

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

The quiet desert life of Betsy Drake and Cary Grant

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As she peered through the surveyor's scope and their newly acquired home-site at Bermuda Dunes, Betsy Drake exclaimed in her distinctive low and dulcet voice: "It looks good any way you look at it." The moment was photographed for *The Desert Sun* in April 1957.

Drake lived with her husband, Cary Grant, in Palm Springs in an idyllic Spanish house designed by famous Santa Monica architect John Byers. Friendly with Terry Ray and Ernie Dunlevie, the developers of Bermuda Dunes, Grant and Drake were keen to invest in the real estate venture. Their presence would certainly boost interest.

They had been in Palm Springs since the very start of their relationship. The *Limelight-News* took notice in 1948: "Glimpsed attractive Betsy Drake dining with cinema star Cary Grant and ace director Howard Hawks. ..." The *Desert Sun* noted their arrival each and every season in the early 1950s.

Bermuda Dunes was a new resort community just east of Palm Springs and a bit west of Indio on Highway 99. Stretching over 2,650 acres, it featured the 12-acre freshwater Lake Bermuda into which Drake and Grant ceremoniously tossed king-sized gold keys symbolizing the always-open nature of the lake "for the pleasure of Bermuda Dunes' residents." Much bigger bodies of water figured prominently in their lives.

Drake and Grant met on a transatlantic crossing of the ocean liner *Queen Mary* a decade earlier in 1947. He'd seen her performing on stage in London and by chance they were on the same boat headed to America. (It wasn't the first time Drake had made the passage. Born in Paris to two expatriate parents, Drake came from a wealthy family. Her grandfather opened the Drake Hotel in Chicago, but subsequently lost his money in the stock market crash of 1929. She returned to the United States on the *SS Ile de France* and had a chaotic and nomadic childhood ending up in New York City, where Elia Kazan selected her as a founding member of the Actor's Studio.)

Onboard the ship, Grant was smitten with her. Once in Hollywood, he ar-



Betsy Drake and Cary Grant are photographed at Smoke Tree Ranch in 1962.

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ranged for her contract at RKO with David Selznick. He starred with her in her first film, "Every Girl Should Be Married." Grant took the movie's title seriously. Two years later, on Christmas Day 1949, Howard Hughes flew the couple to Phoenix where they took their vows in a private ceremony with Hughes acting as best man.

Grant had reportedly been content to retire to the desert; an apocryphal story recounts that Alfred Hitchcock talked him back into the movies. Whatever those circumstances, the year before the splash at Bermuda Dunes, Grant was making "The Pride and the Passion" in Spain. Drake went to visit him on the set and realized he was conducting an affair with the new Italian screen sensation Sophia Loren, 30 years his junior. Drake hurried back to the United States to avoid the gossip columns.

She boarded the ill-fated *SS Andrea Doria* at Gibraltar destined for New York along with dozens of other wealthy travelers and tourists. She sailed as a first-class passenger, occupying a single cabin on the ship's boat deck. The *Doria* collided with the *Stockholm* just shy of the American coast. She had been getting ready for bed "when all of a sudden there was a big bang. Everything flew across the room." She quickly dressed and held tight for hours up on deck until

she was fortunately rescued by the famed French passenger liner *Ile de France*.

While visiting Grant on the set of "An Affair to Remember" a year later, she recounted the harrowing experience for the newspapers: "Suddenly I felt the impact of the collision, which was on the other side of the ship. I was in my nightgown and decided I had better get dressed. It was an eerie feeling to have the ship strike something and then stop. Then the ship lurched to the side with a great noise. People were screaming and I was standing there with nothing on. I might just as easily have run out that way. But I managed to get dressed. How, I don't know. I just did."

The papers continued the dramatic story. "For two hours, I clung to the post on the high side of the ship," she said, "just like that post over there." She pointed to the set of an ocean liner in which Grant and Deborah Kerr were performing a scene. She said she prayed as she waited - "and suddenly I felt quite good."

She crossed the deck of the ship barefoot and discovered she was on the wrong deck to be rescued, having to go further below. "How I got down there, I'll never know." Looking back from the lifeboat she recalled, "It was an unbelievable sight, looking back at the *Andrea*

Doria. There was a full moon out and it was a balmy night. I looked at the big ship, lying at a crazy angle with the searchlights playing. I could scarcely believe it."

The papers continued: "Miss Drake had taken her jewels on deck after the crash but lost them somehow. They were uninsured, and she lost all her other belongings including a lengthy manuscript she had written in Spain. 'I ended up on the *Ille de France* barefoot with only a dress,' she said. 'But very grateful.'"

The drama of the *Andrea Doria* eclipsed any gossip the newspapers may have printed about Grant's affair with Loren. The story of Drake's "lengthy manuscript" lost to the deep was never elaborated. Interestingly, Drake had written a screenplay for Grant's next movie, "Houseboat," intending to star opposite her husband. His affair with Loren ruined those plans and the script was reworked to accommodate a change in the leading lady to Loren, making it doubly bitter for Drake.

But having survived an actual shipwreck, she maintained her equanimity and friendship with Grant. Their marriage would be the longest of his five. They did not divorce until August 1962.

They had intended a peaceful existence in the desert. Grant credited her with broadening his interests. She introduced him to the then-legal LSD therapy (which is having a resurgence again now.) Drake had long been interested in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Grant apparently quit smoking using hypnosis. They delved into transcendentalism, mysticism and yoga. She took up causes, including the plight of homeless children in Los Angeles.

True to their original intentions, Drake gave up acting. She worked as a volunteer and studied at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and earned a Master of Education degree from Harvard University. She continued writing and would cross the Atlantic many more times, finally landing in London where she lived the remainder of her long life.

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