world, help your friends, and create something great." Now busily penning a book of autobiographical relections and searching for a movie script, "I can't sit

here worrying about religion," she finishes. "It's not my business to worry about heaven and hell. I could be dead tomorrow. Now pass the peanuts."

With only the clock ticking and the invisible presences of her housekeeper Norah and long-time secretary Phylliss Wilbourn, Hepburn is a contented loner, settled in the same grayish-white brownstone, in Manhattan's Turtle Bay, for 56 years.

The sitting room is spotless — "I can still get down on my hands and knees and scrub the floor" — with upholstery cozily slipcovered in white and contrasting with a red-orange Dhurrie carpet, an American eagle over the mantel, a profusion of flowers sent by admirer Calvin Klein, and a luxurious black leather chair and ottoman where Madame holds court.

"Got the house for *nothing* in 1933," she chuckles, freckles shining and still-auburn hair wound into a neat bun. On this day, the unchallenged first lady of American cinema, who does not display her five Oscars, is outfitted in well-worn brown pants, a white turtleneck, red sweater, and a slightly frayed shirt: "Spencer's," she smiles. "We got it for three bucks out in the country."

Determinedly *not* celebrating her birthday — Miss Katharine Hepburn will be 80 on Wednesday — the sassy Hollywood legend has other things on

her mind. "Who cares about my birthday? I don't, as long as I can get around and think straight."

Straight indeed. Don't cross Madame. Hollywood learned not to, long before feminism. From the first moment she stood before RKO cameras, Hepburn let loose her ornery Scots-Yankee will, refusing roles she didn't like, towering over leading men, going left when directors said right, refusing interviews and parties in favor of hikes, bike rides and games of tennis. Though she did endure a short marriage, in 1928, to socially prominent Philadelphian Ludlow Ogden Smith, she has since preferred her own company.

She never needed any man, always suffering male fools not gladly. In 1959, when bossy Madame shot "Suddenly, Last Summer," she drove director Joe Mankiewicz to distraction, and he in turn shot her unflatteringly in her final scenes. On the last day of shooting, she politely inquired: "Are you *absolutely* through with me? Nothing more you want me to do?" Assured her work was done, she spat in Mankiewicz' face.

Only Spencer Tracy could tame the spitfire, and, beginning in 1941 with "Woman of the Year," their magnetic screen duet continued through "State of the Union," "Adam's Rib," "Pat and Mike," and the swansong "Guess Who's Coming

to Dinner" in 1967. Although the couple stayed together on the estate of the late film director George Cukor, they never had the chance to marry, for Tracy, a devout Catholic, chose not to divorce his wife Louise.

Through it all, Hepburn lovingly nursed the actor through his severe bouts with depression and alcoholism. Twenty-one years after his death, she insists she never gets lonely or bored.

Katie jumps into an ice-cold shower mornings at 6, digs her garden on hands and knees, teas every afternoon, picks up the garbage on E. 49th Street, golfs and tennises at the family homestead in Fenwick, Conn. All despite an array of infirmities — a hip replacement, an incurable eye infection that developed after she fell into a filthy Venice canal during the shooting of "Summertime," a slight tremor, and arthritis, not to mention the ankle shattered in an auto accident five years ago. A steel rod now binds the foot, yet she manages not to limp.

"That," she grins, "is because of my great character, and vanity. My bones ache constantly and it drives me crazy, but my mother and father taught me never to complain."

The indomitable Hepburn was born in Hartford, Conn., on Nov. 8, 1909, the product "of two extraordinary human beings" — the maverick Dr. Thomas Norval





Hepburn, a urologist who campaigned for the prevention of venereal disease and need for legalized abortion, and Katharine Houghton, a suffragist and early birth-control militant.

Like mother, like daughter. The Great Kate agreed to a rare interview on the non-occasion of her 80th, sharing her blunt views on abortion, the plight of women, the state of the family, death—and her fairy-tale life.

I suppose your mother would have been a ringleader at next Sunday's abortion rights demonstration in Washington. "My mother would be absolutely *disgusted* if she were here. Our right to legalized abortion is of *deep fundamental importance*—like the vote for women, no less.

"Why *shouldn't* a woman be given the right to decide for herself if she wants to have a baby? That's what I want to know."

So does Barbara Bush. "It's too bad she isn't president. Of *course*, her husband doesn't agree. That's the difference between men and women. Women are in a *hopeless* position because they're victims of an instinct stronger than any of us."

Which is? "Sex. Victims of sex. After her own desire, and his desire, she gets pregnant and the man dumps her! What's she going to do? It's not his problem. The problem of abortion exists *at all* because the human animal is irresponsible. Women have to *fight back*."

How do you answer the Catholic Church, which insists it's fighting for the holiness and sanctity of the embryo? "I'm sick and tired of all this sentimentality about the 'little person' on his way to becoming a real baby. What about the little girl who's 14 and pregnant and about to destroy her life? Isn't she holy?"

"The Church says, 'Oh, no, it's not the mother that matters, it's the baby.' But I think that people who are alive and feeling hunger, misery, terror—those are the people to be protected, *before the holy sperm and the egg*. Men are so goddamned concerned about holiness. I think *life* is holy."

So you're against the death penalty? "Nope. I'm for it. Should a moron who's murdered someone be executed? Some say no, it's taking a life. I can't *believe* we're worrying about killing a little sperm when we have these criminals institutionalized