

MONA BERGERS



*Carolyn  
Bessette Kennedy*

QUEEN OF MINIMALISM

CALLWEY

*by* Mona Bergers

*Carolyn Bessette  
Kennedy*

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“I’m not  
comfortable  
in anything  
ornate.

I like clean,  
understated  
looks.”

*Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, 1992*

# Introduction

Kerstin Weng  
Head of Editorial Content Vogue Germany

Wearing beautiful clothes and having true style are not necessarily the same thing. Only a select few manage to combine both. Carolyn Bessette Kennedy was one of them. That is precisely why her look remains a fashion reference to this day. She helped define the aesthetic of American minimalism, blending clean colours and pared-back silhouettes with an effortless sense of ease: classic blue jeans paired with a black blouse, understated shoes in muted tones, and garments that never competed for attention. Through her work at Calvin Klein, she moved within New York’s rarefied fashion circles, sharpening both her eye and her ability to refine her own appearance. Style, after all, can be learned. It comes from immersing oneself in a particular aesthetic, studying it, absorbing it and ultimately making it one’s own.

This is what sets a true style icon like Carolyn Bessette Kennedy apart from someone who is merely well dressed: a distinct visual identity, an instantly recognisable point of view, and the ability to transform individual pieces into an expression of personality. Style does not have to be loud or dramatic, but it does have to be consistent. And consistency was one of Carolyn Bessette Kennedy’s greatest strengths. The clarity and quiet elegance of her appearance, enhanced by understated makeup and classic yet effortlessly natural hairstyles, continue to inspire fashion enthusiasts today. Part of her enduring appeal lies in the fact that her style feels remarkably wearable. It was perfectly suited to the life of a working woman.

Carolyn Bessette Kennedy’s life in the 1990s was not unlike that of many women today: constantly on the move, endlessly busy, with little time to devote to elaborate styling decisions. Her outfits simply had to work—and they did. A number of contemporary fashion buzzwords seem tailor-made for her wardrobe. There is the concept of the “staple wardrobe”: timeless pieces that combine seamlessly with one another. There is “quiet luxury”, characterised by exceptional quality rather than conspicuous logos or prints, reflected in her preference for fluid silhouettes and materials such as silk, cashmere and leather. And there is “effortless chic”, that elusive quality of appearing elegant without seeming to try.

Without ever setting out to do so, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy created a stylistic foundation upon which countless women still build their wardrobes today. In doing so, she became a true style icon, and her look remains a masterclass in timeless—and therefore enduring—aesthetic appeal.





# 1966 – 1989

## *Before the Spotlight*

Childhood in White Plains, teenage years in Greenwich, college and discovery in Boston

Carolyn Jeanne Bessette was born January 7, 1966, in White Plains, New York—a small town in Westchester County, just a 30-minute train ride north of Manhattan, but still worlds away from the fashion scene that would later know her name. Her father, William J. Bessette, was an engineer, her mother, Ann Messina, was a teacher and school administrator. She had two older sisters, twins Lauren and Lisa. The family was Catholic and of French Canadian, Lithuanian, and Italian descent—a classic American mix.

Carolyn’s parents got divorced when she was eight. Her mother moved with the three daughters to Old Greenwich, Connecticut, where she embarked on a quiet suburban life with her new partner, Dr. Richard Freeman. Carolyn first attended Juniper Hill Elementary School, where her mother worked as a substitute teacher, then briefly Greenwich High School, before her parents sent her to the stricter St. Mary’s High School. At that Catholic girls’ school, she was known as sporty, popular, and strikingly stylish—traits that would constantly recur in later descriptions of her.

At St. Mary’s High School she thrived, and not just academically; her classmates voted her “Ultimate Beautiful Person” of her year. Carolyn was popular, had an active social life, and worked side jobs as a babysitter and sales assistant. After graduating in 1983, she enrolled at Boston University to study elementary education—a subject that did not always chime with her later public image. During college she did some small modeling jobs, even appearing on the cover of the university calendar “The Girls of B.U.” in 1988. She then worked as a promoter for nightclub owner Patrick Lyons before starting as a sales associate at a Calvin Klein store in the Chestnut Hill Mall. A decision that would change the course of her life.

Not one interview is known where Carolyn Bessette Kennedy talked in detail about those years. She never spoke publicly about how her parents’ divorce affected her, how she felt about moving to Greenwich, or what it was like growing up as a teacher’s daughter in a wealthy suburb where attitude had to compensate for lack of wealth. What survives are fragments from other people’s memories: the image of a girl who instinctively knew how to enter a room, who said little but observed everything, and who understood at an early stage that making an impression was not about being loud. The divorce, the constant travel between two worlds, growing up in a place that was not really hers, all shaped a skill that would later become central to Carolyn’s public persona: the art of being present without revealing oneself.

**THE OUTSIDER WHO BELONGED**

St. Mary's High School, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1984. Carolyn is on the right and immediately stands out; while her classmates stayed with classic skirts for their school uniform, Carolyn opted for pants, a distinctive choice. She always seemed to treat rules more like suggestions, with her hands in her pockets and her uncombed blonde hair. She apparently often swapped the prescribed shoes for high-heeled pumps, already choosing a Calvin Klein style. Those small differences were early signs of her gift for carving out her own space within a given framework.



Cathy Farrell, Carey Gerwig, Leslie Bell, Nancy Fones, Carolyn Bessette.



## BEFORE THE SPOTLIGHT

### ULTIMATE BEAUTIFUL PERSON

Carolyn's portrait in the St. Mary's High School yearbook, 1984. Barely-there makeup, no styling—just a chunky sweater over a long-sleeve shirt and jeans, hair loose, chin resting on her hands. The beginnings of the style that would later become her signature are already emerging, that look that was uncontrived, but never slapdash. Her parents sent her to an all-girls' school in the hope that she would take studying more seriously. She indeed graduated with honors, and her classmates voted her "Ultimate Beautiful Person" of the year. A few months later, she headed to Boston for college, and a whole new life.



# 1989 – 1996

## *The Calvin Klein era*

The comeback of minimalism, bonding with Kate Moss, and a whole new cool

When the United States slid into a recession in 1990, the power-shoulder glamor of the eighties seemed overnight like a costume from another era. Fashion needed a fresh start—and Calvin Klein delivered. The New York designer, who had already made waves with his clear-cut coats in the seventies and with the infamous 1980 jeans campaign with Brooke Shields—“You want to know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing.”—pared his designs back to the bone: clean silhouettes, tailored styles, muted colors. The rest was all attitude.

In 1992, Klein cast rapper Mark Wahlberg and a then largely unknown British model named Kate Moss for his underwear campaign. The grainy black-and-white shots by photographer Herb Ritts broke completely with the glossy supermodel aesthetic of the time, replacing staged perfection with intimacy, ambiguity, and a raw beauty that felt both vulnerable and untouchable. Sales soared 34 percent in just three months. In the same year Klein launched CK Calvin Klein, a more affordable second line, and in 1994 came CK One—a unisex fragrance that made over five million dollars in its first ten days and defined the scent of a whole generation.

Minimalism was nothing new in fashion, but Klein’s version was totally American, featuring bias-cut slip dresses, coats in groundbreaking tailoring, and a monochrome color palette. His runways showcased women who looked dressed, not dressed up—free from all superfluities. Critics adored him, and women snapped up his designs.

This was the world Carolyn Bessette stepped into in 1988, when she took a job as a sales associate at a Calvin Klein store in Boston. It started as a job, and became a school that would shape her eye, her gift for proportions, for the power of simplicity. When she rose to become Head of PR in New York years later, she had not only built a career, but assembled an entire vocabulary that would define her style forever after.



### THE CITY AS CATWALK

A Calvin Klein Underwear ad, Avenue of the Americas, New York, 1998. Two women cross the street below an enormous billboard for Calvin Klein's underwear line. The nineties in New York teemed with giant billboards plastered over skyscrapers. Klein's black-and-white aesthetic was so omnipresent that it was part of the cityscape—like the yellow taxis adding a splash of color as they sped by.

Carolyn Bessette Kennedy never sought the spotlight—and yet she became the most defining style icon of her generation.

Long before she entered America's most famous family in 1996, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy had already embodied a new kind of American elegance: restrained, self-assured, and possessed of a clarity that never goes out of style. In just a few years, she developed an aesthetic entirely her own—free of logos, indifferent to trends—that designers from Prada to The Row still reference today, and that a generation who never knew her has made entirely their own. This Callwey book brings together iconic photographs and defining articles that shaped her image, tracing the unmistakable language of her style: from the influences of her early years to the garments, accessories, and choices that gave her look its lasting power. A book about a woman who proved that less isn't just more—it's forever.

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