

SWAN SONG

A NOVEL

by

Kelleigh Greenberg-Jephcott

ONE

1974

For the first time in his life, the words refuse to come.

He lies in bed, propped on a pile of chintz pillows, their suffocating tangle of tea roses faintly reminiscent of a Southern grande dame's parlor.

We've each mused, at one time or another, that somewhere beneath his gnarled-gnome exterior lurks a genteel New Orleans matron, mortified by her host-form's crassness.

He stares vacantly at the page before him, thoughts elsewhere.

On delivery dates he hasn't met, on advances already spent. On the Fabergé paperweight he's just nabbed at auction, how it changes hue when the light shines through it just so, citrine tones conjuring Babe's miniature vegetables, darling little carrots that only grow so big.

On the eight-hundred pages of lies he has or hasn't told, depending on who you ask. Depending on what he's said and to whom.

For all his boasts to the contrary, the paper— curled around the barrel of the Smith-Corona balanced on his protuberant stomach— is barren. A stack of sunny legal pads proves equally unfruitful, his spider-like scrawl more scribbled-through than not.

He reaches for an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes and grabs his pack of True's— a brand he's sworn to each of us had been named after him. He trembles as he lights one, causing the flame to quiver before he sucks the nicotine into his lungs. He runs a hand through his tissue-fine hair, a gesture of old, when a mop of thick cornsilk fringe swept across his forehead. The fringe, like so much else, is long gone, with only a habitual gesture to remind us of a tow-haired boy we once adored. A boy pampered and indulged well into middle-age, courtesy of his unquestioned genius.

Certainly never questioned by us... Never his talent, anyway.

In madras pajamas and ratty pink cardigan, the aging wunderkind seems less the literary lion, less still the social barracuda of public perception. Alone in the darkened room, stripped of bravura, he looks like what he is— “just a piss-ant rug-rat from Monroeville, Alabama,

shit-scared as ever.” (His phrase, not ours.) The Tiny Terror is in many ways still the terrified toddler who sobbed when his Mama left him locked in fleabag motels while she stole out with her lovers. Lillie Mae, who traded her small-town, small-time name for the more exotic ‘Nina’, a further removal from the role she never wanted: Mother to the odd Lilliputian boy with the snow-hair, toad-face and girlish voice, the child whose very oddness repulsed her—

He’d sat, he’s told us, on the ‘Big-Bed’, chubby fingers sticky with sugar from the bag of beignets that had been bought to bribe his silence. He watched her dressing as he chewed, wide eyes peering from his cherub face. She was barely more than a girl herself, and were it not for his gnawing at the scrap of fried dough, one might mistake him for her baby-doll, propped against the pillows— rather than her great mistake. A live baby, who she never asked for, from whom she just needed a few hours escape to try to salvage her wreck-of-a-life. She’d told him this in dulcet tones, almost a lullaby, which he couldn’t help but think of as good, given her smile as she cradled him close.

She was beauty and light. His whole tiny universe.

He’d studied her as she sat at the vanity in a sheer black slip, taming a honeyed pin-curl into place. He watched as she unscrewed a tube of lipstick— red like the plastic fire engine a man called Daddy once gave him. She smacked a pout at her reflection. Across the room he mimicked the same, spreading sticky sugar between invisible lips. She’d grinned at him, and he’d giggled.

He pulled another beignet from his bag as she slithered into a silky dress, the green-grey hue of Spanish moss. She’d told him that was the name of the stuff that hung from the trees there, those spider arms blowing in the breeze that used to scare him, the rustle of which he had come to think of as home.

She moved to a hot-plate in the corner. His eyes followed, transfixed by the colored lights that shone through the window onto her face, flashing Red-Green-Blue, Red-Green-Blue — like a Christmas tree. A trumpet-wail from the open window battled a jangling pianola from another room. She’d shaken her hips to the ragtime of the latter, as she stirred a saucepan of milk, pouring a healthy splash from the glass bottle of ‘Mama-juice’ she always kept on her

nightstand. He loved to look at that bottle, its amber liquid sparkling in the lamp light, even when there was precious little left inside.

She had poured a cocktail of warm milk and Mama-juice into a tin cup and presented it to him. She stroked his hair, telling him what a fine boy he was as he sipped, the fire trickling down his throat. He nuzzled against her, inhaling her perfume. It reminded him of the scent of jasmine in the lobby they walked through each day, sneaking past the fat man behind the desk, who, like a broken gramophone record, asked in an angry voice when she intended to pay. She'd made it a game— run, *run!* she told him — and his chubby little legs raced to keep up with hers.

Here in the Big-Bed, she stroked the white straw that topped his head, the warmth of her thigh the last thing he remembered before sinking into deepest sleep.

When he woke, the room was dark. He'd reached for her, but she was gone.

He sat up, groggy, feeling like syrup had been poured through his brain. The colours of the Christmas neon still flashed in through the window. He could still faintly hear the player-piano, drowned by the blare of a brass band.

He slid off the Big-Bed, feet dangling, falling with a thud to the floor. He teetered towards the door, reaching upwards for the cold brass knob. He turned it— one way, then the other. Wouldn't budge. He put his cheek against the crack and cried out, "Mama...?"

No answer.

He'd called again, "Mama—! *Mama!!*"

Only music and shrieks of pleasure from below.

Terrified, he'd howled— desperate that someone might hear him. He worried that she'd gone away for good and forgotten to take him. He pounded tiny fists against the door, screams muffled by ragtime and laughter and grown-up things he didn't understand. He slumped to a heap on the floorboards, sobbing 'til he just couldn't sob any more.

He'd cried himself asleep by the time she returned. She scooped him up, dumping him in a threadbare armchair. He stirred— and through exhausted half-slumber he could just make out the man she led into the room. A man in a smart white suit, sharing a sloppy gulp of Mama-juice

as their mouths collided, just before they fell into the Big-Bed, crushing his bag of beignets, stuffed between the pillows.

Of course, sometimes the details change... The color of her dress.

Beignets or cake, ragtime or blues. Who the man might be. Whether the Mama-juice was clear or amber. Whether she'd instructed the motel staff to ignore his screams. He's always left behind, locked inside. Alone. Abandoned. Terrified.

That's the important part, as the tale is told and retold—

Alone. Abandoned. Terrified.

The details, frankly, are interchangeable.



We've all heard his stories, a hundred times over.

These were Truman's playing cards. How could they fail but rouse our sympathy? How could we not reciprocate with our own tragic tales, each believing ourselves to have privilege over one another...? Each believing ourselves to be his Favourite. We'd loved him, after all. We'd welcomed him into our homes— our multiple homes— into our pools and yachts and planes. Accepted him into our celebrated families— Paleys. Guinnesses. Guests and Keiths. Agnellis and Bouviers. All vigor and tans, fresh-cut flowers and pure-bred pups. With our money and our manners, we picked up his tabs and lifted his stature. We festooned him with cachet.

We were the wives he'd never know. The mothers he wished he'd had. We loved him as we loved our own broods— more so, perhaps. No one would dare leave Truman behind with the nanny. His childlike zeal and raunchy wit proved too heady a cocktail.

He'd even seduced the Husbands. Those alpha-males who launched networks and empires, who found themselves confiding in our androgynous sprite in ways they couldn't confide in us.

He seduced us all with words— and Truman knows full well the power of his words. They're both armour and weapon— the one thing he's sure of. They alone have never failed him, their lyricism hinting at the beauty trapped within his stunted body, not to mention his conflicted soul. The golden boy whose prose, from the start, possessed the grace his person lacked.

But now the muses have gone silent. For the first time since he set up a spartan desk in his childhood bedroom, armed with a composition-book and a thimble of whiskey, the muses refuse to speak. He feels impaired. Senses dulled. Blind to the elusive gossamer threads, from which he once wove such intricate verbal webs. Deaf to the delicate balance of tones he used to strike so effortlessly. Stripped of that singular gift to find just the right word to make a phrase reverberate.

While the right words elude him, the *wrong* ones are another matter. Waffle and bile increasingly spew from his thinning lips— half-baked thoughts, easy insults. He can hardly stop himself. And loooord-eeee, the boasts!

“Honey, I was *born* to write this book. I'm the *only* one who could write it. Let's face it, no one else has the guts to say what I'm prepared to say. I've seen spoiled monsters first-hand and baby, they ain't pretty. *Trust* me, this story is the one true thing I know.”

We've heard him preach this gospel, to anyone who'll listen. Columnists. Chat-show hosts. Friends, Strangers. Enemies, Sycophants— come one, come all. He's been writing it for ages. Told everyone he was doing it. He's taunted with bits and pieces, read snippets to some of us, quoted lines to others, and hashed and rehashed the plot. For years Truman's warned we just might find ourselves making an appearance... He's tailored hand-carved coffins for each of us.

“It's called *Answered Prayers*. And if all goes well, it'll answer mine.”

There's been a lot of buzz, *alotta* talk. But it's becoming cheap, dime-store talk. Shit on a shingle, masquerading as pâté on Tiffany silver— with such a bland taste, he's forced to add fib upon fib to transform it into a flavorful dish, stirring a thick gumbo of promises he surely cannot keep.

“It’s positively epic, the thing I’ve been crafting. Everyone I’ve ever met. Everything I’ve *seen*. I’m constructing this book like a gun. There’s the handle, the trigger, the barrel and, finally, the bullet. And when it’s fired it’s gonna come out with a speed and power you’ve never seen— *WHAM!!*”

Yet now the words elude him, like snowflakes on a balmy day, evaporating before he can grasp them. Without his precious words, he is nothing. Panicked.

And when Truman panics...

He props himself upright, steals a glance at the clock. Nine-thirty. It’s five o’clock somewhere. He removes the typewriter from his distended gut and drags his otherwise shrunken carcass from the bed, treading carefully over the land-mines of his thoughts.

Bare feet wade through a thick shag-carpet, woolen strands threading between his toes. He proceeds through an open-plan living room, glass walls revealing a brittle desert landscape beyond. He’s donned swimming-trunks and a terrycloth robe, which hangs loosely around his minuscule frame. Oversized sunglasses hook over tortoise specs. The thinning hair is hidden beneath a Panama hat and apart from the middle-aged paunch, he could pass as a ten-year-old boy, drowning in adult clothing.

He slides a transparent door open, squinting against the glare.

Lying catatonic on the patio is English Bulldog, Maggie, slobber dribbling from her protruding tongue. Truman steps over her, making a beeline for a wet-bar. He pauses at the mini-fridge, torn between options. Shouts back to the slumbering lump—

“What’ll it be, Mag-pie...? A Bloody-Bloody or my *Orange-Drink*...?”

The rolls of canine flesh fail to respond beyond a steady, listless panting.

“That’s what *I* thought... O.J. it is.”

He reaches for a carton of concentrate. Removes a hundred-proof bottle of Stolli from the freezer. He fills half a highball with the vodka, adding the tiniest smidgeon of juice. Demurely sips— then tops-up the hooch for good measure.

“*Na zdorovyе,*” he quips in thick Russian dialect, toasting lazy ole Mags as he shuffles past.

Heading for a lounge, Truman collects an apricot princess phone, rigged with an exceptionally long wire, linking him to the house as if by coiled umbilical cord. He reclines in the sun, Orange-Drink in hand. He takes a swig, pulling a black book from the pocket of his voluminous robe. He finds the desired number. Dials.

And in that adolescent-girl whine we've all come to recognize in a single syllable, he commands the receiver.

"Hello, precious. Mr. Don Erikson, *s'il vous plaît*," then, surprised by the receptionist's apparent ignorance, "Why honey, it's Mr. Truman Streckfus Persons Capote, if you didn't know."

He balances the phone on his shoulder, and like a contortionist he twists around, shimmying out of the bathrobe and retrieving his drink with surprising dexterity.

From the other line, anxious, "Mr. Capote?"

"Donny. Greetings and salutations."

"And to you, Mr. Capote."

"I'm not your Daddy, for Chrissakes! Call me Truman."

"Mr.— Truman. I want to thank you for returning our call. We're very excited, and may I stress *very* excited, at the prospect of publishing your stories—"

"*Chapters*," Truman corrects. "The first *chapters* of my magnum opus. *Looooong* awaited chapters. Fifteen-years in the making. Think of this as a little sneak peek... A few chapters to keep 'em guessing."

"Yes. Chapters. I just want to express, on behalf of the *Esquire* staff—"

"Let's cut to the juicy bit, shall we...? The *New Yorker's* offered me twenty-thousand. Care to sweeten the pot...?"

The line goes silent. Truman frowns, dabbing the pooling sweat collecting in the reservoir between his chest and belly. His 'man-tits', he'd been amused to inform us while sunbathing on board the *Agnetta*, sailing cobalt waters off the Amalfi Coast, slathering the 'most divine' shea-butter on his beloved Babe's porcelain skin.

We had all, of course, told him what a silly creature he was, that he was far too prepubescent to have tits of any sort.

“Donnn-eeee...? Cat got your tongue?” Truman ventures, pressing the charm offensive, somewhere between a purr and a growl.

From the other end, palpable disappointment.

“We were prepared to go to sixteen. I’m sorry, Truman. We’d do anything to keep our hat in the ring. We know how big this will—”

“Aaaac-tually, I don’t think you do.”

“We do! We’re simply a smaller operation than—”

“Sugar, you have no *idea* how big this book is gonna be.”

Truman rises, dragging the mile-long phone cord past Maggie, who lifts her head as it grazes her lumpy back. At the wet-bar he mixes himself another Orange-Drink, the once icy vodka bottle weeping in the heat.

“We *know*. We knew with *Breakfast*, didn’t we? We just don’t have the resources to go any higher. Try as we might, we can’t outbid the *New Yorker*.”

Truman pours himself an extra capful of Stoli, tosses back the shot.

“Give me one good reason why I should go with *Esquire* for four grand less. You’ve got sixty seconds, Donny-Boy. Convince me.”

A sharp intake of breath, then— “Who would you like your readership to be?”

Truman pauses, “*Well*... I don’t want ‘em kicking the bucket mid-way through. I *suppooose* I’d like a younger readership. One that doesn’t give a flying-hoot about The Rules.”

“Okay. Demographically do you know what the occupation of the greatest percentage of *New Yorker* subscribers is?”

“No.”

“Dentists.”

“Dentists—?”

“Yes— *Dentists*. Purchased as what’s known in the trade as Lobby Lit. There’s your audience. Sad fucks with toothaches waiting for a root canal.”

Truman chews an ice cube, ingesting this, drumming his claws against the highball.

“You know I’ll have certain *demands*...”

“Anything.”

“I want cover approval.”

“You got it.”

“And you cannot change a *word* of text. I mean it! Not a *syllable!*”

“Alright...”

“I’m flying to the Yucatán to see Lee— do you know Lee Radziwell? She’s *utterly* divine. *Far* more stunning than her sister... I mean I *love* Jackie, don’t get me wrong. She was one smart cookie back in the day— surprisingly well-read— but she can be so *severe*, don’t you think? The whole weepy widow routine... No man would touch that with a ten foot pole! And face it, she *can* look a bit like a drag queen in pearls from certain angles. Of course Ari... Well. *He’s* no looker. He did sleep with Lee first... But that’s another story. Anyhooooo. Seeing Lee in Mexico, then on to Key West, where I’ve found the most deliciously trashy seaside motel. I only have one copy of my book. Only one in the whole wide world. You’ll have to come down and pick up the manuscript. Personally.”

“Done.”

Truman dumps the last of the ice-cubes into his glass.

“*Weeee-uull...* okay then, hon. *Esquire* it is. And on that note, I’m gonna do a jig and pour myself one last little something to celebrate...”

A splash more Orange, splash(es) more hundred-proof. Truman teeters with drink and phone towards the swimming pool. Maggie, half-eye on alert, rolls resentfully clear of his path.

On the line the mood shifts to one of triumph.

“Wow. Truman, that really is terrific!”

“I’m delighted, Don. Simply over the *moon.*”

He sets the phone base at the pool’s edge, dipping his toe in the chlorine bath.

“But Donny... Be forewarned,” Truman pauses, wading waist-deep into warm water, relishing the moment. “I’m about to detonate a bomb.”

“You always do. I’m sure this will prove no exception.”

“Ohhh, but it *will*. They ain’t seen nothin’ yet...”

“Well. I can assure you— you won’t regret this.”

“Nooooo,” Truman ponders, “I don’t think I will. But *you* might.”

Satisfied, he places the handset back in its cradle.

Faintly...

You don't think you'll regret it, Truman?

Truman polishes off his O.J., sets his glass beside the phone.

Part of you isn't worried about what we'll say when we find out...?

His brow furrows. Ours is not the Calliope voice he's been longing to hear.

Turning to his morning exercise, Truman dog-paddles the length of the pool, keeping both head and hat above water. At the deep end he grasps the diving board, stretching his arms, feet dangling into the depths below. He makes a U-turn and paddles back to the shallow end.

You know, there's only one thing that cannot be forgiven...

Betrayal, in black and white.

"Stop it," Truman says aloud, to no one in particular.

Maggie raises her head at the sound of a phrase she recognizes. Truman laughs. "Not you, Mags."

Bitchery and butchery, in Century-Expanded type. Are you sure you won't regret...?

Holding his breath, he ducks his head beneath the water. It's serene. Peaceful.

But in the glugging, amniotic solitude, a voice, Our voice persists...

As a rule, people are far more hurt by what they read than what they hear.

Truman allows his weight to sink, leaving his Panama hat bobbing gently on the glassy surface.



A week later, a limousine pulls up in front of Capote's modest desert retreat. A chauffeur collects his luggage: a pair of worn Vuitton suitcases, decoupage with labels.

"My bags have been positively everywhere," Truman often boasts. "They've traveled *twice* as much as me. It's not my fault... They have their own little legs that run on ahead!"

As he carefully locks the deadbolt— we've been told there have been break-ins in his absences— the chauffeur returns for the final item of luggage. A thick, rectangular parcel,

meticulously wrapped in brown butcher paper, tied with kitchen twine. As he reaches for the parcel, Truman lunges in his path.

“Nooooo thank you, Mr. Hauptmann. This baby’s not leaving Daddy Tru-bergh’s *sight!*”

The chauffeur, a heavysset Mediterranean, backs away.

Truman laughs heartily. “Gracious! I’m like a little ole junkyard dog! Bless your cotton-socks. To whom do I have the pleasure...?”

“I’m Vincent, sir.”

“Vii-*chen*-tee...” Truman rolls the name around on his tongue. “Well, you simply must tell me *all* about yourself...”

In the back of the limousine, Truman sits with parcel in place of honor on the seat beside him. He taps the partition. Flashes a grin in the rearview mirror.

“Say, Vincente...? You wouldn’t mind if I popped this delicious bottle of bubbly, would you? I can’t think of anything more *rude* than to drink while you’re driving. But would you mind *terribly*...?”

“No, sir. Help yourself.”

“It’s medicinal, you know. I just have to wash down the *teensiest* of pills, and they’re always *so* much nicer with my old friend Dominic P.—” Truman reaches greedily for the chilled bottle of Dom Perignon, giggling when the cork pops, like a delighted child with a Christmas cracker.

He removes a Quaalude from an enamel Victorian snuff-box in his pocket. Slides the turquoise pill into his mouth, then a jade one, together fanning into the colors of a peacock’s tail.

“Vincente what?”

“Angelotti.”

“Angelotti. *Quel* divine! You’re *Italian*, I presume.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well isn’t that just the most *exotic* thing to be. And where did you say you were from?”

“My family came from Sicily, but I grew up in Hoboken.”

“What an extraordinary coincidence! My friend Francis comes from Hoboken. He’s a singer... Perhaps you know him?” Truman’s accordion-grin expands. Celebrity never ceases to thrill him as a topic. “Francis...? Francis *Sinatra*...?” He watches the driver’s eyes widen.

“You know, he wanted to buy the film rights to my book. Now as much as I love Francis dearly, he’s *notoriously* stingy, and my Big Mama— that’s my *very* close friend Slim— she was acting as my agent at the time, and she said to hold out for a million—”

“Sinatra,” the driver stammers. “You know *Frank* Sinatra?”

“Vinny, I know everybody. So Slim, she was married to Howard Hawks before she left him for Leland Hayward, who left *her* for that slut Pam Churchill— as in Winston, Pam having bagged his son Randolph (...and just about anything else with a pulse!) Anyhow, I had met Howard through Bogart, who met his darling wife Betty through Slim, who *literally* discovered her— not that that misogynist rat Hawks gave credit where credit was due, and—”

“You knew Bogie too...?”

“*Knew* him? He called me Caposey. I beat him at arm wrestling. Three times. I won two hundred bucks off him, which in those days was alotta dough. But when I body-slammed Bogie— he dared me!— and took him out of commission for three days, Big John Huston was not too happy with Lil Ole Caposey, let me tell you! Where was I—? Oh yes. Back to Slim...”

By the time the car pulls up to the Sputnik facade of LAX in two hours’ time, Truman has told Vincent the life-histories and bed-hopping of almost everyone in our circle. The chauffeur has listened, incredulous, not sure whether this pint-sized raconteur is a teller of truths or crazy as a coconut.

Truman, having exhausted himself with a potent cocktail of gossip, dolls and champagne, slumps in his seat, mid-catnap. Vincent collects his luggage from the trunk and sets it by the curb. He opens the back door and gently shakes his snoring passenger.

Truman wills himself awake, peacock-plume eyed, empty champagne bottle in his lap. He squints toward the open door, where the chauffeur stands with the sun at his back, features obscured, surrounded by a halo of light.

“Mr. *Angel-otti*... Have we reached the City of Your Kind?”

“Welcome to Los Angeles, Mr. Capote.”

“Give me your arm, dear angel boy, and help me to fly.”

The chauffeur hoists Truman to his feet, no easy task, his featherweight form laden with fatigue. As porters arrive to drag suitcases inside, Truman removes his watch. A flashy Cartier affair. He presses it into Vincent’s palm, who stares at the offering, flabbergasted.

“For you, Vicente.”

“But sir— I couldn’t possibly—”

“Don’t offend me, Angel. Bogie had one, Francis has one, I’ve got a dozen.”

Vincent’s protests cease as Truman rolls back the sleeve of his uniform, tenderly fastening the watch-strap around his wrist. He pats the chauffeur’s arm.

“*Bellissimo.*”

He lowers his insect-shades and follows the porters into the terminal.

It’s not until he drifts past the rush of travelers, languidly swimming against the stream of hustle-and-bustle, following his bags— which indeed have their own legs today (we’ve always insisted there’s generally a sliver of truth in what Truman says...)

Not until he’s sauntered up to the Aeroméxico counter without a care in the world, been checked in, ticket printed by a doe-eyed Señorita in the smartest pillbox hat (“Just like Jackie used to wear,” we knew he’d tell her, “until that terrible day, the Pepto-Bismol pink pillbox, splattered with Jack’s blood...”)

Not until he’s slurred a final “Adios, Amiga”, pausing to contemplate that the masculine version of that farewell had been— as he’d tearfully informed us— Perry Smith’s final words before he’d watched him hanged, the killer having limped forward, kissed his cheek and whispered, “*Amigo...*” into Truman’s ear. He’d felt the breath coming from Perry’s warm lips in the icy Warehouse, noticed his exhaled puffs, coming faster as he mounted the scaffold steps, where a delicate black mask was tied over his eyes. Visible breath— same as the lawmen and journalists watching. A last exhalation of vapor gave the illusion of hovering when the floor dropped out from under him and the breath was no more. Too late did Truman realize that he’d never be able to jettison those images, of Perry and Dick’s fragile necks snapping, or of the

shotgun blasts for which they paid— four shots that snuffed out the Clutter clan, upstanding folks by all accounts, in a single blood-soaked night. He couldn't escape the feeling that theirs was his own funeral, and that the boy with the fringe had died with them in that freezing Warehouse, leaving a shell of a man in his place.

Not until he's allowed himself a groggy moment of self-pity for all that he has lost, for the price that he has paid for his art...

Not until *then* does Truman remember...

He looks around, horrified, groping for the thick brown parcel, in his plumed-haze deciding it *must* have been tossed into his luggage. Bags are retrieved, flung open, guts rifled and every conceivable item tossed from their cavities. Tablets covered in Truman's fussy scrawl. The weighty Smith-Corona, concealed in its leather sheath. Paisley swimming-trunks. Black silk pajamas. Scarves of unacceptable lengths. T-shirts. Corduroys. Furs—

Furs? In the Yucatán? We'd always said he couldn't pack. How many times had one or another of us neatly packed his bags for far-flung jaunts, removing wildly inappropriate items he's always managed to sneak back in last-minute...? While he, the pampered son, sits curled at the foot of our beds, part-Pasha, part-Pekinese, observing our efforts, rhapsodizing, "But darling, that's *amazing*," delighted by our labour on his behalf.

At the feet of the startled Señoritas of Aeroméxico, Truman tosses his hallowed treasures, searching in vain for the only item that matters.

"Oh-my-god-oh-my-god *oh my GAWD*," he wails, a peacock screech, which in itself is not unlike a woman's scream. (Were he operating at full capacity he would have appreciated this detail, having more than once pointed out in the Central Park Zoo that the New York City Police have often been called to investigate a shrieking 'Genus Pavo' on this very basis.)

"I can't believe... Fifteen-years of my life— *fifteen YEARS!*"

The Misses Aeroméxico exchange uncomfortable glances.

"I can't— I'll *never* be able to duplicate...!!"

He reaches the bottom of the final case and sits back on his haunches, his portable world scattered pitifully around him. (So pitiful we could *almost* feel sorry for him...)

He sees his last minuscule chance receding into nothingness, which is even more frightening than the Nothing he's been grappling with. He realizes that this may well signal the end of the line. He doesn't have the strength to start again...

But Hemingway did, when it happened to him, we'd assure him—

"I hate that pompous old fart," he'd say, per-script. "Homophobic faux-macho cunt. Bore, bore, *BORE*." Those of us who'd known Papa would argue otherwise and Truman, claws extended, would inevitably snap, "Well he was practically a *child* back then— Mr. Shotgun-For-Breakfast could hardly do much *now!*"

The elfin body rounds in defeat. His bony shoulders begin to shake, with them the spine, as ordered and defined as a string of freshwater pearls.

Passengers pass, staring at the quivering creature, mistaking him from behind for a child who has lost a parent, a sign around his neck perhaps— specifying his destination for grown-ups to spot and assist along his way.

A concerned Señor, the counter manager, appears and kindly offers to phone the 'young man's' hotel. Truman shakes his head in his skeletal hands, knowing full well that all is lost.

The voices, *Our* voice— soloists, overlapping now—

You should have known, Truman, that it was beneath you.

Flinging fine-boned skeletons from our walk-in closets...

Airing our thousand-count, bloodstained linens for all to see!

Leaving us reeling that our trust could be so utterly betrayed by our closest confidant...

"*Noooooo!*" Truman wails. Señor Aeroméxico withdraws, mistaking the protest for him.

We can just hear the headlines— 'Capote Kills In Cold Blood. Rendering the Fancier Fish Guttled as the Sole Véronique at Le Côte Basque, scene of the crime. The Ladies Who Lunch— Eviscerated in Manhattan's Most Fashionable Eatery by their Best Friend!?'

"I didn't mean to... I didn't *mean*—"

Our best friend...

Aeroméxico has summoned the porters.

"Where did he come from?" asks the befuddled manager.

"He was dropped off, sir. In a big, black limousine."

Truman screeches again. The peacock's on the loose.

You— With whom we sipped Cristal and spilled our souls! Shared juicy gossip over bubbling pots of Soufflé Furstenberg, egg yolks oozing into milky custard as we dished the latest dirt... We confided, in tipsy tête-à-têtes, our most guarded, martini-soaked secrets, while you listened with the attention our Husbands failed to provide.

You ungrateful little dwarf! Low-level social climber—

“You’ve always made that mistake about me! I was an artist! Always an artist!”

Señor Manager is on the phone now, ringing car companies, calling for reinforcements. A well-heeled queue has formed at the counter. Most ignore the display, unwilling to acknowledge such theatrics in a public place, and one as glamorous as the *Airport*.

A child waiting in line, clutching her mother's hand, stares at Truman with fixed, frightened eyes. He looks to her, making a tearful appeal—

“Who did they think they *had*...? What did they think I *was*...?!?”

“Mama...” The girl retreats behind her mother's skirt.

Then, another voice, across the room...

“Mr. Capote...?”

The voice of an angel, floating towards him.

Truman looks to see the flash of a golden wing— an appendage wrapped in Cartier.

Just like that, Saint Vincent Angelotti is standing over him, offering the sacred object... Eight-hundred pages, wrapped in brown paper, carefully tied with string, which might as well be the Christ-child wrapped in swaddling clothes.

“I’m sorry, sir. I came as soon as I realized. You left this on the backseat.”

Truman Capote reaches out, recovering his destiny, clutching it to his concave chest.

“Ohhhhhhh *grazie*, Angel! *Grazie!*”

And suddenly he knows, definitively— regardless of the outcome— sometimes the wrong words are better than no words at all.

TWO

1975

Lady Slim Keith— formerly Mrs. Leland Hayward, formerly Mrs. Howard Hawks, formerly scrawny Nancy Gross of Salinas, California— is startled when the phone rings just before eight. She’s reading the morning papers in bed, her routine of late. It’s what divorcées do, she’s told herself— even reluctant divorcées, when forced to create new rituals. She’s always been an early bird, up with the sun, relishing the lazy hours before the rest of the world has risen to join her. Yet the unexpected ring alarms—

No one calls until ten. It just isn’t done.

Her mind races... The asylum? Has Billy pulled another prison break? If so, should she contact Leland, or should she wait...? He and horrid *Whore*-ed Pam have neglected Billy awfully. She herself has tried to intervene, but then, as we’ve reminded her, it isn’t her responsibility; he isn’t her son any longer, if a stepson ever was.

When the phone goes quiet, she feels the relief of reprieve. Probably just some rat in London who hasn’t had the decency to check the time.

Then— a fresh round of ringing punctures the stillness.

It *must* be Billy. Or Bridget? The Hayward brood gone haywire. It wouldn’t be the first time, and Slim doubted it would be the last. She feels a sharp stab of anxiety, the same she’d felt when the phone went at sunrise years ago, with grim news about Papa. Ernest had not been well. “I’m sick of it all, Miss Slimsky,” he’d said when she last left Havana, and he’d meant it. They’d been dove shooting one last time, she later confirmed, with the very gun he’d used to— —

Christ. Not Billy too...

Bracing herself for the worst, Slim reaches for the receiver. Before she can answer, Babe’s voice, strained— higher than its usual smooth, silvery perfection.

“Have you read it?”

Thank god— just Babe. The stretcher-cases are fine.

With a wash of relief, Slim reaches for the papers. “*Times* or *Post*?”

She'd already flipped through *Suzy* and Charlotte's gossip columns, scanned picayune slings and arrows hours before. The usual birdbrain socialites jostling for see-and-be-seen preeminence. Par for the course. No Paleys. No Haywards. Nothing to warrant an eight AM alarm.

"Truman's piece in *Esquire*," says Babe, in an un-Babe-like rush. "Have you read it...?"

"*Esquire*...? No."

"Well, get it right away. Read it and call me back." Click. Click? From the Queen of Manners? *Decidedly* un-Babe-like... What could possibly—?

Slim rings for her maid, hands her some change from the vanity drawer and sends her scampering down to the corner newsstand.

An hour later, Slim sits at her kitchen table nursing a bottle of scotch, the pages of *Esquire* spread open before her, confronting her fictional doppelgänger.

Lady Slim Keith, meet Lady Ina Coolbirth...

Both carefree, Californian broads, thrice divorced. Both damn good-looking, yet one of the boys. Sultry gals-next-door, whose laid-back cool make trousers and suede jackets and slip-on flats alluring. Both poster girls for the Man's-man's Ideal Woman. A woman who drinks deep and lives large, who fishes, rides and shoots big game. Who'll spin a helluva yarn once the cocktails start flowing... Trouble is, the booze and the spiel tend to flow together.

And there they all are. Our precious, protected secrets. Shared in hushed voices among members of our set, bandied like tennis balls at our most exclusive clubs. Court-side, pool-side small talk. Harmless enough. But guarded with hawklike vigilance from anyone *outside*.

We're all there. The whole goddamn cast. Some of us appearing under our real names—Babe and Betsey, Jackie and Lee— others under thinly veiled pseudonyms. All at our signature tables at La Côte Basque, unknowingly weathering the barbed insults of the fictional Lady Ina... *clearly* Slim, dishing the foulest dirt with a gigolo queen named 'Jonesy'... obviously Truman.

But it's not 'Jonesy' from whose lips the slander drips... It's *hers*.

Slim feels a cold chill run through her body... the arctic chill of panic.

Oh, Tru-heart. You little motherfucker. What have you done??!

That's before she reads the worst of it...

When she gets to the blood-stained sheets, she fumbles for the phone. Babe answers on the first ring.

“*Well?*”

“I feel like I just got punched in the gut.”

“Yes, but what did you *think*...?”

“Pure garbage. Bitchy, catty trash,” Slim says unequivocally. She tries to sound dismissive, but they both know this is bigger than that.

It’s a declaration of war.

“That story...” Babe pauses. “Do you think that it’s true?”

Slim holds her breath, knowing *exactly* which one Babe means...

The Sheets.

Slim can’t bear to tell her. With her cancer... with the treatments. We *all* know about Bill’s women. But with Babe looking death in the eye, to *mention* them seems exceptionally cruel.

“Truman’s a fantasist. I’ve always told you that.” *Cannot tell her... Can’t...*

“But there’s always some truth in what he says,” Babe persists. “Clearly ‘Ann Hopkins’ is Ann Woodward. The pretend intruder, the dead husband...”

“Okay, so that bit’s true. My god, to dredge that up...”

“What was he *thinking?*”

“Christ. I hope Ann’s okay...”

Slim doesn’t yet know, but Ann is *not* okay. Someone smuggled her an advanced copy of Truman’s article days ago. Needless to say, poor Ann Woodward was horrified by the prospect of having her long-buried demons revisited, sickened by the thought of being dragged through the mud, branded *Bigamist* and *Murderess* in blazing scarlet letters, all over again.

She’d always admitted to shooting her husband, mistaking him for a prowler. She’d certainly set up the idea, The Prowler being the Woodwards’ sole topic of conversation at the dinner they’d attended for the Duchess of Windsor the very night in question— Ann in particular having *banged* on about it (Truman’s sardonic pun.) They’d been worried about the break-ins in

their Oyster Bay hamlet. Had taken to sleeping with shotguns by the bed. What they failed to mention were the separate bedrooms, so broken was the marriage, hanging at that point by a thumbnail. Ann had heard an intruder and shot without looking. But there was something fishy in the position of her husband's naked body when police responded to Ann's frantic call.

Truman relished the salaciousness of it all, and had a new detail to share each time he told the tale around an enraptured luncheon table, as if he peeked into the Oyster Bay police files on a regular basis.

"She *says* she'd grabbed her shotgun and in the dark fired away, *Bang-Bang!*, emptying both barrels," Truman had recounted. "Then she turned the lights on and— oh, horror of horrors!— discovered Billy Woodward sprawled out in the hallway, nicely cooled. But that wasn't where the cops *found* him. Because that wasn't where he was killed, *quelle surprise...*"

When we'd asked Tru how he could be so sure, he retorted, with forensic zeal, tidbits that had been withheld from the press. "Honey, the police found the corpse inside a glassed-in shower. *Naked* for Chrissakes! The water was still running and the shower door was shattered with bullets. Now *you* tell *me...*? How did he die...?"

He'd then slurp a spoonful of soup, or drain a martini, satisfied.

The scandal had faded, to Tru's dismay, with Ann's acquittal, her mother-in-law Elsie having refused to press charges. She was a vestige of the Gilded Age of Astors and Vanderbilts, when one didn't taint the family name with shame, even if it meant setting a murderess free. Elsie Woodward believed one should only see one's name in print twice— once at one's birth and once at one's death.

For Truman, however, the more ink the better. For him a good story never died, and he's waited with the patience of Job to resurrect *this* gem. Truman's a great one for grudges and for almost two decades, Ann's been at the top of his hit-list.

"Look at Capote, that horrid little faggot," he'd told us Ann had sniped at a party in St. Moritz in the early Fifties. Other times he'd said he'd bumped into her on the packed El Morocco dance floor, stepped on her clodhopper toes in a frenzied, tipsy jitterbug.

"Watch it, *fag...*" she'd hissed.

"Watch *yourself*, Bang-Bang," he said he'd fired back.

Whichever version, however vicious or not, she'd gotten hers, on the knifepoint of his pen. She's the main attraction in his *Esquire* sideshow, the production simply dripping in Truman's malice. She's billed as 'Ann Hopkins', a flame-haired widow in a black Mainbocher suit and veil, sitting with a Gibson-swilling priest, who consoles her over the death of a husband called 'David'.

"Ann was a two-bit Showgirl— Call girl, more like," Lady Ina tells Jonesy in Truman's tale, sinking a spoon into her Soufflé Furstenberg. *"Desperate to grind her way out of the chorus, Ann found a 'patron' in David Hopkins Senior before moving on to Junior, who married her for her... talents. But when David found out that his Daddy'd beaten him to the punch, the marriage went south quick.*

"Well. David wanted out, without the hefty price tag, so he hired a crack P.I. to see who else's bones were hiding in Ann's closets. And before you could blink, he had enough evidence—including Polaroids of Ann being mounted front, back and sideways by a couple of jockeys in Saratoga—to warrant an arrest, not to mention a divorce! But in a twisted turn of fate, clever Private Dick had a stroke of inspiration—and a pity he did, because without it, David might still be alive. Dick poked around Ann's old homestead— some backwater in East Jesus Nowhere—and interviewed her toothless relatives, who had never known her in the highfalutin role of Mrs. David Hopkins..."

Lady Ina relishes this bit in particular —

"... but as Mrs. Joe-Bob Barnes, child bride of a hillbilly jarhead! Clever Dick dredged up a copy of the marriage certificate and tracked down said Joe-Bob Barnes, and convinced him to sign an affidavit saying he'd married one Ann Crumb, never divorced her, but simply returned from Okinawa to find she'd flown the coop, and that the last time he checked, she was still Mrs. Joe-Bob Barnes... her first rung on a mile-long ladder out of the inbred gutter. David confronted Ann with the evidence: 'Now we'll have no more of those six-figure ultimatums, since we're not legally married and never were.' He'd added, in a final blow, that that must make their two sons bastards, and all thanks to their gold-digging tramp of a mother. Surely it was then Ann decided to kill him— a decision made by her genes, by the irrevocable white-trash slut inside her..."

“But I never *met* Truman Capote, and he never met me!” Ann had insisted when she was told about the article. Whatever the truth, after reading Tru’s sordid *Esquire* tale, Ann marked the date of its release in her pocket diary. She had retreated to her Fifth Avenue prison and drawn the curtains, her maid Miss Reeve would later tell our maids. She’d asked Reeve to hold her hand and pray with her.

That night, in a blue-flowering nightgown, Ann fished a notepad from the bedside table, **DON’T FORGET...** printed in typeface as its heading. She scrawled ‘*Ann Woodward*’ beneath, and placed it beside her telephone. Instead of the mask of cold cream she usually slept in, Ann, still the showgirl of her youth, painted her face, applying pancake-base, rosy cheeks and gobs of green mascara, as if going on stage for a final, grotesque curtain call.

Then, grappling with the ghosts of her messy, guilt-wracked past, Ann Woodward went to bed, took a fatal dose of Seconal and never woke up. (The same drug that killed Lillie-Mae Nina Capote, we’ll later remind one another, gobsmacked by the irony.)

Punished for an insult spat eighteen years earlier, Ann is Truman’s first victim.



A pause from the other end of the line. Only Babe’s slightly-laboured breathing. Forty years of Chesterfields, finally taking their toll. When she speaks again, it’s careful...

“That story... The Sheets. Who do you think it is...?”

“Who knows. Could be anybody,” quips Slim, a little too quickly.

Another pause, soft wheezing, then, “I can’t figure out who the woman is, but I think I may know who the *man* might be...”

Slim downs her drink... Here we go. Land-mine territory.

Babe hesitates, then, cautiously, “Slim... Do you think it could be Bill...?”

Slim, with feigned certainty, “It’s fiction, Babe. Half-baked fiction at that. Don’t waste a minute more on it.” Changing the subject, “Where are we lunching...? Quo Vadis?”

“But he’s Jewish, ‘Sidney Dillon’...”

“So is half of Manhattan.”

On the line Babe calms her breath. “It can’t be. Truman wouldn’t do that... Not to *me*. Not to us.” The thought seems to mollify her.

At the St. Pierre, Slim pours another scotch. She wishes she could agree.

The warmth of the amber liquid sliding down her throat has started to thaw the chill. In fact, it’s heated her stunned spirit back to life. Her cheeks begin to flush, now burning with rage. He’ll pay, that sick little fuck. He’ll pay for selling our secrets like some cheap back-alley pimp. For putting *his* bile in *her* mouth...

“Like I’ve said— Truman’s out for Truman.”

“But you *love* Truman...”

“I love him. But I’ve never trusted him.”

Oh but Slim *had*. She hadn’t meant to, but Truman had a way of getting you talking. Getting you drinking and getting you gabbing. Slim racks her brain to separate fact from fiction.

Had she told Truman the rumor of Bill’s attempt to bed the Governor’s Wife while Babe was out of town, only to have the lady in question menstruate vats of blood onto the Paley’s marital sheets? When Babe had called and announced her early return, Bill, in a darkly slapstick turn, had stripped the bed in a panic and thrown the linens in the bath. The idea of the great Bill Paley, CBS mogul, at tub’s-edge on hands and knees scrubbing bodily fluid from fine Egyptian Cotton like an old Russian washerwoman had seemed amusing at the time, as long as it was kept from Babe. More amusing still was Bill’s alarm— after depleting two bars of Guerlain’s *Fleurs des Alpes* guest-soap— that the bedding might fail to dry in time. The lauded laundryman had stuffed the sheets into the oven, baking their restored pallor to a vanilla, linen crisp. Surely it was *Tru* who had told that tale to *Slim*— or had it been the other way around?

Oh god... ‘Lady Ina’ felt a pang of remorse for not remembering.

They had shared so much, the pair of them, having told each other tale after tale with competitive zeal, it all seemed to bleed together.

“If I had to choose between writing and talking,” Truman had more than once confessed, “I *reeeally* just don’t know which I would pick! I simply *love* to *talk*.”

And Jesus, had they talked. They'd talked through hundreds of lunches over twenty years. Over cognac Chicken Hash in the Oak Bar at the Plaza. Over The Colony's Lobster Thermidor and Boeuf à la mode. Past the cast iron lawn jockeys in their jewel-toned silks on the way into 21. Across smoggy tables at the Stork Club. At dinner parties, over quivering aspic. At galas, shunning banquet fare. In loungers, sipping Gimlets, on poolside terraces and shipboard poop decks. They'd talked in taxis stuck in traffic. On Vespas whizzing through Madrid. At thirty-thousand feet onboard transatlantic flights, smoking at the bar to pass the time. On freezing trains through barren Russian landscapes, clinging to each other for warmth.

It was after those surreal days in Moscow— after a vodka-drenched rail journey to Leningrad, sinking shot after shot, wrapped in multiple coats to stave off the ferocious cold, singing folk songs they'd been taught by the locals Truman had befriended, toasting “*Na zdorovye*” with each toss-back of succour, enjoying the feeling of crystal clear Mama-juice as it trickled like lava down their throats— that Truman suddenly cocked his head and stared at Slim.

“You never confide in me, Big Mama,” he'd mused, a twinge of hurt in his voice.

“Tru-heart, *please*. We talk all the time! I tell you *everything*.”

“Yes... But you never *confide* in me. About *you*.”

Slim had smiled, “No I don't, darling, you're right.”

“Why don't you confide in me?” he pressed, Stoli stripping defenses like paint-thinner.

“Well, Truman,” Slim slurred, too rat-assed to pretend, “It's very simple. I don't trust you.”

Papa had always told her, “Miss Slimsky, you have a first rate, bona fide bullshit detector,” and Slim had detected early on that Truman was a master of the art. She'd in short order spotted what most of us denied: If Truman could run around blabbing to each of us about the others— *in the strictest confidence, sugar!*— it was pretty damn certain he was liable to be blabbing to everyone else about us, in an endless round-robin of chat.

Gossip *was* art to Truman, a legitimate medium in which he worked with prowess. In fact, he failed to see any difference in the two. We were his creations, whether rendered by mouth or pen, the Miss Golightlys no less real than the Mrs. Paleys or Guinnesses or Keiths— the Mrs. Keiths and Guinnesses and Paleys no more. The details of our lives supplied base metal

for his tales, which through some strange alchemy he turned to shimmering, narrative gold, spanning themes and genres. We'd see shades of ourselves in his work; nothing you could pinpoint—we wouldn't stand for that. It was our *essence* that peopled his text. We floated in and out in different guises... Babe drifted through his tarnished fairy tales. Gloria's covert past stalked his thrillers. Marella's foreign cadence metered his librettos. Lee's long-stifled envy simmered beneath his rivalries. The bridles and florals of CZ's sporting life pervaded his pastorals. Slim spawned heroines in stark Western Gothics: Steinbeck-tinged seediness meets Little Girl Lost.

“Big Mama had a brother who looked *exactly* like me. Same tow-hair, same cherubic face. The spitting, *spitting* image. Edward was his name (after their Daddy—a big-fish who owned half the sardine canneries in Cannery Row—) but folks only ever called Ed Junior ‘Buddy’—the very name my old Cousin Sook called me as a boy... *Buddy*.” We had each, on more than one occasion, listened as Truman spun the trauma of Slim's childhood into mythos, as he had for each of us in turn. “He was mummified, you know—actually *mummified*, like those sad souls in Pompeii. Poor little Buddy. Saddest thing. That tiny boy, in an old man's nightshirt, one he would never grow into. Flames lapping him up like a thousand serpents' tongues. Slim tried to save him—her name was Nancy then, and Nancy was a very brave girl and she adored her baby brother. They shared a secret language, just like Slim and *I* do.”

Here he'd pause, wistful, sometimes removing his glasses for effect.

“I've always felt *quite* close to Slim—eerily so. From the moment we first met, in Mrs. Vreeland's living room, shrouded in fabrics. A *melée* of design! She'd told Billy Baldwin she wanted ‘A Garden in Hell’ and *lawdy* did she get it! An Armageddon of patterns—peonies and Ikat and wayward climbing vines, in a room so *red* you could hear the walls sizzle. Mrs. V always said that red is the great clarifier—cleansing, *revealing*. Well, I plopped down beside Slim on that crimson-clear sofa, and through the vortex of throw-pillows I said to her, ‘Honey, I just *know* we've met before—another lifetime ago.’ I *recognized* her, see...? It was like finding a scrap of my own mislaid self. We're old souls, Slim and me—we've been around the block a few times. Why for all we know, I could be Buddy reincarnate!” (Most of us thought this last bit was asinine, and told him so—but we *nearly* saw his point about the rest.)

Whether Slim was born an old soul or was forced to become one remains uncertain, but she had ripened and toughened beyond her years, in a season of uncalculated heat. Grief had robbed her of a childhood, her youth incinerated alongside Buddy, when she was still little Nancy in Salinas. She'd been reborn as *we* know her in Death Valley, where she was sent to cure her spotted lung, a scrawny kid of seventeen. An ironic place to start a life, but start one she did, when Bill Powell plucked her from a motel in Mojave and christened her 'Slim Princess', the 'Slim' sticking long after the 'Princess' had been dropped. He'd been the first of dozens of men who'd looked after her, making up for a father who was something worse than absent. A father who was deeply damaged. But who in the Gross family wasn't? You don't survive something like that without scarring, which each of them bore, as if theirs had been the charred and blackened flesh instead of Buddy's, once plump and soft as a piglet's underbelly.

Even now, decades later, Slim has told us she *still* wakes in an icy sweat, having felt in her nightmares the blast of heat from the open grate. She comes to, rolling in bed, trying desperately to smother the flames that had licked the edge of Buddy's nightshirt. Flames that traveled as if through wild brush through the cotton fibres, consuming her brother in flames.

When the surviving Grosses later stood at the cemetery watching his body being entombed in the mausoleum her father had bitterly purchased, Nancy had noticed that there were only plaques enough for four of their five. On an unseasonably cold day for the California valley, she wondered which of them her father had blamed for Buddy's death and denied a place in the family plot, in some sick game of permanent musical chairs. She had decided in short order that *that* was the last place in the world she wanted to end up, and quietly resolved to bequeath her spot to whomever had been slighted.

The men she had chosen from that day on were, each in his own way, the fathers she'd been denied. Her string of husbands, revolving-door of lovers— there was something of the patriarch in each. "Big Mama's on the hunt for a Big Daddy, because her real one was so absent," Truman noted. "With his fish-stenched fingers and his tight German lips... You know she never once saw him smile? He only cared for Buddy and when *he* went, so did Poppa Gross. You never get over being left like that," This was the cue to replace his glasses, with a practiced shift in tone. "I *know* this, you see, because *I* had absent parents too."

They'd been chasing them since. A head-shrinker's field day, the pair of them. Filthy ole Freud's wet dream— Slim searching for Daddy, and Truman for Mommy, he desperate to recast Nina with a swanlike being, one who would love him with unwavering devotion. He had us now, en masse. And Slim realized, in Russia more than ever, just how desperately Truman needed the love that Nina had denied him.

It was after an even longer journey to Copenhagen, after they'd checked into the Angletterre Hotel and basked in the rediscovered luxury of creature comforts, that Slim saw Truman shed his armor— slip out of his crusted shell, a flaccid, slug-like creature. And it was in that moment that she understood him. Or *thought* that she did...

They'd had an idyllic day out, devoured an absurdly indulgent lunch of pickled herring and schnapps, followed by a heaving platter of *Smørrebrød*, though they concurred that *anything* would have seemed indulgent after weeks of freezing borsht. Even what Truman pointed out were, let's face it, little more than open-faced sandwiches with fancy Danish names. They'd determined the finest of these was fittingly called *Stjernesked*— The Shooting Star. Slim had giggled as Truman wrestled his slice of buttered rye, piled high with mounds of shrimp and egg — with battered plaice, white fish and salmon-rolled asparagus, with cucumber and caviar and lemon-rind sliced thin, an endless series of layers, all tumbling from his grasp. Tru couldn't resist but quip to the uncooperative morsel, "Oh Stars-kie, you sneaky little bastard! Where *we* come from you're nothin' but a sandwich who's missing his hat!"

Afterwards, waiting for the bill, Tru had pulled a little pot of gloss from his pocket and dabbed some on Slim's bow-shaped lips.

"You just *gotta* have some of this, Big Mama. Smack it around, like so," he demonstrated with his near-lipless horizontal line of outer mouth.

"What is it?"

"It's called The Ooey-Gooley, honey. It makes you more kissable."

"And do *you* use it?"

Truman stared with mock offense, "Well of *course* I do! Can't you *tell*?"

On their way back to the Angleterre, Slim stopped to photograph a group of local children tossing coins into a fountain. When she turned around, Truman was gone. She popped her head into a row of shops, checking them one by one. No Tru. She continued on to the hotel when he suddenly appeared at her side once more. He slipped a wrapped box into her coat pocket.

“That’s for you, Big Mama. That’s because I want you to have things as pretty as you are.”

Slim opened the box to find an exquisite antique ring: brilliant canary gemstones, linked in a delicate band. Truman had disappeared into a shop as she walked, and managed to find a gift more suited to her tastes than her husbands and lovers combined. He could, when he chose to, be the most thoughtful creature alive. He *knew* us, Truman. Knew what would flatter our sylphlike figures, what would complement our unique features and coloring. (‘Oh honey, don’t wear *that* dress— brunettes should never wear yellow! Now *this* one turns your eyes to sapphires!’) He anticipated our individual tastes and preferences. (‘My stars, but that Gauguin is glorious!’ ‘Wherever do you find such teensy tiny beets?’ ... ‘Here, Baby— I’ll take your onions— I know how much you loathe them.’) He memorized our shared ones. Whether a drink or meal, a gown or a song. A painting, paramour or credenza. He knew what we wanted before we knew ourselves. This was one of the myriad reasons that we loved him. And Slim, despite her cynicism, was not immune. In fact, it was she who first spotted the truth: Whether it was she or Babe. Marella or Gloria. C.Z., Lee or beyond...

Truman loved more than just the way we looked, or how we lived. He loved that each of us had *stories* to tell— just like he did.

Each evening on their travels they had shared a nightcap, and Truman had walked Slim to her room, kissed her goodnight and retired to his own. Their last evening in Denmark they repeated the ritual, only this time Truman stopped at her door.

“I’m gonna come tuck my Big Mama in, that’s how much I love her,” Truman insisted in an oddly hushed voice.

Slim unlocked the door and Truman followed her into the suite. He sat on the edge of the bed, watching as she undressed, studying her long body with wide eyes. She walked naked to the bathroom, as she would in front of Kitty. Easy, devoid of self-consciousness. She returned wearing a thin, silk dressing gown.

“You just do what you usually do, then I’ll put you to bed,” he almost crooned.

Slim settled in at the vanity, proceeding step by step through her nightly beauty ritual. Truman watched with rapt attention as she removed her makeup, as if witnessing the dance of the seven veils as Slim shed each cosmetic layer with tantalizing promise, until her bare flesh was revealed. He studied her face in its natural state, the earliest traces of sunburst lines forming around her eyes.

“Beautiful,” he exhaled. The sunburst rays spread as she smiled at him in the mirror, as Lillie Mae once had while he chewed sugared beignets, another lifetime ago.

He watched, enraptured, as she slathered a layer of cream onto her skin. She loosened her hair around her shoulders— a seasoned blonde, darker than it once had been, the color of winter wheat. With soft boar bristles she brushed each side, exactly fifty strokes.

Finally Slim rose, walked to the bed and removed her dressing gown. And like a tender lover, childlike father, or both combined, Truman lifted the covers for her. She slipped inside, and he gently tucked the soft blankets around her.

“I’m doing this, Big Mama, because I love you. I love you very much,” his eyes met hers, welling with sincerity.

“I love you too, Truman.”

“No, you don’t,” he frowned, turning from her.

“Of course I do,” she insisted, reaching her arm out to touch his rounded back.

“*No— you DON’T!!*” He jerked away. Slim sat up, startled. She turned him to face her, his visage flushed the color of rotting cherries. Teeth clenched, tears streaming down his hot, puffy cheeks.

“Truman, whatever’s wrong?”

“*No* one loves me.”

“That’s not true. *I* do. And Babe. And Jack—”

“You *don't*. None of you. Well— *maybe* Jack...” he allowed. “Because Jack sees me for exactly who I am.”

Slim reached for his arm and he snapped, like a feral animal, caught in a cage, frightened of contact. Protecting the one thing he had... knowledge.

“You don't think I *know*? You don't think I know what I look like? What I sound like? You don't think I see people cringe when they meet me? Or wince when I speak?” He rubbed his eyes. “I'm a freak. I'm a monstrous little freak and everybody thinks it.”

Slim started to protest, but he cut her short.

“Oh sure, people get used to me. People can adjust. But every time they see or hear me, it starts all over, the *adjustment*— to get past the freak-show to all that's trapped inside. Be honest, Big Mama. Don't pretend you don't know what I mean.”

Slim sat quietly. As much as she hated to admit it, she *did* know what he meant. She'd watched it happen, again and again— we all had— watched a room forced to acclimate to his mannerisms. She'd felt it herself— not once, but the tiniest bit every time she saw him, before she slipped into his delicious Trumanisms once more.

She *did* know, and he knew that she understood. He hung his weighty head, hiccupping silent, choking sobs.

“I'm unlovable. No one could ever love me the way I want to be loved.”

With a surge of warmth, Slim wrapped her arms around him and held on tight, trying to smother the flames of Truman's misery, as she'd once attempted to smother the flames lapping at Buddy's nightshirt.



To be fair, Truman had warned her about his *Esquire* bombshell weeks ago at the Russian Tea Room, where they like to wax nostalgic over their Moscow venture. They laugh at the notion of the stark Soviet haunts they'd braved bearing any resemblance to the jade jewel-box dining room, gold leaf phoenix reliefs swooping down on chattering Manhattanites.

Slim looked doubly radiant in that space, bathed in the warm light reflected off its twenty-three carat ceiling— light that even gave Truman an oddly flattering, if slightly jaundiced glow.

“You’re in it, Big Mama,” he’d smiled as they snuggled close in a circular banquette, sipping blood-red pickled-beet borsht and a round of Black Russians, chased by a round of White. “Hold onto your hat...!” Slim had not thought about it since. She’d expected a cameo— not the leading goddamn role!

Well. He wouldn’t charm his way out of *this* mess, the snake.

Slim had a sudden flash of the pair of taxidermy cobras in Truman’s United Nations Plaza apartment. They’d found them together in an antique shop in Madrid, thought they were kooky and fun. Truman loved it when startled visitors encountered the serpents for the first time— their scaly bodies stuffed upright, raised at the point of attack; mouths agape, sharp little fangs poised to sink into unsuspecting flesh. He’d laughed and laughed like Br’er Rabbit in his Briar Patch when each of us jumped at the lifelike-reptiles... *Oh it was war, all right.*

Slim hears the click of Babe’s Ronson on the line, and imagines her bringing the next in a string of Chesterfields to her lips, nails buffed to perfection. Babe had them painted in a glossy oxblood lacquer, carefully maintained twice weekly at Kenneth’s, as with enough wear and tear, they, like anything, might chip and fray and eventually be broken.

We can each picture Babe, fingering a stray lock of hair as she tends to when she’s nervous— the bit tinged with premature silver, usually hidden in her neat chignon.

“Slim. Tell me honestly. As my friend. If you know, tell me... Is it Bill...?”

Slim takes care her answer comes neither too quickly, nor too slow—

“It isn’t Bill.”

She downs her third scotch and tells her first lie of the morning.

It’s not yet ten A.M.



Looking back, Marella had seen the storm brewing.

That's why she'd stopped speaking to him months before.

European Swan Numero Uno— as Truman long ago christened her— is fortunate that Manhattan is not her natural habitat. She visits of course, but what better excuse than being isolated on a yacht in the middle of an ocean to escape the lunch requests Truman continues to bombard us with. (Invitations that, post-*Esquire*, largely go unanswered.)

It happened on board the *Agnetta* in the last days of August, as they sunbathed on the polished deck, sipping iced Prosecco and nibbling plates of antipasti.

“Uno, you simply must read my latest chapter,” he had brought a stack of pages from his cabin.

She'd been excited, Marella. Long before she'd met Truman she had read his work and thought him a genius. She was his fan before she was his friend, having devoured translations of *Breakfast...* and *Other Voices...* before he'd infiltrated her sphere. As he'd done with each of us, he'd read her excerpts of *In Cold Blood* before its release, and she'd listened, moved to tears by the beauty of his prose.

“Bellissimo, Truman. Siete Michelangelo,” she'd said, believing him a modern master of his craft. Reading a sliver of his long-awaited *Answered Prayers* would be a thrill for any of us, but Marella took the charge as seriously as a Medici glimpsing the Pietà in progress. She started the chapter, which was set neither in the gothic South of his childhood, nor the barren plains of Kansas, but amidst the cramped tables at La Côte Basque. After the first ten pages, Marella began to question her abilities as a reader. English was not her first language. Perhaps she'd misunderstood...? Someone called ‘Lady Ina’ seemed to be spitting insults at everyone in sight, people that we knew. Marella had to wonder, was she missing something...? It sounded like one of Truman's catty gossip sessions. Worse, in fact. (We've all noticed that Truman is on slightly better behavior around Marella. Call it the Princess Factor.)

Reclining on her stomach on a lounge, the graceful slope of her exposed back absorbing the midday heat, Marella struggled through the text, feeling like a remedial schoolgirl, straining to grasp the nuances of a foreign tongue. Even so... surely this wasn't literature? She turned to the author, who sat gnawing at a ribbon of Prosciutto, flipping through a paperback potboiler.

“Truman, stai scherzando...?”

“What’s that, Uno?”

She joined him at the table. “Is this a jest? Where is your novel...?”

His thin grin spread as he popped an olive into his mouth. “You’re looking at it.”

Marella frowned. “Well, perhaps my English isn’t good enough...”

“Oh yes, of course sugar... It’s molto colloquial. Here,” He wiped his greasy fingers on the tablecloth, extending an eager palm. “Let me read it to you.”

He snatched the pages from Marella’s lap. Cleared his throat.

And in the high, melodic voice the princess had come to love, almost as much as his old cousin Sook in Monroeville had, Truman began:

“*Bill— oops! I mean Dill...*” he gave Marella a conspicuous wink, “... *couldn’t come. He felt as if he was churning in a receptacle of sour buttermilk inside the Governor’s Wife, the whole ambiance so sloshy, he couldn’t get a decent grip. She assisting with all the enthusiasm of a clubbed seal, he thought perhaps if he went down on her... but the moment he began she hauled him up by his hair: ‘NO, for god’s sake, don’t do THAT!’ Dill raised the white flag as his member flagged. He rolled over and said, ‘Well I don’t suppose you’d blow me...? Or just jack me off and we’ll call it scratch...?’*”

By the time the stewards arrived with lunch, Truman had moved on to the moment in his narrative when the Governor’s Wife rose to dress, leaving as a parting favour, he gleefully reported, ‘a blood spot the size of Brazil.’

“Ohhhhhh how perfect is that...” Truman enthused as cloche lids were lifted to reveal steaming plates of Spaghetti Puttanesca, “Whore’s Pasta!”

Marella had long lost her appetite.

“Isn’t it a scream...?” he laughed, digging into the pungent tomato sauce. “You see Dill only wants that blueblood bull-dyke to prove that he can have her. Because they’d kept the Yids out of their fundraisers and their country clubs... Ironic, given that he’s just about the only Atheist Jew in Manhattan!”

She had watched him, Marella told us, repulsed, when he’d asked her between greedy mouthfuls, “So Uno... What do you think of my ditty...?”

“I think it’s vile, Truman. Pettegolezzo.”

That had straightened his spine. The Great Author had bristled at the unfamiliar sting of criticism. Marella said it was as if something snapped, and the lapdog bared his Rottweiler teeth. That he’d turned in an instant from toy-pup to butchers’ dog, bred to pull meat to the market.

“Well you wouldn’t really know, would you? You can’t even speak the fucking language.”

“I’ve read what you’ve written before, and this is beneath you.”

“What the hell do you know. You’re just a paid-for princess. Principessa Puttana,” he laughed. “I’m gonna do to America what Proust did to France. It’s utterly brilliant— it’s bold and it’s brave. You wouldn’t know brilliance if it hit you in the faccia.”

Marella felt dizzy. She looked to her plate to avoid his grimace.

Why had she never noticed his teeth before, how the gums receded, how the incisors tapered to sharp little points? She placed her napkin over her untouched Puttanesca, covering the pool of tomato sauce, its Kalamata eyeballs staring up at her. Truman’s manuscript pages fluttered in the breeze beneath her butter knife.

“What don’t you like about it?” he demanded. “Be *specific*.”

She’d reached for a page, reading slowly in her thick Italian accent, “*Why would an educated, very rich, well-hung Jew go bonkers for a cree— cretinous Protestant size forty-two who wears low-heeled shoes and lav— lavender water?*”

“Lav— lahhhhvvv— lav-ander wa-ter...” Truman mocked her accent.

Marella pressed on, ignoring him.

“Especially when he was married to Cleo Dillon— to my mind the most beautiful creature alive....” She lowered the page and looked at Truman pointedly.

“What do you think Babe will have to say...?”

Truman met her gaze, then looked away, leaving the question hovering in the air.

“This is gossip. It’s nasty, vicious talk. Truman... please don’t do this.”

For a moment his eyes glazed, then began to water. A salty sea-breeze made him blink, its breath chilling the single tear that escaped down his cheek.

“Babe’s not Babe when I’m writing.” He’d rubbed his eyes roughly, reaching for the bottle of Prosecco. “She’ll understand.”

Marella had leant across the table and grasped his arm, trying to make him see.

“Truman... I don’t think that she will.”

He ingested this before freeing himself and depleting his glass. “Yeah, well what do you know. Non capisci un cazzo— You’re thick as a fucking plank.”

Truman rose, collecting his manuscript, tucking it carefully under his beach-towel. He looked to Gianni, swimming in the waters around the anchored yacht, his skin brown as a butternut. The bronzed skin of privilege.

“Miele, Gianni’s so rich he buys a new boat each time his old one gets wet!” Truman, in better spirits, loved to tease.

Heir to the vast Fiat fortune, Gianni lost no time, it seemed, test-driving hundreds of the flashy fuckers, chauffeuring around half the female population of Europe (present company included) before he was forced to settle down and marry. Scion of an Italian industrialist father and Umbrian princess mother— the latter of whom Marella seemed a slightly faded carbon copy — Gianni had complied. But not without a fight. He preferred more oomph in his inamoratas, the famed Pam Churchill having tooted his horn with Satchmo-gusto for the better part of a decade. Her enthusiasm legendary, she’d worked her way through the brass of the fraternities of worldly men, and while each appreciated her performance, nobody married Pam Churchill. Gianni had wanted to— had honestly planned to make her his bride. Ever one to seal the deal, Pam had converted to the Catholic faith; had enrolled in a crash course at Berlitz and taught herself Italian. (None of us could accuse her of being anything short of a go-getter...)

“For-fuckssakes, she even learned to roll his Madre’s meatballs!” Truman had, on good authority, exclaimed.

That was until Gianni’s Famiglia threatened to fling themselves off some picturesque Umbrian bridge if he considered such a scheme. When he’d driven his new ’53 Fiat Otto Vu smack into a lorry (after a red-hot fight with Pam, it must be said, over his other playthings), he was finally slowed by broken bones, confined to bedrest. His sisters had insured that Pam was barred from visitation, while Marella was driven past her, waiting at the hospital gates.

The domineering sorelle closed ranks, had determined that the princess-next-door be given preeminence, as if arranging a marriage of Borgian proportions.

“You can see why, can’t you? Marella even looks pricy. If she and Babe were in the window at Tiffany’s,” Truman analyzed, “Babe may be more elegant, but Marella would be more *expensive*.”

Indeed, with her aquiline profile, neck that went on for days and pedigree to match, Princess Marella Caracciolo di Castagneto proved a more appropriate matrimonial option than the fast women who’d warmed the seats of Gianni’s even faster cars.

It must be noted that Truman has never cared for speed. He’s actually appallingly lazy when it comes to most things, writing, lunching and gabbing being rare exceptions to his adage that time should stroll rather than sprint. We’d long known his views on hurried pursuits—ditto athletics, outdoorsy-ness and exertion in general. On sightseeing: ‘Seen one ruin, seen ‘em all.’ On rushing: ‘Haste makes waste.’ On running: ‘I only run when chased.’

The lethargy of his Southern childhood still lingered in his blood, flowing as slow through his veins as tar through a gully. He’d never be as quick as the playboy with his streamlined strokes, cutting through the ocean below, nor as slick...

Except in words. That’s where Tru’s quickness triple-lapped others, his verbal velocity outpacing Gianni’s breaststrokes and race cars and speedboats combined. As ever, Truman took comfort in his words, which never failed to restore his wounded pride. Armour and weapon.

Armour and weapon...

As he turned to retreat to his cabin, Truman allowed himself a parting jab. He’d leaned in close and whispered in Marella’s ear—

“By the way... The Governor’s Wife...? Gianni fucked her too.”

And brushing her earlobe with his Prosecco-chilled lips, Truman was gone.

THREE

1932— —?

The boy is eight, maybe nine, we're told.

It's a sweltering day in Monroeville, the kind of day when lizards sizzle on the pavement, the kind that sears the tender pads of doggies' paws.

He reclines on the porch planks, listless, watching an ice cube melt atop the griddle of his chest, translucent dribble rolling between his bony ribs.

It's the kind of day when the heat seeps into your brain and sets it on fire. When you just have to stir something up or go out of your pent up, heat-stroked skull.

He wills himself from the shade and his toy limbs follow, buttoning his shirt, trotting next door to Nelle's house. He knocks on the frame of the mosquito-proof screen, waiting for his friend.

Mr. Lee answers in his hybrid-cotton suit, a loose weave that, in theory, would allow breeze to blow through, should the breeze ever choose to cooperate.

"Well hey there, Truman," he says in his molasses baritone. A lawyer's voice, trained to appeal to twelve good men and true— to the whole dang town to be honest. He's the classiest act the boy has met, a beacon of what he thinks of as 'justice' when it's preached by folks who wouldn't know it if it smacked them in the kisser. Teachers and preachers, each dumber than a bucket of hair.

"Hiya, Mr. Lee. Might Nellie be available to play?" he bows with formality, a midget suitor, pushing the fringe from his sweat-soaked forehead.

"Nelle, honey— Truman!" Mr. Lee calls, setting his scuffed briefcase by the door. He reaches for a hair-comb and straw hat, turning to the kitchen mirror as the boy moves to the porch swing, the latter wondering what it might feel like to wait there for a sweetheart. He swings back and forth, his feet dangling, enjoying the creak of the metal chains, calling to mind the uneven croaks of bullfrogs at the swimming hole.

Through an open window he can hear a voice inside the house, buzzing like a gadfly, presumably on the telephone, hardly pausing to land on one topic before irritatingly buzzing ‘round to the next.

“... And I just told her to pack her things and get! But would she listen? No! With a man like that, poking every stuffing from here to Mobile, and all before the wedding cake was in the ice-box? Well, who could *blame* Itty for running off with Scrub Mangram? But all the way to ‘Nawlins—? She *did* though— Esther Reaben *saw* them check in! I swear it on a stack of Bibles! At the Pontchartrain Hotel on St. Charles. I *tell* you, Esther *saw* them at the Bayou Bar, clear as crystal! Well, Itty best watch out or she’ll end up like this one next *door*— knocked up without two pennies to rub together, before she’s old enough to order a cocktail. Dumping her brat with that bunch of spinsters... Mark my words— that boy’ll turn out just like his con-man Daddy, if you can call *him* a man, or call *that* a boy—”

“Nelllllllll—eeeeeeee,” the boy screeches in his highest, most-affected wail.

He wants the voice on the phone to know. He’s *heard* her.

He’s *listening*. Always listening...

“Listening and lurking,” he’s heard her say about him, that busybody. Old Mrs. Busybody Lee! How could someone as decent as Mr. Lee have chosen such a witch? How could that biddy have spawned his precious Nellie, speak of the devil—

The coltish form that bolts onto the porch is as far a cry from sweetheart as the boy is from beau. The masculine to his feminine, with her bowl-cut bob, rolled blue jeans and Keds that she can run in. She can climb a tree faster than him, but she *can’t* hang from the monkey-bars for hours, or stun the toughest boys with an endless series of cartwheels without getting dizzy. He’d told that gang at the swimming hole who’d laughed at his bathing costume, “My Daddy had me take lessons from Jack Dempsey. I could knock your lights out, but I won’t.” So convincing were his words, the bullies stood stock still, their sorry feet rooted to the ground, silenced as the boy cartwheeled triumphantly away. Nelle had followed, a few paces behind, but the boy knew she had his back, if push came to shove. Together they could outsmart the whole damn bunch. She’s his one true friend and he hers.

She joins him on the swing, each appreciating the harmony of creaking back-and-forth together, swinging higher and higher....

Then, from an upstairs window, the fly-buzz amps to a buzz-saw wail, “*Nelle...?* Don’t you *dare* leave this house with that little nancy!” Old Mrs. Busybody.

Mr. Lee flashes a wary grin on his way out, “Y’all best be off before you get caught!”

He stops the swing and gives the colt-girl a quick nuzzle before hurrying to trade the wrath of the Missus for the sanctity of his office.

Nelle and the boy exchange a glance and leap from the swing in unison, running from the porch with the speed of a hurricane. Not a minute too soon, as the figure— absurdly plump for an insect— is in the doorway, her buzzing having escalated to the baying of a hound-dog—

“Nelle Harper *Lee!* You come back here this *minute!* You’ve got a ballet lesson at two-thirty!”

But they’re off, making their getaway into the fields. Onto dirt roads outside town. Into tree houses and under porches, listening to unsuspecting voices they both will later repeat to one another, still later rehash in their prose. Sometimes the boy has Nelle take dictation, weaving tidbits into stories as he orates. Sometimes he types them on his own, on an old Remington with keys that stick, that he’d found in his cousins’ attic.

As he furiously types that very night— the open window scant comfort in the sticky stillness— he relishes his revenge on Old Mrs. Busybody.

She’d get hers. He’d teach her to talk that way about— —

The boy is nine or ten, he tells us— *certainly* no older. It’s a sweltering day in Monroeville. Lizards sizzle on the pavement. Dogs scorch the pads of their paws.

He and Nelle wander along the train tracks, balancing on the rails, wondering how long it would take for the conductor to spot a body, were one tied to the tracks, and whether or not the brakes could stop in time to avoid hitting it. In an old abandoned depot at the fork in the road, they spy two derelicts. Local men, “once nice family types”, the preachers caution, “until they got hooked on the hooch.”

One looks to be asleep, a Stetson over his face— or maybe he’s a body, dragged in off the tracks. The other, a shirtless figure, Skin and Bones, swigs from a bottle of Wild Turkey as he gives the reclining feller an earful, who, if he wasn’t dead already, might *wish* that he was after all that talk.

The boy puts a finger to the place his lips should be, signaling Nelle to follow him around the back of the ramshackle structure. They lie in the tall grass, so hot it laps like flames at their sockless ankles. Eavesdropping...

“Goddamn preachers’ll tell you otherwise, but there ain’t nothin’ wrong with Faffy Bixter’s roadside cathouse, sure as I live and breathe,” Skin and Bones assures his passed-out friend. “Them’s just honest gals, makin’ an honest wage...” He takes another gulp, swilling the liquor through the gaps in his teeth. “I’d haul these ole bones right on over there this minute, if I hadn’t done lost the only quarter I had on the chicken fights... I could’a just fried that no-good losing cockerel in a pan and gobbled him up myself— *still* madder than a wet hen!”

He downs another mouthful of Turkey, directing a resentful gobble at the label.

The boy and Nelle suppress giggles as they listen to Skin and Bones’ bourbon-drenched diatribe, when— —

The boy is ten, but only just. He knows this because he just had a birthday the week before.

He was given as presents an eggshell herringbone suit (mailed in a box from his Mama), a slingshot (from Nelle) and a typewriter ribbon (from Mr. Lee).

He had wanted a dog, and his Daddy had promised him... He’ll bring one the next time he comes to visit.

Because it’s September, just one day shy of the start of October, the boy is certain that the trees are losing their leaves.

He plays hooky twice a week these days, about as often as he can get away with without being sent to a home for wayward boys. He gets himself a stack of books from the library, waits until the grown-up Faulks have left for work, when it’s only him and cousin Sook left in the big drafty house. Sweet Sook— somewhere between sixteen and sixty, who people think as slow and odd as the boy himself. She brings him cups of hot chocolate as he lies in bed, propped up

by pillows, escaping the dull grey town, reading his way through the great stories of the world, sharing his tiny room with the likes of Huck Finn and Oliver Twist, boys who have nobody, like himself, who live large, in primary colours splattered onto vast canvases.

Sook also brings the boy the morning paper, he being the only soul in the house full of aging cousins who has a lick of interest. He reads the obituaries out loud to her. She likes to hear about the people who have gone, and all the folks who'll carry on without them.

As Sook settles into her rocking chair and the boy flips through the newspaper, his eyes flick across the children's Sunshine Page on his way back to the Obits. He usually skips this—it's kids-stuff after all. But his focus is drawn by a photo of a Beagle puppy, the word CONTEST printed above.

Folding the page carefully to the section in question, the boy reads aloud to Sook's gentle rocking, the old chair squeaking on her down-tilts. She smiles and nods, mending a pair of long johns, the Sunshine Page pleasing her every bit as much as the Obits. It's the boy's high, melodic voice that she loves.

“The *Mobile Press Register* seeks short stories by children under the age of twelve. Any subject. Five hundred words. First prize, publication and... a *Beagle PUPPY!*” The boy has wanted a dog badly, his Daddy having thus far failed to deliver on his promise.

He's just finished reading *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*—at *ten*, he later loves to boast—and strangely enough, it felt... familiar. He's read it's what's called a *roman à clef*—which to him just seems to be a fancy French word for spreading rumours. He figures he could try his hand, southern gothic style. While there isn't much in Monroeville, there *is* gossip. It peppers every porch chat from here to Mobile. And who better than the town muckrakers to mine for narrative gold—serving up Mrs. Lee's and Skin and Bones' scuttlebutt as fiction, just like old Marcel had done? He's already written up Mrs. Lee's slew of lies. It'll serve her right for talking out-of-school.

Within the afternoon the boy has carefully typed a copy of what he now calls *Mrs. Busybody* on clean white paper, has sealed it in a brown manila envelope and hand-delivered it to Miss Bee McGhee at the post office.

“It’s very important that this not get lost in the shuffle,” he’s gravely instructed her, paying an extra nickel for First Class.

Each afternoon the boy runs home to check the post box. Day after day, he loyally reads the Sunshine Page and fishes through bills and envelopes in the mail, searching for his name. When an official-looking letter arrives, he holds it in his pocket for a day and a half before he can bring himself to tear it open.

“Mr. Truman Streckfus Persons, we are pleased to inform you...”

Pleased?!! The boy can hardly contain his joy. He’s never won a cotton-picking thing, has never been told by anyone but Sook that he’s good at anything (she having told him he was excellent at flying home-made kites.) He cartwheels across the lawn to Nelle’s house, shouting his triumph loud enough for Mrs. Lee to hear him.

His joy will be short-lived. As he tells it, his story was to be published in three installments in the *Mobile Press Register*, under his very own name, which the newspaper men call his *byline*.

The boy and Nelle wait on the Sunday for the paper to be tossed over the crumbling fence at the Faulk house. The minute it lands, thrown unceremoniously by a sluggish boy on a red bike peddling *far* too slow for their taste, the pair races up to the boy’s room to enjoy his tale, printed there in black and white for all the world to see.

He feels for the first time a rush of something like power.

That same moment, Mr. and Mrs. Lee are sitting down to plates of bacon, grits and eggs, reading their own Sunday *Register*. Mr. Lee sees it first, (the Lee’s cook, Val, will later report—) and begins to laugh in his hearty, good natured way.

“Well I’ll be damned. Little Truman’s gone and got himself published.” He folds his newspaper to the Sunshine Page, clears his throat and starts to read out loud:

“Mrs. Busybody— by Truman Streckfus Persons. Mrs. Busybody buzzed like a gadfly on the telephone, hardly pausing to land on one topic before irritatingly buzzing ‘round to the next... ‘Well, Itty best watch out ...’ her fly-buzz amped to a buzz-saw wail, ‘... or she’ll end up like this one next door— knocked up without two pennies to rub together, before she’s old enough to order a cocktail!’”

Mrs. Lee has, by the third sentence, at least had sense enough to recognize herself, and marches right on over to the Faulk house to tell the boy's spinster cousins what she thinks of him. She rings up the newspaper editor personally, demanding the next two installments under no circumstances be published. She has all her lady friends write letters threatening to cancel their subscriptions.

The boy writes his own letters in reply, about the beauty of art and the evils of censorship, but he never sees his byline in the *Mobile Press Register* again— not, that is, until he has long-emerged from the chrysalis of self-conscious prepubescence and made his mark on the world.

Still ten, the boy also writes the *Mobile Press Register* about the dog that they had promised, but fails to get a reply. He calls them from the telephone in Mr. Lee's office in town, which he and Nelle had snuck into for that very purpose. He's told that his inquiry will be 'looked into'. He even saves his pocket change and skips school to take a Greyhound bus to Mobile, where he marches directly to the Press Register's office, approaching a reception desk he can only just peer over. The receptionist with the horn-rimmed specs pretends not to know what he's talking about.

He's won their contest, fair and square, but he never sees the Beagle that they promised. Or the one his Daddy had. Wouldn't get one until he was all grown up and moved away, to the City where no one cares what you— —

The boy is eight, but he *remembers* being nine. It's still autumn, but closer to Halloween. He vividly recalls planning his costume: Fu Manchu, a long robe with a thin, dangling mustache.

He often brags about digging a hole from Monroeville to China, has even enlisted the labour of local bruisers to dig up his Cousin Jenny's vegetable patch, promising payments of Oriental treasure when they reach the other end.

This time he recalls concealing the identity of his subject, writing about Mrs. Lee, but putting her words in the mouth of Skin and Bones, the derelict from the railroad tracks:

“... *And I just told her ta pack her things and get!*” the boy has the fictional Skin and Bones rant to his hooched-up companion, passed-out beside him in the abandoned train depot.

He has recast the object of gossip as Skin and Bones' wayward wife, run off with a traveling salesman, "... *poking every stuffing from here to Mobile, before the weddin' cake was in the ice-box ... runnin' all the way to 'Nawlins, without two pennies to rub together... knocked up before she's old enough to order a whiskey...*" Skin-and-Bones-On-Paper takes a guzzle of Wild Turkey for emphasis.

The boy feels clever coming up with the amalgamation, a disguise that would surely prove crafty enough to elude any grown-up who might suspect his source and put the kibosh on his efforts.

He even allows himself to plot a sequel, in which Mrs. Lee shocks the ladies of Monroeville at the beauty parlour, spouting Skin and Bones' diatribe about cock fights and gambling and houses of ill repute, making a case for their various virtues.

"*Ain't nothin' wrong with Faffy Bixter's cathouse, sure as I live and breathe,*" Mrs.-Lee-On-Paper assures the parlour of God-fearing women, sitting under their metal cone hair dryers, talking especially loud. "*Them's just honest gals, makin' an honest wage.*"

The thought of offending Mrs. Lee twice over— both by giving her words to a washed-up tramp *and* by forcing the tramp's whore-loving words into her pious mouth— pleases the boy enormously.

Within the afternoon he has carefully typed a copy of the first tale— what he now calls *Mr. Busybody*— on clean white paper, sealed it in a brown manila envelope and hand delivered it to Miss Bee McGhee at the post office, insisting in his gravest squeal that she take special care, paying an extra nickel for First Class.

The prize offered by the *Mobile Press Register* is a Shetland pony, something the boy wants badly. He thinks he remembers his Daddy promising to bring him one one day.

He recalls winning first prize, the first installment coming out under his very own byline. But Cousin Jenny comes home early from the dry-goods shop and hears the boy reading his piece to Sook and Nelle in the kitchen of the old drafty house, and recognizes Mrs. Lee's gossip. She calls the newspaper editor personally and tells him not to print installments two and three, and even makes the boy write a letter of apology for the lies that he has spread.

He hopes against hope that he still might get the pony, and gallop into the sunset, or at least ride far away to the City where boys with talent might speak their minds without causing a fuss.

The pony never — —

The boy is twelve. He's not sure if the sun is scorching or if the leaves are falling, but he senses that he's older. This time he's added a pejorative 'Old' to the 'Busybody', but later forgets whether it was *Old Mr.* or *Old Mrs.*, and vacillates between the two.

In this version the first installment *is* published under his byline in the *Mobile Press Register*, as the winner of the Sunshine Club prize.

The second installment is ready to go to press the next week, but is yanked in the ninth inning when the *Mobile Press* switchboard lights up with calls like a fireworks display. The more the boy tells the tale, the madder folks seem to get, until you'd think there'd been an absolute riot in Monroeville over a tiny little story in the children's Sunshine Page.

The prize is 'a Beagle Dog *and* a Shetland Pony'— sometimes with a bicycle thrown in for good measure. Not that Cousin Jenny will let him ride a bike, claiming his constitution too fragile. Since neither dog nor pony materializes, the boy develops a conspiracy theory and begins to write to other winners of children's contests across the country, asking if they had been given their prizes, and enlists Nelle to do the same. After fifty letters, their tongues numbed with the cardboard-taste of licking stamps, neither is able to find a single case of Dog or Bike or Pony being forked over.



The boy is a man when he first tells us various versions.

It was the dead of winter— he's told Babe— when the skeletal trees rattled against the icy wind. That he'd shivered in a threadbare hand-me-down jacket— even though the average December temperature in Alabama flatlines at fifty degrees fahrenheit.

He's told Lee, CZ and Marella it was spring, when the new azaleas had started to bloom atop the previous season's growth, in that brief lifespan we all know they have, just between Easter and May Day.

With Slim and Gloria it's back to that sweltering summer of old. The sizzling lizards. The scorched Beagle paws— which he would tenderly have bandaged, had he been given one. The summer scene he gives to Gloria because he thinks it might appeal to her hot Latin temperament, to Slim because he couldn't bear to pitch her any scene but sunny.

Both of the latter are too savvy to believe a word of it. But Gloria, being a hustler herself, appreciates the detail of the feverish heat, whereas Slim just logs it as another reason not to trust him.

Nelle alone— never one of us, being armed with too much knowledge and too little beauty— knows the truth. And for that very reason he has kept her separate from our flock, for fear that she'd trumpet a definitive gospel.

FOUR

1933/1966

MR. TRUMAN STRECKFUS PERSONS
REQUESTS THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY
AT A HALLOWE'EN GOODBYE PARTY,
FRIDAY OCTOBER 28, 1933
7 O'CLOCK (IN THE EVENING!)
THE FAULK BACKYARD
COSTUMES A MUST-- ELSE YOU'LL BE TURNED AWAY!!!

The boy is *beside* himself, perched at the farmhouse table in the drafty kitchen, typing up his first invitation on the Remington with keys that stick, having carefully threaded a new ribbon for the occasion.

“Just *beside* myself,” he rhapsodizes to Nelle, Sook and just about anyone who’ll listen. “Absolutely pleased as punch!”

He’s gonna give little ole Monroeville a night they won’t soon forget. Long after he’s moved to the City, his legend will loom, bigger than a tit through a telescope.

Yessir, after what *he* has in mind, they’ll remember him when he’s gone. He’s made a special trip to the Five and Dime and bought a brand new three-cent composition book: black confettied with white flecks, its pattern reminding him of granite slabs in the stone-yard.

In it he has, for the better part of two weeks, carefully recorded the name of every child in town. He’s weighed with great consideration his feelings for each, and either placed a star by their name or drawn a line through it.

He’s both judge and jury. He can choose benevolence— hadn’t he crossed Summer Clewett off last week when she’d refused to let him skip rope, yet reinstated her when she shared the oyster po’ boy from her lunch pail the very next day? In equal measure he could retaliate, having struck Chipper Daniels clean off when he’d mocked the boy’s speaking voice in class.

The boy carries his composition book everywhere. To the playground. To the swimming hole, where he sits a distance from the ruckus, way up the mossy bank, shielding his precious pages from wayward splashes. It’s his constant companion, the black and white book. The kids watch with curiosity as he scribbles his secrets on the ruled sheets inside. He’s not like the rest of them, in his sailor swimming-trunks and smart linen jacket, sent in a box from his Mama. But they’ve learned that he’s something of a magician— ‘A Pocket Merlin’, Nelle calls him, never failing to come up with something to pass the time on days that seem slower than watching cream rise on last year’s buttermilk. Whether it’s building a side show from scratch in his Cousin Jenny’s shed, convincingly playing General Tom Thumb, World’s Smallest Man, or sticking horse-hair on Nelle’s chin with spirit gum, transforming her into The Bearded Lady, or even convincing a couple of colored farm-hands, Lucian Cole and John White, to play Siamese twins, their separate forms hidden behind a suit-draped hat rack— the boy can call in favors, he being friendly with *everyone* in town, black, white or red all over.

The kids know he can be a spitfire too, and have learned to keep their distance when he’s on the warpath. Now with his granite-flecked book, they all want to know what he’s planned

next, each eager to ensure that they're part of whatever it might be. The boy enjoys the panic that flashes across their dull little faces when they see him cross a line through a name on his list, keeping the page in question close to his chest.

Kids worry that *they've* been the one he's crossed off, and bring him Snickers bars and chewing gum and fireflies caught in jars as offerings.

"Why thank you, sugar," he gushes, scrawling notes in his ledger. "Maybe I just *might* have to invite you to my shindig after all..."

Grown-ups say he's out of control. Gotten too big for his britches, they insist, ever since his crazy Mama's summoned him up to New York City.

"She's gone and married herself a *Yankee*, lordee mercy!"

"And of the *Latino* persuasion..."

Such is the chat that dominates Mrs. Lee's under-read book club, comprised of six Monroeville doyennes, their Sunday-best dresses soaked clean through, dabbing futilely at sweaty upper lips and lower chins with handkerchiefs doused in cucumber-water. They loll on the porch, fanning themselves with their folded *Forum* magazines, pages dogeared to Mr. Faulkner's *A Rose For Emily*. From the bits they've skimmed, they like his heroine in her big drafty house, whose fiancé '*disappears* one day'. She reminds them of at least a dozen shrews in town they know. That bunch of spinsters next door, especially.

"I'll bet a hundred dollars and my first born that ole Cousin Jenny's got a corpse rotting up in that dump too," Mrs. Lee clucks wickedly, and they all cackle like a coop of satisfied hens.

The boy no longer cares what they say. He's already sprouted wings and flown high above their tawdry company. He looks down from his newfound height and sees them for what they are— small town, small time poultry. Grounded specs pecking at a cramped and barren landscape. Stuck there to rot. Never taking wing or soaring beyond to the wider landscapes of the Great World. He can hear the snippets of the Negro spiritual at the Second Baptist Church as he walks past on his way to the library... *I've got two wings for to veil my face. I've got two wings for to fly away.* . . While the boy certainly doesn't have time for bible-thumping, he finds comfort in those rich baritones, about the closest thing to *soul* the overtly Anglo town can claim.

Two wings for to fly away. . . .

“You know, I’m the first out of Monroeville to cross the Mason-Dixon Line,” he boasts to the kids down by the river dock. The first except his Mama that is, who has returned for him as promised, with a brand new life and a brand new name.

She’s Cuban now— having traded the hillbilly ‘Faulk’ and Southern ‘Persons’ for the more exotic ‘Capote’. The boy is about to become Cuban too, he brags. He promises he’ll bring back crates of fancy cigars when he next comes to visit, that being the only thing Cuban that he’s sure of.

Folks don’t believe him. This sounds like another of the boy’s tall tales, but then they say the poor little bastard seems so overjoyed, they can’t help but be happy for him. He knows this because Nelle, moving in and out of shadows unnoticed— perhaps her greatest talent— has heard them.

He’s waited for this moment. Waited since he first watched his Mama drive away in a Silver Bullet convertible, backing out of the driveway of the Faulk cousins’ house— barreling down the long dirt road, tires leaving clouds of red smoke billowing in their wake. The boy had run down the road after her, his screams drowned by the roar of the engine. He’d begged her to take him with her, promising he’d be *so* good, she’d hardly even notice him. He had sprinted like a little ole greyhound after that car, until his legs buckled beneath him and he crumpled to the ground, unable to run any more. An abandoned racer pup, muscles smarting from the effort. (For added impact he makes sure that we all know that racing dogs who run too slow are either shot in the head or left in fields to starve, their purpose all used up.)

He’s told us he’d cried himself to sleep the first time she’d driven away. The second time, he’d stolen a bottle of her perfume— Shalimar— and drunk the whole thing dry like a bottle of Mama-juice, part of him hoping to ingest her beauty and keep her inside him, part of him hoping to overdose on her rancid poison, relishing the thought of the tears she would shed when his little body was all laid out at Johnson’s Funeral Parlor, drowning in the casket, pint-sized legs barely stretching halfway down.

Covered in hundreds of glorious calla— —

But that's behind him now. He has been *summoned*. All the way to New York City.

He'd been there before, mind you.

"I was *taken* there," he frequently reminds us, "Not by *her*, not by my Daddy— but on my own special merit." He'd been taken there by the men in suits who'd changed his life, when they showed up one broiling day with their briefcases to administer The Test.

They'd thought him thick, those dimwit schoolmarms, called him 'subnormal'— until the team of seersuckered researchers from the Mobile Works and Progress Administration brought their box of IQ tests to the little ole country school, where the boy felt sure not a single moron teacher could *begin* to pass the men's exam. He had scored so high, the men had furrowed their brows and made him take the test again. Yet again, the boy scored a perfect 215. Never had a child in the U.S. scored as high on an IQ test, he's assured us. The men were so damn stunned they drove him all the way to New York City where they only confirmed what the boy already knew— that he was a bona fide genius, so proclaimed by science.

And now he has been sent for, by *her*.

He'll become Cuban like she has, perhaps change his name to *Juan*... Dye his white fringe black and begin his new life as a genius in the City where exotic boys with talent might speak their minds without causing a fuss.

But first, he wants to make sure Monroeville never forgets him.

That's what's given him his idea... to throw a party like the hick little town has never seen before and likely'll never see again. A party to bask in his genius and good fortune. Sometimes he just wants to hug himself in a joyous chokehold, he *so* can't believe his luck.

This is better than a *pack* of beagle dogs and a *herd* of Shetland ponies (which he now feels confident he's won for his stories in spades.)

In a bold gesture, he's insisted on a nighttime gathering, even though most children under the age of ten have never been out much past sundown. He's decided on the weekend of Halloween to add a splash of drama. He adores a masquerade. Why you could be practically anybody hiding behind all that— —

MR. TRUMAN CAPOTE
REQUESTS THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY
AT A BLACK AND WHITE DANCE
ON MONDAY, THE TWENTY-EIGHTH OF NOVEMBER,
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-SIX
TEN O'CLOCK
GRAND BALLROOM, THE PLAZA

R.S.V.P. MISS ELIZABETH DAVIS
485 PARK AVENUE

DRESS:
GENTLEMEN: BLACK TIE, MASK
LADIES: BLACK OR WHITE DRESS, MASK

Truman is beside himself when he collects the box of embossed invitations from Tiffany's. Just *beside* himself, staring at the text, fresh from the printers, his enthusiasm dampened.

"Sugar," he informs the manager of the stationery department in clipped tone, not nearly so friendly as he'd been moments before, "An E seems to have gone missing from Miss Davies' name, and someone at 485 will be *très* surprised to receive acceptance cards from five-*hundred* of my close personal friends, while my publisher Mr. Cerf at 465 listens to the crickets chirping."

The Tiffany salesman dons specs, examining the card. At first glance it's exactly what his client ordered. An elegant, white embossed card, classic Emily Post, with Truman's playful touch of a sunrise border, gold and orange pinstripes framing the perimeter. Yet turning to the RSVP line, the secretary's name is indeed misspelled and the street address off by a number.

"I mean *honestly*, for all the free press I've given you, *you* should be giving *me* breakfast — and a set of Tiffany silver to boot!"

Before Mr. Manager can grovel in earnest, Truman has snatched the stationers' box and left in a huff, taking comfort that he'll later milk the blunder for a discount.

Truth be told, he's already planned to alter the invites by hand. He's been struck with the sudden inspiration for his *pièce de résistance*... a Guest of Honour.

Of course those of us who *know* him know this is merely a prop. Let's be honest... Truman's throwing a party for Truman.

Nevertheless he's written our names down and weighed us each as candidates. Babe is the obvious choice; if this is Tru's version of a wedding, she's the closest thing he has to a bride.

He knows, however, that *that* would be expected, and he's aiming for anything but. He considers Slim, alas away in London with Husband No. 3. Gloria, who we all know would lord it over Babe. Lee would shift the focus to Kennedys, thoroughly unacceptable. CZ, too twin-set tweedy for what he has in mind. Marella, too *European* for a venue so steeped in American lore.

Truman has naturally selected the Plaza as the setting for his drama. It has, since his early days as a copyboy at *The New Yorker*, served as his haven, as he tucked into the Oak Bar on his lunch breaks, inhaling the signature cognac Chicken Hash— an upscale version of Sook's down-home cooking. He'd peered into the hushed opulence of the Grand Ballroom after those stolen lunches, before rushing back to the office, where his tardiness was being clocked with some regularity by exasperated superiors. He'd seen dancers in those shadows, visions swaying to the big-bands in his mind, when he was little more than a loud-mouthed nobody. He'd always known that *this* was his Shangri-La.

"It's the last great ballroom left in Manhattan," he's insisted ever since. With its lingering glamour and old-school mystique, the Plaza remains a glimmering symbol of Truman's most cherished, Gatsbyesque ambitions.

In the end, we all fail to qualify for the role of Honoree. Of course we know the *real* reasons none of us is chosen. First, we are a "We". Truman knows women, and is savvy enough to foresee that plucking one from his chorus would be bound to offend the rest. More important — none of us *needs* a fairy tale. Our over-fêted grace would deny Tru the credit that he craves, would strip him of the art of creation. He's planning his party with a focus normally reserved for his fiction. His real-life heroine will be no less vital to his legacy than his fictional Holly Golightly. Truman realizes, as any skilled dramatist would, that what he needs is the fantasy of transformation. An Ugly Duckling, ripe for metamorphosis. Casting himself as a pygmy-Higgins in his very own *Pygmalion*, he'll turn duckling into swan, come hell or high water. If not to fully-fledged Swan, at least something close, paddling in the pond nearby.

And Truman has *just* the ugly duck in mind...

"Kay, sugar, it's Tru-baby," he drawls, sitting at the desk in the vermillion study of his new

United Nations Plaza apartment. His address book lies open to the Gs, where he's drawn a star beside GRAHAM, Kay.

"Truman!" Kay brightens on the other end of the line.

With a blue fountain pen Truman carefully corrects the street number on the first in a stack of invitations, phone receiver shoved between his chin and shoulder.

"I've missed my precious Kay-Kay!" he playfully whines.

"I've missed my Tru-babe."

"Look, honey. We hafta have a chat. I've decided you're depressed, and I'm gonna cheer you up. I'm gonna throw you a little party to shake you out of it."

In her *Washington Post* office, buried under a deadline, Kay sounds more befuddled than pleased.

"But I'm not depressed."

"Yes you are, sugar. You're depressed and need cheering up and I'm gonna be the one to do it. You see I've got this vision... a Bal Masqué. A *sea* of black and white, with *you* as the belle of the ball."

Kay, in her sensible suit with her sensible haircut, snorts at the absurdity.

We know Kay of course, some of us better than others.

Babe had introduced Tru to her a year ago and with Truman, as ever, the wooing process commenced. She's unusually dowdy for Tru's bag of chips, but she has kind eyes and razor smarts, things that he admires. As publisher of the *Washington Post*, Kay's an impressive addition to Truman's flock, even if her feathers aren't quite as smooth.

He'd brought her along as his 'own special date' for last August's *Agnetta* cruise around the Greek and Turkish islands. The trip seemed cursed from the outset, Marella and Gianni having both come down with food poisoning—a batch of rotten oysters. They insisted, however, that Kay and Tru take the yacht as planned.

Truman had instantly taken to Kay, loving— as he does— a tragedy. They were both, after all, shucking off death.

He had just watched Dick Hickock and Perry Smith hanged in Kansas, they having requested that "Friend Truman" be present at their executions. He'd procrastinated for hours, sat

weeping into a pillow in the impersonal Holcomb hotel room that had been home on-and-off for the better part of six years. The very same room where he'd first arrived with Nelle to investigate a crime that was then little more than a footnote in *The Times*— the crime that would change his destiny. He'd forced himself to appear at the jail minutes before Neck-tie Party, when first Dick and then Perry were driven to the Warehouse and strung by their necks until their twitching ceased.

While we sensed Truman's grief, noticed that his lunchtime martini count had all but tripled as months rolled by, we all felt *wretched* for Kay... Phillip Graham, her husband and publisher at the *Post*— *ghastly* man, manic depressive— checked himself into a D.C. nut-bin, then convinced the doctors to spring him for a weekend. Back in their Virginia farmhouse Phil had kissed Kay goodnight, left the room and proceeded to blow his head off with a 28-gauge Winchester repeater. Kay had bottled her pain and assumed the mantle of Publisher with dignified grace in the wake of the unmentionable.

Truman had restored for Kay the gift of pleasure on their yachting venture, where they sunbathed while cutting across the Aegean into Turkish waters. They sipped chilled Retsina and ate fresh-caught fish, fried-up and served with meze of salty cheese and sweet, ripe melon. All the while, Tru read to Kay from the galleys of *In Cold Blood* as he proofed them, the first time he'd shared the words he so desperately hoped would change his life. He'd finished reading his final scene, in which Detective Dewey encounters the best friend of the murdered Clutter daughter in the cemetery, visiting their graves. She's home from college. Blossoming. She recalls how she and Nancy had hoped to go away to school together, had planned to be roommates at Kansas State. Parting ways, the lawman watches the girl walk away, thinking her, "*just such a young woman as Nancy might have been...*", before heading home himself, "*to the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat.*"

Tru looked to his audience, expectant.

"Truman, that's extraordinary. Absolutely extraordinary," said Kay, wiping tears from her eyes. Tru had hesitated, then leaned in close.

"Can I tell you a secret, Kay-Kay...? Deep down, I think I know... I've finally written my masterpiece. And it scares the living shit out of me."

“But why in the *world*—?”

“What’s left?” he’d asked, forlorn. “I’m scared to death I won’t be able to do anything *nearly* as good again, and that this is the beginning of the end.”

Kay says she had dismissed this as preposterous, but somewhere in the pit of his gut, Truman knew that he was right.

At night they smoked a hashish pipe furnished by islanders in turbans and collapsed woozy on the cushion-strewn deck, giggling in earnest for the first time since death had kissed them both. They lay cradling one another, staring into a star-littered sky.



At the top of the invitation card, Truman neatly writes: ‘In honor of Mrs. Katharine Graham’ in blue ink, shifting the phone receiver to his other shoulder as he slides it into an envelope.

“I’m sealing your invite as we speak— it’s too late to say no. ”

“Truman, I’m *not* depressed. I don’t need—”

“Now Kay-Kay, I won’t hear another word. You’re having a ball and that’s final.”

He hangs up, cutting the call unceremoniously short before his Honoree has time to object. Satisfied, he turns focus and fountain pen to the next invitation, ready to insist four-hundred and ninety-nine more times in his neat script that his Dance has *nothing* to do with *In Cold Blood*, or feting his own Arrival.

For those of us who *know* him, he isn’t fooling anyone. As we say, Truman’s throwing a party for himself.

Yessir, he’s gonna give little ole Manhattan a night it won’t soon forget.

He’s made a special trip to Woolworth’s and bought a brand new ten-cent composition book, the kind he uses for his work, black and white confetti-flecked, its pattern mimicking the marble floor in the Paleys’ foyer.

He's written a single word— DANCE— on the cover, and has, for the better part of three months, carefully recorded the name of everyone he knows. Writers. Film stars. Politicians. Intellectuals. He's weighed with consideration his feelings for each, and either starred their name or drawn a line through it. He's relished assembling the perfect cast of celestial beings, like playing God at an empyrean cocktail party.

He's been benevolent— hadn't he listened sympathetically to an acquaintance who called to say his wife refused to leave her bed, so devastated was she not to have been included? There was something in the husband's sad dignity that moved Truman. Something about the wife's desperation that reminded him of Lillie-Mae-Nina-Capote.

He had bandaged their wounded pride, spinning the omission into a mistake.

"Why, honey, did your invite not arrive? Well mercy me. It must have gotten lost in the post. I'll have my secretary send another straight away. I would simply *loooooove* to have you at my party."

In equal measure he's used his list to settle old scores, having added Ann 'Bang-Bang' Woodward's name for the sole pleasure of striking her off for calling him "a horrid little faggot" at El Morocco years ago. Just a graze now... he's saving his big guns for a later date.

He's carried his Notebook everywhere. To The Colony. La Côte Basque. To 21, where he eschews his usual Prime table for a booth in the corner, holding hushed meetings, shielding his precious pages from curious eyes.

He brings it like a prized pet to our various swimming pools through those humid summer months. Takes it sailing on board the *Agnetta*, with Marella, Lee and co., where we all watch, enchanted, one lazy afternoon as a Corsican swallowtail lands on Babe's exposed breast, resting there, fluttering gossamer wings, the magic of the moment broken only by Truman's high-pitched squeal: "Lee, should we have Jackie, or is she playing 'Widow' all November...?" We all know he can be a little bastard and have learned to keep our distance when he's on a jag. We see him toying with us, a tomcat with a garbage pail of mice. Enjoying the panic that flickers across our carefully made-up faces when he cuts another name from his list. Being the inner, *inner* circle, we doubt we have to worry that we'll actually be axed, but you never *really* know with Truman.

“Honey, maybe I’ll invite you to my party and maybe I won’t,” he loves to taunt as we sip poolside Vespers. We’ve listened to him read sections of his guest list in the stillness of the August heat, recalling fantasies of romance that we’d long-ceased to believe in.

The Acquaintances, outsiders to our set, are practically tripping over themselves to get in his good graces. They send him Mont Blanc pens and theatre tickets and five-figure cheques as offerings.

“Why thank you, sugar,” he says with a smile. “But my party’s just for *cloooose* personal friends... and I don’t waste time on folks I don’t admire.”

Now a man of means, the boy can no longer be bribed.

The papers say it’s out of control. New York’s been struck with Black and White fever, ever since Truman mailed his invites.

“In one day I made five-hundred friends and five-*thousand* enemies!” he relishes telling the press. Truman’s roster of ‘personal friends’ reads like a new aristocracy, so dripping in cachet a modern Madame Defarge would just love to get her knitting needles into us, her patterned stitches making swift work encoding those who only need one name— Sinatra. Mailer. Warhol. Bacall.

“Capote’s Court, An International List for the Guillotine!”

Such is the fodder that dominates the headlines, comprised primarily of six daily papers, plus *Vogue*, *Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair*. Even *The New Yorker*, who once fired the effete copyboy with the big ideas, now wants in on the act. With his granite-flecked book and lauded bestseller, they all want to know what he’s planned next, each eager to ensure that they’re part of whatever it might be.

He’s waited for this moment, waited since he first arrived in the wheat-fed Kansas wasteland, patiently befriending detectives and killers alike, he having a rare gift for walking delicate tightropes of loyalties.

He’s invited his very close Kansas friends to his Dance— the ones who are still alive, that is— immortalized after six long years as characters in his masterpiece.

And now they have been summoned, all the way to New York City.

“I was taken to the Plaza for the very first time,” he’ll remind them when they’ve checked into the big hotel and tucked into lunch in the Oak Bar, “Not by Nina, not by my Daddy — but by the men in suits with their IQ tests.” A lifetime ago, when kids lined up for Chinese-boxes and apple-bobbing in the Faulks’ Monroeville yard, orchestrated by a midget-outcast, hiding behind a Fu Manchu mustache.

The boy-turned-man has waited ages to celebrate his wild success. To show every moron teacher, every dimwit bully, everyone who ever doubted him just how wrong they were.

He’s metamorphosed into Truman Capote, Great American Writer.

And he got there on his own special merit. It only confirms what we already knew, the thing he’s said over and over to anyone who’ll listen: that he’s a bona fide genius, as long-proclaimed by science.