

# “NO GUTS!”



## **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO KAY THOMPSON**

**BY HART LEAVITT AND NED LEAVITT**

Presented exclusively by **SAM IRVIN**,  
author of *Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise*,  
with the help and generosity of *Eloise* illustrator

**HILARY KNIGHT**

## Introduction by SAM IRVIN

Despite unsubstantiated rumors that Kay Thompson had affairs with women, there is a mountain of credible evidence that Kay was, first and foremost, attracted to men. Aside from her two husbands, Jack Jenney and Bill Spier, Kay had a long-term, sexually-charged relationship with Andy Williams starting in 1947 and continuing, on-and-off, until 1961 (which Andy openly wrote about in his memoir *Moon River and Me* and discussed in even more detail with Sam Irvin, author of *Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise*, during several exclusive interviews).

Kay also had substantiated affairs with a growing list of men, including Dave Garroway (*Today Show* host), Krenning Dorris (of the Dorris Motor Car family), Don Forker (Union Gas Company exec), Burt McMurtrie (CBS-Radio exec), George Kinney (clarinet and saxophone player for Tom Coakley's orchestra), and Georges Champigny (a Frenchman she met in 1952 on tour).

After the publication of *Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise*, another affair came to light indicating that Kay had been romantically involved in the early-1950s with LeRoy "Brud" Pitkin (1908-1968), an Ivy Leaguer, musician, and Wall Street executive.

In 1929, Brud graduated Andover (Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts). Then, he studied one school-year (1929-1930) at Princeton University, only completing his freshman year. Hit hard by the Great Depression, Brud quit Princeton and found work as a saxophone player and band leader throughout the 1930s and early-1940s. Brud was married twice: first to a woman (name unknown) circa 1930s-40s; then to Patricia Parkhurst Orcutt (betrothed in Reno, Nevada, on February 21, 1959; Patricia had two children from a previous marriage: Tim Orcutt and Faith Orcutt).

Brud's obituary in a 1968 issue of the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, written by classmates Bill Dinsmore and Tom Mettler, read as follows: "Although Brud left Princeton at the end of freshman year and got the jump on most of us in starting a business career during the Great Depression, he was always a very active and well-loved member of the Princeton Class of 1933. He was the leader of an unusually large contingent from Andover (about 25) entering Princeton in the Fall of 1929, roomed freshman year with Tom Mettler. He was a member of the Glee Club freshman year and became a member of Tiger Inn. Brud's enthusiasm as an alumnus of both Andover and Princeton undoubtedly accounted for the impression at many Princeton reunions and class dinners that the occasion was at least 50% Andover. It was inevitable during the early depression years that Brud's varied talents found expression in a variety of jobs (while many of us were wondering if we could find any at all). He first went into banking in New York, then became a cruise director, a band leader, and a hotel manager. Perhaps all of these helped make him the respected financial and investment adviser he became in post World War II years, managing portfolios for such well-known firms as Standard and Poor's, Moody's, Lionel Edie, and Paine Webber, Jackson & Curtis. During WW II he volunteered to put another of his many talents, sailing, to work for the United States Coast Guard, and served from 1942 to 1946 as BM 2/c. Brud's intense feeling for Andover was appropriately symbolized by the request that contributions be made to Phillips Academy in lieu of flowers."

Substantiating the affair between Kay Thompson and Brud Pitkin came in a roundabout way. In early 2014, *Eloise* illustrator Hilary Knight came across a forgotten letter in his archives, dated October 11, 2002, from a gentleman named Hart Leavitt. In that letter, Hart revealed that he was a friend of Brud Pitkin and that the affair between Kay and Brud had gone as far as a marriage proposal.

Hart Leavitt was, himself, an amateur jazz musician, a bestselling author of books on grammar, and a beloved English professor at Andover (1937-1975) where his famous students included actor Jack Lemmon and President George H. W. Bush.

Unfortunately, in the intervening years since writing the letter to Hilary Knight, Hart Leavitt had passed away on October 29, 2008, at the age of 98. At the request of the author of this book, Hilary Knight generously provided Hart Leavitt's letter for publication in the endnotes and website for *Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise*. The author contacted Hart Leavitt's son, Ned Leavitt, who granted permission for his father's letter to appear here.

Here is the letter in its entirety:

**October 11, 2002**

**Dear Hilary Knight,**

**In a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, I read a long piece about Kay Thompson in which the writer said you were thinking about writing a book on Kay.**

**A long time ago I knew Kay, a fascinating woman and a good friend. I'm wondering if you'd be interested in a brief narrative of our relationship. It's not romantic; it's an account of the unusual things that happened when we were together: like...**

**Her melodramatic romance with one of my best friends: Brud Pitkin.**

**Our little jam sessions: Kay on piano, me on tenor sax.**

**Several narratives of her public performances that bewildered me.**

**My wife's reaction to Kay's antics.**

**An account of our relationship when we were both living in Rome, including one wild idea.**

**I hope this interests you, mainly because I'd love to write about a most unusual part of my life, the musical part. That's why I knew Kay.**

**I first met the actress Kay Thompson while she was having a melodramatic love affair with an old school and college pal "Brud" Pitkin. Like me, he was trying to make the big-time music world in New York City.**

**Brud's dream was to front a society dance band, and mine was to make Benny Goodman's swing band [as a tenor sax sideman].**

**Kay was already a movie star, and a powerful woman.**

**When she got tired of bawling Brud out for the way he was going about his dream, she'd sit down at the piano and tell me to get my axe (a tenor sax), and we'd jam "standards." She was a pretty good piano player and a fierce critic. Continually, she'd bawl me out: "Play LOUDER! You sound like Pitkin!" ...and she'd turn around and make faces at him.**

**I always noticed that Brud never talked back to her; he looked scared.**

**Since I had never known any power-house women, I often wondered how I would react if I fell in love with someone like Kay.**

**I think I amused her because I came from an entirely different background: a minister's son, a preppie, and a college graduate... AND a would-be professional jazz musician.**

**Now and then I gave Kay a chance to act, as in the following melodramatic performance.**

**One night in New York, Brud and I planned a dinner party for Kay in the famous restaurant in Central Park [Tavern on the Green].**

**We invited some friends to show her off, for she was enjoying her fame as an actress and an author. She had written a very ingenious book entitled *Eloise*, which was the name of the main character, who I thought was very much like her creator: witty, aggressive, electric and good looking.**

**Unfortunately for our dinner party, Kay was late, and some of us began to be annoyed. One older lady said sharply: "I'll bet she's planning a theatrical entrance. That's what they do."**

**And she was right, for suddenly Kay sailed into view and stopped bluntly right in front of me, staring as if she had never seen me before. For a few moments I stared back... and then suddenly I reached out to embrace her and introduce her to the crowd of diners: in a very loud voice she began an incredible speech:**

**"Do you know who this is, this man standing next to me? Do you have any idea who this is? This is HART LEAVITT! Do you know that this is who he is... Hart Leavitt... I mean that this is who he is?" And she grabbed my two arms and waved them at the crowd of diners.**

Then, abruptly, she backed off and stared at me, nodding and clapping her hands.

I was so bewildered and embarrassed I couldn't think of anything to say or do... I just stood there, hoping that Kay would go away... which suddenly she did, striding out of the dining room as if the place were on fire.

So we all sat down and ate our dinner and tried to figure out what Kay meant by her melodramatic performance. Today I think the older woman was right who said Kay loved to create a theatrical scene that would startle everybody.

Several weeks later, Kay appeared at my apartment, and stood at the door studying me, as if she didn't know what to say about the dinner party.

Suddenly, she laughed and said, "C'mon, let's play some music. All that other stuff, forget it."

So we drove over to the Pitkin's mansion and tore into a jam session. Though Kay wasn't a real jazz pianist, she belted out the choruses literally, giving me the feeling that I was not playing loud enough.

Personally I was not comfortable with Kay Thompson, and I am very sure that the reason was that I had never known a woman so aggressive, like the character she created in her book *Eloise*.

The strongest evidence appeared in Kay's reason for the end of her romance with Brud Pitkin. She told me about it several years later, after I gave up trying to be a professional jazz musician and came back home to Boston.

Kay brought her vaudeville show to Boston and played several weeks at what used to be called "The Costly Pleasure"... for Copley Plaza. One afternoon she called and said to come into Boston and "let's talk."

What she wanted to say was, "Me and Pitkin are finished and I'll tell you about it. I had a gig in Chicago and Pitkin decided to come along, so we took a train and I started talking about us getting married. Gradually I should have noticed that your Brud boy didn't seem at all excited; in fact, he seemed nervous and silent. And then came the pay-off. The train stopped at some little station, and he got up and walked down to the end of the car and disappeared. We stayed for a while and then suddenly the train started to move... Where was Big Brud? ... He'd gotten off the train and disappeared... NO GUTS!"

I hadn't the faintest idea what to say to Kay because at that time in my life, a year after college, I was thoroughly ignorant of such human behavior, being just out of school and college where most of my generation learned almost nothing about human character.

**I certainly had no idea what Kay meant by “NO GUTS,” especially since the phrase seemed, to me, to have nothing to do with getting married; and I certainly didn’t dare ask Kay.**

**However, the phrase intruded in my life many years later on the only occasion I met Kay Thompson again.**

**In 1970 [Hart’s son Ned corrected the year to be 1967], I was granted a Sabbatical from my teaching career at Andover, and my wife suggested we spend a year in Rome, which I thought was a magnificent idea.**

**Among the many startling and imaginative happenings that excited our lives in that fascinating old city was the discovery that Kay Thompson was then living in Rome, so one day I called her up and immediately we made plans to do things together.**

**One day she called to say that she was inviting some of her Roman friends for dinner and would we join them. It was a memorable evening, especially for a friendly question Kay asked me at dinner.**

**“Hart, what is the one thing above all others that you would like to do in Rome this year?”**

**I thought for a minute and suddenly an idea occurred to me: “I would like to meet Sophia Loren.”**

**“Yeah, I thought it would be something like that... typical male itch,” Kay said.**

**My wife chuckled, and my son [Edward “Ned” Leavitt] who was visiting us [in December 1967], said, “Wanna be there, too.”**

**Kay laughed and changed the subject.**

**A couple of weeks later, Kay called me and said, “I have something for you. Come on over.”**

**What she said was this: “I have talked to Sophia and everything has been arranged. She’d be delighted to meet you. What I told her was that you are a millionaire American businessman who wants to buy an estate in Rome so he can entertain famous Italians, like Sophia.”**

**I almost choked, literally and figuratively..... I knew dramatically that I never could act out that part convincingly, and Sophia would laugh at me, but I was ashamed to say so to Kay. She could get away with a show like that, easily.**

**Finally, I said it: “Kay, I couldn’t pull that off, much as I’d like to.”**

**Kay stared at me... then barked, “NO GUTS! Just like Pitkin. Tell your wife to come over and see me.”**

**I never saw Kay alone again that year in Rome, but she had dinner several times with Carol, who once said, “There’s something sad about Kay Thompson, but I have no idea what it is. She did say once you were a fool to give up your chance to meet Sophia.”**

**And at times I do wish I’d tried to play the part in Kay’s trick. What would it have been like to play a game with one of the most beautiful women in the world, AND a great actress.**

**Sincerely,  
Hart Leavitt  
North Andover, Mass.**

Following up on the mention in the letter that Hart’s son, Ned Leavitt, was visiting Rome at the time of the Sophia Loren anecdote, the author of this book asked Ned to write about any remembrances he himself may have had of Kay Thompson. This request resulted in the following stories, written by Ned Leavitt, exclusively intended for the endnotes and website for *Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise*, dated June 18, 2014:

### **Kay Thompson Anecdotes**

**by Ned Leavitt**

#### **First story about Kay...**

**During Christmas holidays in 1967 my sister, Judy, and I went to Rome to visit our parents [Hart & Carol Leavitt] during my Dad’s sabbatical year [from teaching English at Andover]. One of the highlights of the trip was a dinner with Kay Thompson at her fabulous apartment [atop the Palazzo Torlonia].**

**I knew Kay was a friend of Dad’s and somewhat of a big deal but in all honesty I knew little about her and her history. I had played Woody in *Finian’s Rainbow* as a senior in high school and loved *West Side Story* and *The Music Man*. But as a graduate student in directing and acting, my taste in theater ran to Greek Tragedy, Shakespeare and very contemporary plays involving drugs and/or nudity. So I was curious to meet the legendary Kay Thompson, but didn’t know what to expect.**

**We arrived at her apartment and were greeted with dramatic enthusiasm. Kay was dressed in black with her eyes darkened. She kidded my Dad mercilessly about his amateur status as a musician and demanded a full report of his adventures around Rome as a photographer.**

At one point she turned her full attention on me. “So you want to be an actor!! How’d you like to be in a film while you’re in Rome.”

“Really? What film?” My pseudo academic sophistication dropped away instantly under the heat of her intensity.

“Yes, they’re shooting one of those spaghetti westerns and I know the director. I can get you an audition tomorrow. Can you ride a horse? Can you shoot?”

“Well, I once got on a horse on an Indian reservation and the horse rode straight for the nearest tree trying to scrape me off on a low branch...”

“Good! Tell them you have experience. In fact tell them you can do anything they ask you to do even if you can’t!”

“Really??” I stammered.

“Yes, and then if you get the part, go take riding lessons or shooting lessons or voice lessons or whatever you have to – that’s how it works in show biz. Do anything to get the part and then work your ass off to be the best you can be!!”

That night I schemed how I might change my flights home in order to be on the set for the next 3 weeks. And the next day I went out to Cinecittà where the production offices were. Kay did get me a meeting but it was with an assistant producer. He didn’t speak much English and had such a bad cold that he blew his nose constantly and rudely throughout the interview. He said I had been misinformed – there were no auditions for new parts for the next 3 weeks. I realized that my sudden dream of my first movie role was not to be realized that day. But I never forgot Kay’s advice and although I haven’t been on a horse in a film or anywhere else since, I have occasionally faked it in a meeting and then gone out and studied like hell to learn what I had to.

Second story about Kay...

In the fall of 1971, I fell madly in love with a beautiful and fiery Latina actress. It was a perfect match of opposites – me the wasp Ivy League tall blond, she the dark-haired street smart girl from the mean streets of the south Bronx. I had been knocking around New York City for a few years getting small gigs as an actor and directing tiny shows and scenes for class here and there, but mostly driving cab and selling a little marijuana to get by. We moved in together and the only distraction was her beautiful but very male Irish setter, Max, who wasn’t used to sharing her and threw himself at the bedroom door whenever we were inside making love.

Her brother was a playwright and had a play with a starring role for her. When he heard I was a director, he said he could get a production in a tiny theater off-off-Broadway if I would direct. We were all on fire with excitement – me directing my



beloved, her brother with a chance for his play to be seen – the three of us on our way at last!

The play was a fraught drama about sexual identity – my beloved was the center of a drama involving a very flamboyant gay man and a very macho handsome guy who was after the heroine but being challenged by the gay man as to his real sexual identity.

During auditions a young actor showed up perfect for the macho part. His name: Harvey Keitel. He read like a dream and I tried to cast him. But he said he had too much to do and didn't think he could take on the part. I promised him we would work around his schedule – anything to have him in the cast because he was so perfect for the role. He finally agreed. But tension built up during rehearsals – not only was Harvey hard to schedule, but he was devoted to method acting. He could barely take a step on stage without needing to explore and understand his deeper motivation. As opening night loomed, we were behind and fearing disaster. But the show must go on and so we opened.

In the midst of all this, inflamed by my love for the actress and dreams for success and recognition, I took the plunge and called Kay at the Plaza. She remembered me. “How is Hart? Does he have any guts yet?” I told her about the play and she promised to come for our opening night even though I warned her it was a tiny theater and there was no budget.

However, I had no thoughts of Kay when opening night came. We had a house full of friends and even a couple of critics – one from the *Village Voice* which was a very big deal. Things went well for a while, but tension began to build up between Mr. Macho and Mr. Flamboyant. To make matters worse, Mr. Flamboyant liked to sometimes depart from the script and improvise which bothered Method actor Macho a lot. Yet somehow the tensions between the actors fueled the drama and the play was racing toward its climactic scene. And then at the last minute, Mr. Flamboyant pulled a big improvisation, taunting Mr. Macho way beyond what was in the script. At that point Harvey snapped – he grabbed a heavy glass ashtray, threw it at Mr. Flamboyant's head and yelled, “This play is over!” He then headed straight off the stage, up through the audience and out of the theater.

Dead silence. Nobody in the cast could believe it happened and nobody in the audience knew if it was an avant garde twist to the script or what. Finally I stood up and said, “I'm the director and I'm sorry to say the play is over. Thank you for coming. If anyone wants their money back we will refund you.”

The audience actually applauded and then began to leave with much lively talking. The cast members, playwright and I huddled on stage (there was no place to hide back stage because there was no back stage.) After a while, the theater seemed empty – but when I looked out in the seats I saw a lone figure all dressed in black with a broom, sweeping out the aisles and between the seats.

**Oh my god it was Kay. She had come. She had seen the disaster. Oh my god.**

**I rushed up to her apologizing and thanking her for coming all in the same breath. She stopped sweeping and said, “It was a great night of theater. I had the best time!! Now I’m going to finish sweeping here and then go back to the Plaza. When you are done, come and meet me in the Palm Court. I have some notes for you.”**

**I couldn’t believe it. So after we finished closing the theater, I gathered my beloved and we rushed to the Plaza. We walked into the Palm Court and there she was, still in black, the dowager queen of theater ready to receive us, her subjects. We sat down. The gypsy violins were playing. Kay beckoned to us and we leaned in to hear what she had to say.**

**“I’ve seen a lot of theater and I want you to know this was a great night – real things happened on that stage and you should be proud!”**

**We couldn’t believe it.**

**“Now don’t worry about that nonsense at the end. It worked whether it was planned or not. The audience left the theater full of curiosity, strong impressions and with lots of lively questions. That’s all we can ask for in the theater, isn’t it?”**

**We sat there taking in her words which were so kind and welcome and insightful.**

**Then she said, “Now pay attention because I have some notes for you.”**

**And she proceeded to give us detailed suggestions about every aspect of the evening. I furiously took notes, we ordered champagne, and left a long time later feeling we had been blessed.**

**After that I didn’t see Kay again. Harvey Keitel never came back to the show, so his part was played by the playwright. Eventually the play closed, I broke up with my beloved, and we all moved on.**

**But I will never forget Kay – she moved in the highest circles of show biz and knew the biggest stars – but one night she came to a tiny theater in the East Village where we were struggling at the very beginnings of our lives and careers. She paid attention, saw the essence of what was needed, encouraged us and gave us kind and perceptive support. I will be forever grateful.**

**ABOUT NED LEAVITT: Ned Leavitt started in publishing in 1972 at GP Putnam’s Sons. After three years at Putnam’s, he went on to Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books and then left editing to become a literary agent at The William Morris Agency. During his thirteen years at William Morris, he worked with a wide variety of “commercial” and “literary” novelists including Morris West (*Shoes of the Fisherman*), Gregory McDonald (*Fletch*), Paul Bowles, Richard Yates, Dan Wakefield and Lawrence Thornton (*Imagining Argentina*). A number of books he represented have become films including *Dances with Wolves*, *Fletch*, *Dead Ringers*,**

and *The Sheltering Sky*. In August of 1990, he left William Morris to establish The Ned Leavitt Agency. In addition to working with novelists, he has also become very involved in books related to spirituality, creativity, and psychology. Among his clients in this area are best-selling authors Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D. (*Women Who Run with the Wolves*), Dr. Christiane Northrup (*The Wisdom of Menopause*) and Caroline Myss (*Anatomy of the Spirit*). Recent clients include authors Gregg Braden (*The Divine Matrix*) and Bruce Lipton (*The Biology of Belief*) both published by Hay House. Other well-known clients are Andrew Harvey, David Abram, Sam Keen, Baron Baptiste, and Matthew Fox. In the 23 years since opening the agency, 9 books he has represented have been major *New York Times* bestsellers including two #1 bestsellers. Most recent was the bestselling *Women Food and God* by Geneen Roth. A graduate of Harvard University with an MFA in theater from the University of Hawaii, Ned has been at times an actor, singer, cab driver, theatrical director, choral conductor, poker player, drummer and vision quest guide. He is a devoted Kirtan chanter and has a CD with his wife, Lynn, called *Bhakti Treasure*. His publishing career spans more than 40 years of editing and agenting.

SAM IRVIN would like to thank HILARY KNIGHT, NED LEAVITT, and the late HART LEAVITT for their extraordinary generosity to help preserve the legacy of KAY THOMPSON.