

Uncommon Grace

PRODUCED BY MEEGHAN TRUELOVE. WRITTEN BY JOLEE FENNEBRESQUE.

In 1997, I was freshly graduated from the University of Virginia and living in New York City, working as a personal assistant and not particularly looking for a new job. But when a friend came across an opening for an assistant and social secretary to Brooke Astor, I decided to apply, even if just for the experience. When I walked in for my interview, there were large pictures of Beijing—which I had just been lucky enough to visit—hanging on the walls. It seemed like a sign. Soon after, I was hired.

Mrs. Astor was born Brooke Russell in 1902. Her third husband was Vincent Astor, scion of the legendary Astor family. He was known to have had a grumpy disposition his whole life, and Brooke Astor did her best to make him happy during the five-and-a-half years that they were married. When he died in 1959, he left her a huge sum of money and control of his newly formed foundation.

When I met Mrs. Astor, she was 96, and there were three things I immediately admired about her: she had an amazing amount of energy (still swimming, walking and doing yoga with Tilly, Jackie O's instructor), she loved people (and dogs!), and she was extremely generous. When I arrived, she was just closing down the foundation that she and Vincent had started, and which she ran for 50 years. During that time, she gave away more than \$200 million dollars both to New York's premier institutions and to many smaller charities alike. All of her gifts were given within New York City, because, as she said, that's where the Astor fortune had been made. She regularly visited each organization she supported, always dressed to the nines with a hat and white gloves. If she deemed it worthy, other philanthropists and foundations usually followed suit. At one particular board meeting, she apparently made a certain someone match her own million-dollar donation by just giving the person a stern glance.

Whomever she met or was with—whether it was a good friend or a stranger—she had an amazing ability to make them feel important and special. People in New York often stopped her on the street to pay their respects, and she always took the time to chat and thank them. She never went anywhere empty handed: She always had copies of her favorite books to give friends, or at the very least, engraved copies of a poem called "Discipline" that she had written and published in the New York Times.

During the three years I worked for Mrs. Astor, no two days were alike. I kept her schedule, planned dinners and lunches and travel, and answered the many invitations and letters and calls that came from everyone from museum heads to foreign dignitaries. She was renowned as a warm and meticulous hostess.

One time, she gave a luncheon at her home for Camilla Parker Bowles. Catherine Zeta Jones and Michael Douglas—who were extremely famous at the time but not at all on Mrs. Astor's radar—made the guest list. Mrs. Astor, of course, flirted with Michael Douglas and showed him all around her apartment. After all the guests left, she asked me, "Who was that woman wearing an evening dress to my luncheon party?" How do you tell Mrs. Astor that it was one of the most famous women in New York at the time, Catherine Zeta Jones!

The daughter of a Marine, Brooke Astor had a true sense of patriotism. One of her favorite paintings (and she owned quite a few!) was "Flags, Fifth Avenue" by the American Impressionist Childe Hassam, which hung over the fireplace in her famous red-lacquer library by Albert Hadley. While I was working for her, Mrs. Astor received the highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom, from Bill Clinton, who she said flirted with her during her visit at the White House—though she did not seem to mind. She never remarried after Vincent, but she always loved the company of men, especially attention from a president! I left my job in late 2000 to accept a position in the Social Secretary's office at the White House, and working for the new president and his wife was one of the few reasons for leaving Mrs. Astor's employ that I think she found truly acceptable.

In the fall of 2012, five years after Mrs. Astor's death at the age of 105, my "Astorland" days, came flooding back to me when her many artworks and antiques were auctioned off at Sotheby's. I went to New York for two days just to walk around the auction preview. It was very nostalgic to see all her belongings together again, all the things she collected and loved. It was like being with her one last time.

After working with Mrs. Astor and at the White House Social Office, designer Jolee Fennebresque settled with her family in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she maintains the thriving practice Fennebresque Interiors.

Brooke Astor photographed by Annie Leibovitz at her New York apartment in 1997. Astor had personal stationery for each of her residences. A painting that the author purchased from Astor's Sotheby's auction. "She was always spontaneously giving things to people to make them happy," says the author, who received this porcelain dog. The author at Astor's 100th birthday party in 2002. A copy of Astor's poem "Discipline." Her famous Albert Hadley-designed library.



Discipline

I am old and I have had
more than my share of good and bad.
I've had love and sorrow, seen sudden death
and been left alone and of love bereft.
I thought I would never love again
and I thought my life was grief and pain,
The edge between life and death was thin,
but then I discovered discipline.
I learned to smile when I felt sad,
I learned to take the good and bad,
I learned to care a great deal more
for the world about me than before.
I began to forget the "Me" and "I"
and joined in life as it rolled by;
this may not mean sheer ecstasy
but is better by far than "I" and "Me."

Brooke Astor

