

# SWAN SONG



*'Princess Caroline Lee Radziwill, crepe shawl by Bersioe and hair by Kenneth, New York, March 23, 1961', by Richard Avedon. Opposite: 'Dolores Guinness, hair by Kenneth, New York, November 30, 1961', also by Avedon*

Elegant, wealthy and well-connected, Truman Capote's muses inspired his paeans to their beauty in *Bazaar*, and were his devoted friends – until he betrayed their secrets in print

By CATRIONA GRAY

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At the height of his fame, Truman Capote threw a party so spectacular that it became a modern legend. Andy Warhol, Gloria Vanderbilt, Frank Sinatra and the Maharani of Jaipur were among the many famous faces who donned masks and wore monochrome for a dazzlingly smart ball at New York's Plaza Hotel in November 1966. Years later, Marella Agnelli – an Italian princess married to the heir of the Fiat empire – recalled the event in her memoirs, and wondered if the writer had an ulterior motive. 'I often thought that his Black and White Ball was a way of gathering together all the characters who were going to be a part of his novel.'

Among the 540 masked guests were six beautiful women, who Capote referred to as his Swans: Slim Keith, Babe Paley, Lee Radziwill, Gloria Guinness, CZ Guest and Agnelli. All were prominent socialites who had married into the highest sphere of power and influence. For almost 20 years, Capote had maintained close friendships with each of them. He was their constant companion who shared in their gossip, accompanying them on yachts around the Mediterranean and on private jets to the Caribbean, until he betrayed their secrets in a 1975 piece for *Esquire*, an extract from that unfinished tell-all novel, *Answered Prayers* – the seeds of which were already germinating when he threw his party at the Plaza. The fallout was spectacular: Capote was expelled from society by his furious muses. He never recovered or published another work, and, unable even to finish the book that ruined him, he spiralled into the alcohol and drug abuse that led to his demise.

Tracing Capote's association with these gilded beauties makes for compelling reading, for the women dominated New York society for decades. All appeared frequently in fashionable periodicals such as *Harper's Bazaar* and three of them were also more actively involved with the magazine. Slim Keith, who had started out as a model, was friends with both *Bazaar's* fashion editor Diana Vreeland and its legendary editor-in-chief Carmel Snow, who offered her a staff position. Keith (then married to the film director Howard Hawks) regrettably declined the job, citing time pressures, but went on to bring Lauren Bacall to the attention of Hollywood after spotting her on the cover of a wartime issue of *Harper's Bazaar*; and getting her to audition for her husband's movie *To Have and Have Not*. Meanwhile, Gloria Guinness rose from relatively humble beginnings in Mexico to marry a scion of the famous brewing dynasty. From 1963 to 1971, she penned a column for *Bazaar*, chronicling the changing fashions of the day; Lee Radziwill, the sister of Jackie Kennedy, also briefly worked at the magazine. Of the remaining Swans, Babe Paley, one of three notably lovely sisters, was a New York fashion icon, and CZ Guest

was an actress and socialite, with ice-blonde hair and pale blue eyes.

Glamorous and captivating though these women were, there seemed to be deeper reasons why Capote was so drawn to them. Having always been in thrall to his mesmerising but mercurial mother, the writer began to accumulate his Swans in the year following her suicide in 1954, as if seeking to fill the emotional chasm caused by her death – it is no coincidence that all but one of the six were significantly older than he.

'A Gathering of Swans', one of the many pieces Capote wrote for *Bazaar*, pays homage to this glittering cohort. It appeared in the October 1959 issue and was illustrated by Richard Avedon's images of Gloria Guinness' daughter Dolores, and of Babe Paley, who posed with her daughter Amanda. Paley was 44, and Capote, while acknowledging the potential of youth, writes that 'a beautiful girl of twelve or twenty, while she may merit attention, does not deserve admiration.

Reserve that laurel for decades hence when, if she has kept buoyant the weight of her gifts, been faithful to the vows a swan must, she will have earned an audience all-kneeling; for her achievement represents discipline, has required the patience of a hippopotamus, the objectivity of a physician combined with the involvement of an artist, one whose sole creation is her perishable self.'

'He saw each of these women as the heroine of a potential narrative,' says Kelleigh Greenberg-Jephcott, who has written a novel inspired by Capote's Swans, based on a decade of research. 'Many of them were self-made, as was he, and I think he identified kindred spirits.' Her book explores the aftermath of the publication of 'La Côte Basque, 1965', the *Esquire* story that marked Capote's social downfall. Paley and Keith, the two women he was closest to, suffered the worst – cruelly immortalised in the text as shallow and bird-brained, their private lives laid bare to be gossiped about. (They were the lucky ones. Ann Woodward, a socialite who Capote despised, had the details of her husband's murder case dredged up in the story, prompting her to take a lethal dose of cyanide before the issue hit the newsstands.)

'It's clear that he never thought that they would be so hurt by his words,' says Greenberg-Jephcott. 'Because of their 20 years of friendship, he thought they would

forgive him anything – he assumed that he was indispensable. That was where he grossly miscalculated.' Perhaps over-familiarity had blunted Capote's sensibilities. In his 1959 piece for *Bazaar*, when his relationship with his Swans was in its first flush, his attitude to them was far more awestruck. 'In the presence of the very beautiful,' he writes, 'terror contributes to our overall reaction, and it is as much fright as appreciation which causes the stabbed-by-an-icicle chill that for a moment murders us when a swan swims into view.'

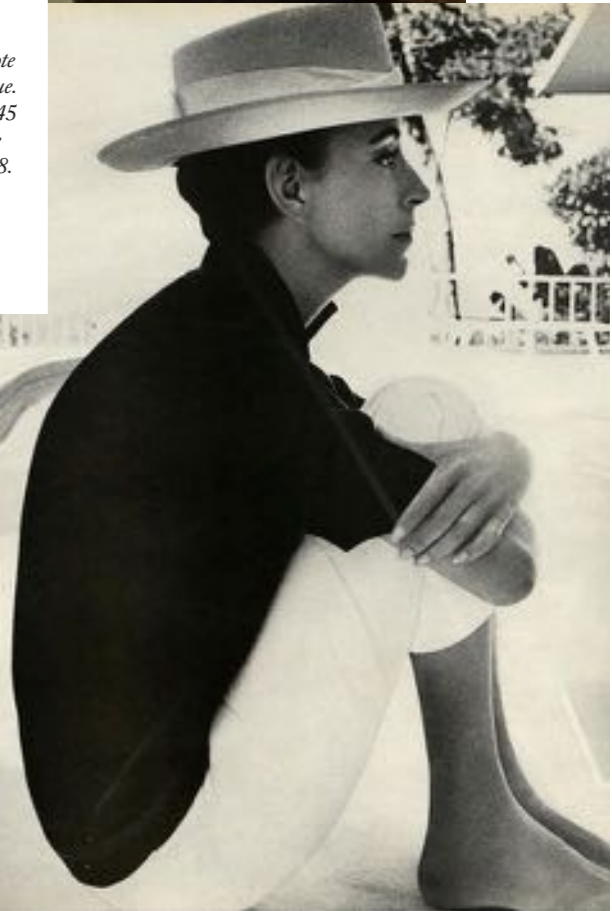
Little did Capote know how true his first instincts would prove to be. Unable to resist such a rich source of narrative inspiration, he flew too close to the sun, forgetting the power and influence his elegant companions possessed, and betraying them for a story. It is in itself the stuff of fiction: the epic fall of a 20th-century great, fatally poisoned by his own pen. □ *'Swan Song' by Kelleigh Greenberg-Jephcott (£12.99, Hutchinson) is out now.*



Lee Radziwill dancing with Truman Capote at his Black and White Ball in 1966



Clockwise from top left: CZ Guest photographed by Louise Dahl-Wolfe for the March 1951 edition of Harper's Bazaar; An Henri Cartier-Bresson shot of Capote from the November 1946 issue; Slim Keith in the August 1945 Bazaar; CZ Guest, Capote and Diana Vreeland in 1968. Left: Capote at the Black and White Ball in 1966. Right: Gloria Guinness in Bazaar in April 1966



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*'Truman Capote, writer, New York, October 10, 1955', photographed by Richard Avedon. Opposite: 'Marella Agnelli, aristocrat, New York, December 1953', also by Avedon*