

TLC Showcase

KELLEIGH GREENBERG-JEPHCOTT

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Introduction to *Swan Song*

Truman Capote— suffering from writer's block, crisis mounting— decides to publish excerpts from his savage roman à clef *Answered Prayers* in *Esquire* magazine, inexplicably betraying the confidences of his inner circle, mid-20th century society's wealthy and powerful elite... The women he called his 'Swans'.

Capote has reached the pinnacle of success. His masterpiece *In Cold Blood* has achieved wild acclaim. He has hosted his infamous Black and White Ball at the Plaza Hotel. He's the darling of the press. Yet celebrity has begun to erode his work. Eight years delinquent delivering his next manuscript, Capote commits a social and literary crime that will have seismic ramifications. Centered around events that scandalized New York society in 1975, *Swan Song* spans three decades of complex friendships, as told from the collective and divergent perspectives of iconic tastemakers Babe Paley, Slim Keith, C.Z. Guest, Gloria Guinness, Marella Agnelli and Lee Radziwill.

A novel rooted in libel and slander, *Swan Song* strives to replicate— through language and shifting point of view— the gossip-riven world that its characters inhabit. A world in which everyone talks... and where talk can prove deadly. The narrative moves between the PAST, 1955-1974 and PRESENT, 1975, the year Capote dropped his literary grenade. Interludes revealing Truman's childhood in Depression-era Alabama provide crucial insight.

The novel employs a First Person Plural perspective— the collective 'We'— functioning as the voice of Society, the voice of Capote's Betrayed. It seeks, through prose, to channel the corrosive nature of gossip. The alternatively adoring and vengeful Swans haunt Capote, asking the question at the novel's core: Why would he attempt to publish *Answered Prayers*, knowing what he stood to lose...?

In the tradition of the Capote-invented 'Nonfiction Novel', *Swan Song* turns a forensic eye on events surrounding Truman's professional and social suicide— and his incomprehensible slaughter of the jet-set elite, who'd trusted him with their martini-soaked secrets.

The idea for *Swan Song* was conceived in Provence, France in 2006, where Kelleigh Greenberg-Jephcott was the recipient of the Abroad Literary Conference Fellowship.

The collective voice of the narrative was developed almost a decade later, in the UEA/ Guardian Masterclass led by James Scudamore.

Swan Song is the winner of the Peggy Chapman-Andrews Award for a First Novel.

Swan Song, by Kelleigh Greenberg-Jephcott

Baré 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 zdorovye*," 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 leaden 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.

About the Writer

Kelleigh Greenberg-Jephcott was born and raised in Houston, Texas, before coming to call first Los Angeles and then London her adopted homes. She earned a BFA, Drama (Directing) from Carnegie Mellon University and studied screenwriting at the University of Southern California.



Kelleigh has been honoured by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences as one of ten Finalists for the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting. Numerous screenwriting honours include the Zoetrope competition judged by Francis Ford Coppola and the Austin Film Festival and Screenwriters Conference, where she has twice been honoured as a Finalist. In 2006 Kelleigh was the recipient of the Abroad Writers' Conference Fellowship in Provence, where the germ of an idea for a book about Truman Capote's betrayal of the powerful society confidants he called his Swans was born; nearly a decade of research and gestation later, *Swan Song* is her first novel. Kelleigh developed the collective voice of the narrative over a six-month UEA/ Guardian masterclass, with the mentorship of novelist James Scudamore. The novel was shortlisted for the Myriad Editions First Drafts Competition and is longlisted for the 2015 Historical Novel Society Award for a New Novel. *Swan Song* is the winner of the 2015 Bridport Prize Peggy Chapman-Andrews Award for a First Novel.