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AUDREY HEPBURN, AN ELEGANT SPIRIT

A SON REMEMBERS

Sean Hepburn Ferrer

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AUDREY HEPBURN
AN ELEGANT SPIRIT

SEAN HEPBURN FERRER

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"La Vigna" outside of Rome, 1955. Photograph by Philippe Halsman. © Halsman Estate.

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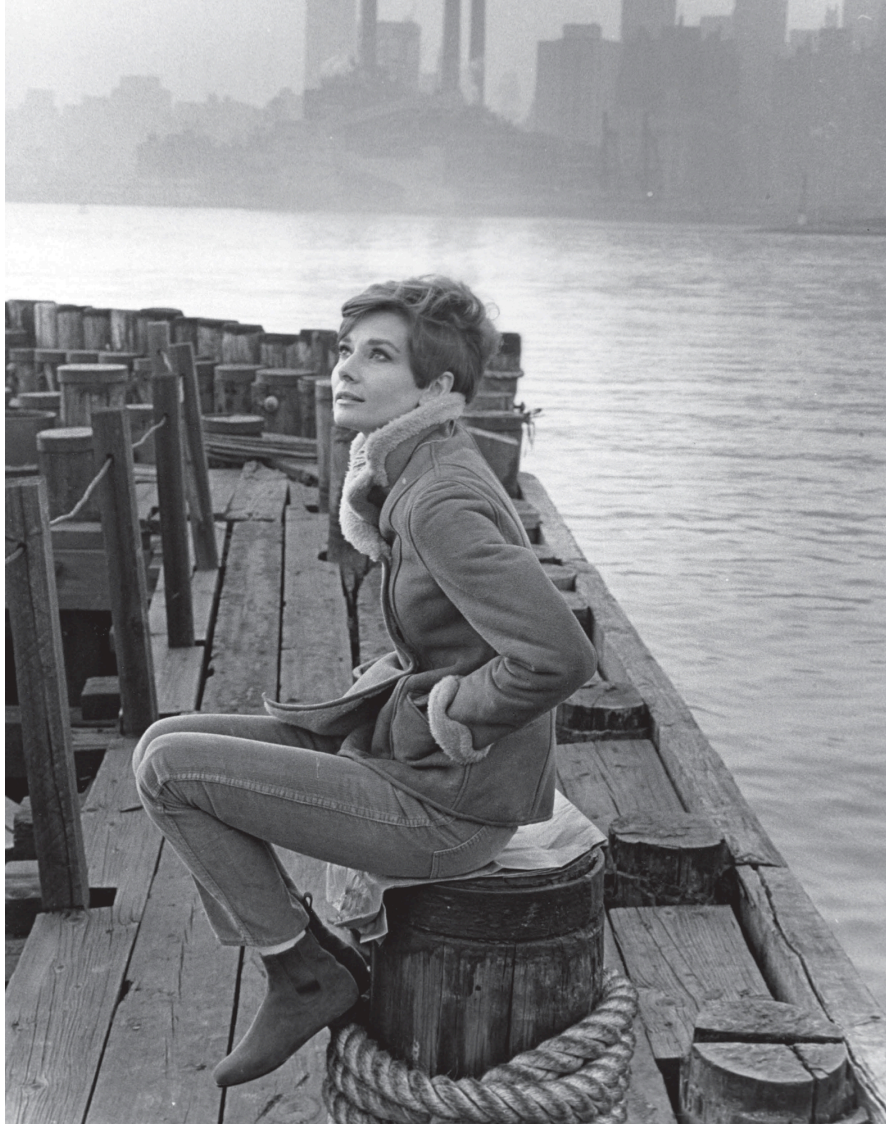
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To you.



New York City, circa 1967. Photograph by Howell Conant.

PREFACE THE SECRET

I am writing this preface almost nine years after Audrey Kathleen Hepburn-Ruston left us. She was—or should I say, is—my mother. I started writing this little book on January 21, 1993, the day after she passed away. It took me roughly four years to put the first words to paper.

The actual writing took maybe a few months. It's what happened before and in between that took some time. I am quite sure by now that everyone who loses a parent, as we all do sooner or later, could write a book. As it did for me, it might feel like the only book you'll ever write. Weeks, months, years may pass between writing sessions. You too may experience something that can no longer be called writer's block. You see, it's not about you. It is about the one person in the world who is more than you! And in my case, it is about someone who was most dear to me, the very person who brought me here and saved me time and time again, when I needed her for my survival. Yet she was someone whom I couldn't help or save in the end. So I find myself endlessly rolling these few words like pebbles in the river of my story so that the smooth stones that emerge will be worthy of your time and her spirit. I want you to know . . . what truly counts, yet in a way that won't ripple her peace.

As one theory has it, our organs have varying life expectancies. For example, our lungs, the meekest and the most useful, have the shortest life span: roughly 60 years. Our brain, of which we use less than 10 percent and therefore the least useful of our organs, as well as our greatest

liability, has an expected life span of somewhere over 150 years. In writing this book, I have discovered something new and exciting:

My memory will outlive all of them.

Long after I'm dead, and long after my brain dies—much later, of course (which is why I'm planning on being either cremated or buried with a chessboard), I will remember all this . . . and the scents. I close my eyes and remember, through the noise, her scent: powdery, elegant, safe, strong, the scent of unconditional love. I look down and see her delicate hands, their skin so thin I can faintly see their veins, her nails round, soft, and clear. Yet these are the hands that have held me, carried me, talked to me. They caressed me, they walked me to school, and I held on to them when I was scared. Oh, how I miss them! What I would give to feel them running through my hair . . . in my sleep, once more.

What happened? My head is still spinning. Wouldn't yours be if your mother was Audrey Hepburn? My mother died in 1993, and still . . . she's everywhere: on television all the time, at the video store, in magazines, in bookstores, on huge billboards in airports and on freeways, downtown on a bus stop shelter, in every conversation I have sooner or later with everyone, in my work and in my thoughts, especially since I started writing this book, and in my dreams . . . sometimes.

Talk about larger than life. She weighed 110 pounds and measured five feet seven.

How fortunate that our memories of her are good. They leave a gentle wake, like a sunny empty room that feels good. It's there, at times stronger, at times gentler—the perfect combination of sweet and sad. The sweetness of her, the sadness of her.

I have thought much about this book—endlessly agonized as to whether this should be revealed. After nine years I have come to terms with it. I am telling it to you because there is little to be ashamed of, and because it may be helpful to others.

My mother had a secret.

I don't think she would mind my saying it. We see things much more clearly . . . after. So here it is, the great secret.

She was sad.

Not that life treated her badly, and therefore she was sad. Life was tough but good. My mother was sad because of what she saw happening to the children of this world. I think we all made her a little bit sad. Yes, you did as well as I. Not because we were bad, but because we couldn't help. If she hadn't done the work for UNICEF at the end of her life, I wouldn't be so sure. I've now done some work for the children, and I'm sad too. So this book will have to be about this as well: sadness and children. Not a great combination, but there you have it. I think if you got the full picture, you would be sad too. So I'm not going to do that. I'll spare you the whole picture about sadness and children. But I'll give you a little bit of it, just enough.

Don't worry, you'll smile as well. A smile is the perfection of laughter. And you may cry a little too. But crying is good for your eyes and for your soul. It beautifies.



Sean at home in 1960, only a few weeks old. Photograph by Mel Ferrer.



1939, the year war was declared. Arnhem, Holland. Photograph by Manon van Suchtelen. Audrey Hepburn Estate Collection.

INTRODUCTION KISSED ON THE CHEEK

This is the story of a little girl with a powerful mother who instilled in her the values of hard work and honesty.

This is the story of a little girl with a father who left the family when she was six.

This is the story of a child who grew up during World War II with little food and no money and who remembered what it felt like for the rest of her life.

This is the story of a young woman who through a lot of hard work and much good fortune was discovered, surrounded by the best actors, writers, and directors, and became a success because of their vision and talent.

This is the story of an actress who got up early in the morning, usually between four and five, and worked harder than the others to compensate for her shortcomings.

This is the story of a star who couldn't see her own light. Instead she saw herself as too thin, with a bump on the arch of her nose and feet too big for her size. So she felt honored and thankful for the attention, which is why she was always on time, she always knew her lines, and she always treated everyone around her with courtesy and respect.

This is the story of a grown-up daughter who decided that she respected the fact that her father never contacted her after she had become well known, a father whom, although he had been absent from her life for twenty years, she took care of until the end of his days. He was also a man whose political views she strongly disagreed with.

This is the story of a wife who was disappointed twice in marriage, in part because she couldn't mend the hurt of her father having left her, a

hurt that had broken her heart so early in life.

This is the story of a woman whose deep desire was for her family to be together, who loved her dogs, her garden, and a plain plate of spaghetti *al pomodoro* (the recipe will follow, on [page 33](#)). This is a pretty straightforward story—which is why my mother never wrote a book about her life. She felt that it would be all too plain, too simple.

So how do you write and market a “Hollywood” biography without the public scandals or lurid secrets? Barry Paris, her last biographer and probably the most conscientious, wrote in his foreword, “Audrey Hepburn is a biographer’s dream and nightmare simultaneously. No other film actress was so revered—inspired and inspiring—both for her on-screen appearances and for her passionate, off-screen crusade. She remains so beloved that virtually no one has a bad word to say about her. The worst thing she ever did, it seems, was forget to mention Patricia Neal at the 1964 Oscars. She left no lurid secrets or closet cruelties to be exposed. Beneath her kind, warm surface lay more kindness and warmth to the core.”

Also very much at the core of why my mother never wrote, herself, or participated in an autobiography is the fact that she didn’t want to expose the private lives of others. Had she done it, she would have had to be completely honest and probably in so doing taken a chance of hurting someone. She couldn’t have lived with that. She wrote and, after a career built upon it, spoke beautifully. Yet she was so self-effacing that she may have left out certain aspects of her life that seemed to her so plain, so obvious, so unimportant. She would have unintentionally skipped over them. Yet in their simplicity, they are the secrets of life.

I haven’t had the pleasure of reading any of the seven biographies written about my mother, except for parts of the Barry Paris one, yet two minor points that I keep hearing about should be rectified. Although neither is of vital import, they are indicative of the research quality put forth by the writer who originally coined them and the willingness of other biographers to propagate them.

Several of these biographies stated that my mother was born Edda Kathleen Hepburn-Ruston and later changed her name to Audrey. To a

writer faced with the already difficult task of building a story around a life basically devoid of juicy conflicts, this was a prize morsel, the much-needed proof that she had done something disingenuous early in life. But I have her birth certificate, and it reads, "Audrey Kathleen Ruston." After the war, her father, Joseph Victor Anthony Ruston, found documents about his ancestors, some of whom bore the name Hepburn. This is when he added it to his name, which caused my mother to have to legally add Hepburn to her name as well. The actual "Edda" story is quite different. My grandmother temporarily changed my mother's name from Audrey to Edda during the war, feeling that "Audrey" might indicate her British roots too strongly. During the war, being English in occupied Holland was not an asset; it could have attracted the attention of the occupying German forces and resulted in confinement or even deportation. My grandmother Ella came up with the name Edda by simply exchanging the two l's in her own name with two d's. Since most documents were handwritten at the time, Ella may have had one that could easily be doctored so that my mother could carry it with her whenever she left the house. Just add two c's to the lowercase l's. Change the birth year a bit—Ella was born in 1900, my mother in 1929—and you have Edda Van Heemstra. My grandmother was a strategic woman.



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

Miss Audrey Hepburn-Ruston is known to me as a British subject by birth. She has been for some time a student of ballet dancing, and is proceeding to the United Kingdom to study at the Rambert School of Ballet Dancing.

B. E. F. Gage

(B.E.F. Gage)
Counsellor.

British Embassy,
The Hague.

10th April, 1948.



Audrey Hepburn-Ruston, British Embassy document, 1948; re: ballet school and nationality by birth.