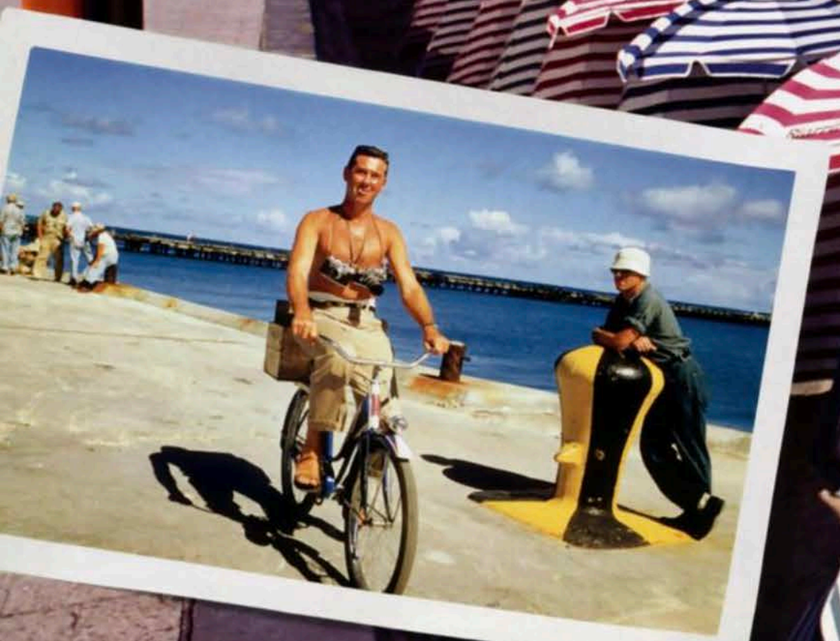
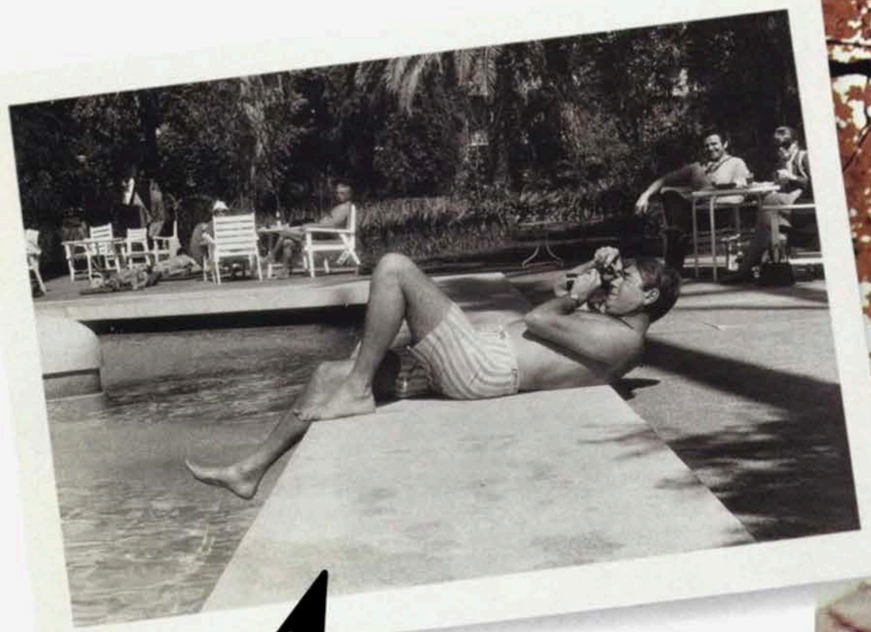
Postcards from Paradise

When Slim Aarons published A Wonderful Time, *his photo album of the rich at play, in 1974, the book fell flat. Three decades later, it's essential inspiration for top designers, art directors, and interior decorators; copies go for up to $2,000; and Aarons has been re-invented as a fashion guru. With a second volume of his work,* Once upon a Time, *due out this month, EVGENIA PERETZ discovers how Aarons's images—C. Z. Guest poolside in Palm Beach, Peter Pulitzer's khaki cool, Babe Paley at her Jamaica cottage—put old-money chic on the map*



I COVER THE WATERFRONT

A 1985 Slim Aarons photo of the Grande Plage in Biarritz, France; *inset,* Aarons in Hawaii in 1955 with cameras slung round his neck during the filming of John Ford and Mervyn LeRoy's *Mister Roberts.*



At 80-something and with a weakness for needlepoint cushions, Slim Aarons, the photographer behind *A Wonderful Time,* a 1974 picture book about the Good Life, is not what you'd expect from the guru of 21st-century cool. At his 1782 Bedford, New York, farmhouse—bought with the help of friends at *Life* magazine in 1953—you are greeted by an American flag and, at Christmastime, by a cardboard pinup of Charlie Brown. Inside, among the signed pictures from photographer friends Alfred Eisenstaedt and George Silk, you'll come across straw hats propped against the wall, a stash of Canada Dry ginger ale, a small bowl of hard candy, and Currier & Ives prints he may have picked up at a New Hampshire auction. Settle into the sofa, fireside, and you'll find yourself next to a tiny pillow that tells you, IF YOU EVER LEAVE ME I'M GOING WITH YOU.

"I can't figure out why people love it so much," Aarons says of the book he did three decades ago that has suddenly put him back in the limelight. As usual, the lanky, six-foot-four-inch, good-looking photographer is wearing a cheerful cotton ascot around his neck and a tidy cardigan. He has made contact with his memory, or what he calls his "IBM," and is on one of his impressive monologues, delivered in an endearing bark. "Imagine, it came out in '74! Now they've set up a whole thing on the Web! They have an auction [of copies of the book] every day—would you believe it?" A collection of photographs from Aarons's work for *Life, Holiday, Harper's Bazaar, Town & Country,* and *Travel & Leisure, A Wonderful Time* is an unabashed homage to a now bygone era of privilege and exclusivity. Popping into such resorts and enclaves as Newport and Palm Beach, Acapulco and Palm Springs, it introduced people to Barclay Warburton III at the helm of the brigantine *Black Pearl;* Mrs. William de Rham's dancing class at the River Club, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan; golf-club cozies knitted by the Duchess of Windsor; skiing picnics at Snowmass, Colorado; numerous "popular couples"; women with names like Brownie and Bobo; and various horses and hounds. While only a handful of people in 1974 thought *A Wonderful Time* was so wonderful, it has given Aarons a second career—starting with a new book, *Once upon a Time*—and has made Slim, a man who still talks about "gals" and "fellas," the hippest name in fashion.

"I don't think there's any American designer who doesn't have a copy [of *A*

Photographs excerpted from *Slim Aarons: Once upon a Time,* by Slim Aarons, to be published this month by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; © 2003 by Getty Images.

Harper & Row publisher and majority shareholder Cass Canfield, outside his home, Crowfields, in Bedford, New York, 1960; *inset,* Aarons gets down at one of the many pools he used as settings.

"I didn't do fashion," says Aarons. "I did the people in their clothes that became the fashion."

BLITHE SPIRITS

Mrs. A. Watson Armour III, the former Jean Schweppe, her children, and their friends relax at the Schweppe estate in Lake Forest, Illinois, 1957. *Top right,* writer Noël Coward in Jamaica, 1953.

Wonderful Time]," says Michael Kors, chief dresser of the junior jet set. Designer Anna Sui calls it "the quintessential guide for good taste." Rare-book dealers sell it for up to $2,000. Interior decorators leave copies open to a different page each day for inspiration. Top editors of glossy magazines won't let it leave their offices. Art directors "borrow" it—permanently. "*Vogue*'s had and lost 47 copies!" Aarons reports.

Aarons began his climb to style swami at an unlikely place—a farm in New Hampshire. But, for all the weighty lineage he has photographed, his own childhood remains "a blur." Raised by his grandparents, Aarons never really knew his parents, and he won't talk about it, because he doesn't want "crazies calling up, saying they're long-lost cousins." Instead, he'll just exclaim, "I'm a simple farm boy!"

Like all New Hampshire farm boys in the early 1940s who wanted to see the world, Aarons enlisted in the army and talked his way into a job as a hypo dipper, the boy who dunks the developing prints in chemicals—"the lowest level in photography." Soon thereafter he became a photographer at West Point, shooting military maneuvers. "I was a big hero there," says Aarons, "and I became very looked after by the sergeants' daughters." When the war started, he also charmed Hollywood director Frank Capra, who had been making a movie for the war effort, and who had come to West Point looking for people to work overseas on *Yank,* the weekly spin-off of the military newspaper *The Stars and Stripes,* which had such writers as Andy Rooney and Irwin Shaw on staff. "Capra got me out," says Aarons. Before he knew it, the simple farm boy was on a Pan Am Clipper, headed for London. "Quite a thing for a kid like me," he says. He can wax nostalgic about the good old days of early-airline luxury for an afternoon, uninterrupted.

Photojournalism was just beginning, and he was issued a Speed Graphic, a camera that required the insertion and removal of plates. Aarons promptly ditched it. "How can you even *think* of using it in a war?" he says. Instead he used a small Leica. "Cameras were nothing in those days. You had to be a *photographer* to take pictures in those days," he explains. Aarons recorded brutal fighting at Monte Cassino, where, under mortar fire, he lost bowel control. The war also introduced him to two men, George Silk and Carl Mydans, who were taking pictures for *Life,* the magazine he had revered as a teenager. "We stayed together through the whole campaign

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

A 1966 photo of the Ledges, the Newport, Rhode Island, estate of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Gardiner Cushing, built by Howard's father, Robert Maynard Cushing, in the 1860s as a retreat from the Boston summer heat.

"It was a perfect world that he put together," says designer Anna Sui.

in Italy," says Silk, 86, who remembers the three of them liberating a German beer cellar, catching a chicken by the side of the road and making it dinner, and risking their lives on a daily basis. "He was scared to death, and so was I," Silk adds. At one point, Aarons saved Mydans's life by frantically telling him to retreat from some German gunners. Aarons himself was wounded during the invasion of Anzio, along with syndicated columnist Ernie Pyle, when the Germans blew up a dock along the Italian beach. "That's how I got my Purple Heart," Aarons says. "I gave it to a blonde I knew after the war. She said she liked the color." Finally, the three rode into Rome together to see it fall to the Allies. Aarons recorded the day with a famous picture of a soldier holding a baby in a jubilant Mussolini Square.

But Aarons would tire of witnessing carnage and despair. "After you've seen a concentration camp, you really don't want to see any more bad things," he says, echoing the sentiments of many returning vets. For some, this meant a life spent grilling in the suburbs. For Slim, it meant recording for all the top magazines an exclusive world of elegance, wealth, and leisure—or, as he famously put it, "attractive people in attractive places doing attractive things." While at *Life* (where he met his future wife, Rita Dewart, then an assistant on the photo desk), he went to Hollywood to shoot such rarefied events as the croquet match between teams headed by producer Darryl Zanuck and writer Moss Hart. When he returned to Rome, it was to photograph actors and actresses, and he embedded himself at the Excelsior Hotel, whose lobby was festooned with high-priced courtesans. At *Harper's Bazaar,* he worked with art director Alexey Brodovich, an acknowledged master at turning magazine photographs into artistic presentations. By the time *Life* wanted him to shoot the Korean War, Aarons had decided, "I'll only do a beach if it has a blonde on it."

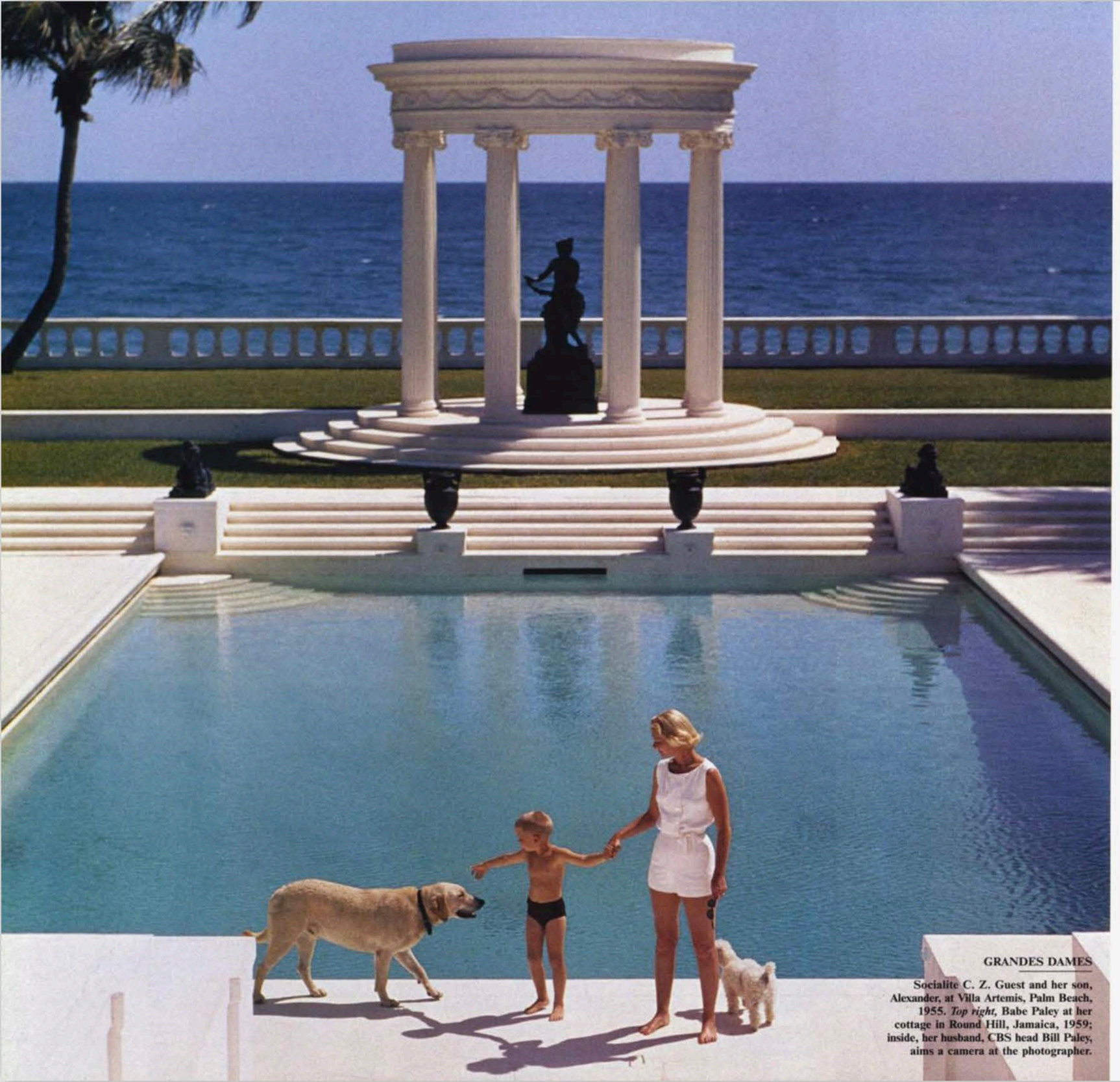
Aarons would subsequently get his fill of both blondes and beaches at *Holiday* magazine. Although *Holiday* had such distinguished writers as Faulkner and Steinbeck, its look had long been overly tidy and predictable. Then, in 1951, a man named Frank Zachary took over as art director and pumped new energy into it. Fresh from *Portfolio* (a cutting-edge design magazine that people still talk about, even though it came out only three times), Zachary enlisted a number of sophisticated illustrators and came up with a style of taking pictures he called "environmental photography." There would be no close-ups. Subjects would be seen in their milieus—their rooms, their gardens, with their books and their "goddamn dogs," as Zachary would say. He set up a stable of photographers that included Arnold Newman, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Tom Hollyman, Fred Maroon, John Lewis Stage, and Aarons, which would become the backbone of the magazine. From the start, Aarons was the group's most voluble member. "He was very exuberant," Newman, 85, says decorously, recalling the group lunches at Gallagher's Steak House, on West 52nd Street, during which the other men struggled to get a word in here and there. Aarons sometimes had them jumping through hoops at work too. Once, on assignment in Nairobi for an issue devoted to Africa, Newman discovered that Aarons had made him his assistant. "I couldn't get out to do my own work until another couple of days," says Newman.

Aarons never made a big thing about creating high art—which is why his friend *V.F.* contributing photographer Jonathan Becker calls him the "Jimmy Stewart of photography" and why Aarons often reminds people that "it's all bullshit." His briefings with Zachary before assignments were to the point and usually ended with the words "Slim, bring back the snaps, and make sure it doesn't look like Brooklyn." Aarons would set off with a minimum of equipment and a beautiful assistant to distract subjects. ("They were all racehorses," Aarons tells you—often.) Sometimes he and his girl Friday worked like tornadoes. *New York* magazine founder Clay Felker, now a senior lecturer at the U.C. Berkeley graduate school of journalism, recalls witnessing them getting the snaps for a story he was writing, and reporting on it to Zachary: "Slim and that girl were a guerrilla team. They went in, went out, without anyone knowing what hit them."

Other times, Aarons might put in long hours of careful orchestration, persuading subjects to move, say, their entire bedrooms onto the lawn. Once, on assignment for a story about Venice, he spent days trying to get a gondolier to haul dozens of boats up onto St. Mark's Square (he eventually succeeded by giving him $250). Determined not to include any pigeons in the photos, he waited one morning until 6:30, when the square was gleaming wet from being freshly cleaned, and pointed his Lei-

THE GANG'S ALL HERE

(1) Slim Aarons outside his home, in Bedford, New York, July 2003. (2) The girls of the Foxcroft School, in Virginia, wait for their horses, 1960. (3) Clark Gable and Aarons in Rome, October 1959. (4) Mafia boss Lucky Luciano, second from left, with Aarons in Sicily, 1949. (5) Senator Barry Goldwater near Scottsdale, Arizona, 1967. (6) Aarons (back row, center) with the *Holiday* staff, including Arnold Newman (back row, second from left) and Frank Zachary (front row, second from left). (7) Editor Buz Wyeth, writer Laura Hawk Cushing, Aarons, and his assistant Cary Ohler, in Aarons's living room.



GRANDES DAMES

Socialite C. Z. Guest and her son, Alexander, at Villa Artemis, Palm Beach, 1955. *Top right,* Babe Paley at her cottage in Round Hill, Jamaica, 1959; inside, her husband, CBS head Bill Paley, aims a camera at the photographer.

ca to shoot. "One pigeon appeared," says Zachary. "It was perfect." To photograph Madame de la Haye-Jousselin, a descendant of the Comtesse de Noailles, Aarons put her in riding habit, sidesaddle, in front of the magnificent gate of her château. "Slim managed to get the horse to raise his hoof. A real, honest-to-God, 17th-century portrait," Zachary says.

But Aarons's pictures were more than old-fashioned portraits of modern rich people. They made modern rich people sexy. His photos of banquets in Acapulco—including one with actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and designers Oscar de la Renta and Emilio Pucci—had the kind of effortless fabulousness that told viewers, Keep dreaming. The photographs of socialite C. Z. Guest at her pool in Palm Beach and of Babe Paley relaxing at the cottage in Round Hill, Jamaica, owned by her and her husband, CBS chief Bill Paley, had the kind of satisfied-ice-queen allure seen only in Grace Kelly movies. "He extracted everything that was cool and chic about [old money]," says professional style-watcher Simon Doonan, a major Aarons follower. "He left behind all the dusty mumsiness of it and made it look incredibly crisp and stylish . . . because most rich chicks look kind of frumpy, mumsy, frowsy."

In return, society made him an honorary member. "Everybody that he photographed—*everybody*—liked him. You couldn't help but like him," says Guest, who sums up the whole Slim experience in a clipped "fabulous." Anthony Mazzola, his editor at *Town & Country,* recalls, "When we covered balls, we knew all the people, and Slim knew all the people, and when they saw him coming, most of the women would get up and embrace him." At the annual Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute ball, Aarons would serve as an escort for Mrs. Douglas MacArthur. When President Kennedy drove by him in Palm Beach, he rolled down the window of his car and asked, "Was the girl from your story about Lake Como really that beautiful?" European aristocracy would vouch for him. During the Ascot races in London, when Aarons was knocked down by guards for lifting up his camera in the royal enclosure, he was rescued by none other than Prince Philip. "Slim, what the hell are they doing to you?" the prince asked.

Saving the flattery for his pictures, Aarons called it as he saw it, seeing fit to point out to John D. Rockefeller III the crabgrass growing on his lawn or telling Daniel Ludwig, the billionaire shipbuilder

and environmentalist, who had asked Slim to pay the taxi fare, to take a hike. "I think of Slim as Tom Sawyer," says his friend Mike Gallagher, the vintage-book-and-photograph dealer. "I can just picture him sneaking out of someone's window."

"People always ask me, 'Why is everyone always so happy in your pictures?'" Aarons reports. "I say, 'Because they like me!'" After he turned in a story on the Duke of Devonshire, his talent for access raised the bar at *Holiday.* Zachary recalls the hard line he developed with young photographers looking for work. "I'd say, 'Suppose I gave you an assignment to shoot the Duke of Devonshire.' They'd say, 'Great, line it up and I'll shoot it.' I'd say, 'No. *You* line him up.'"

It wasn't just high society that embraced Aarons—it was anyone who had a taste for *la dolce vita.* In 1949, when Mob leader Lucky Luciano was banished from Rome and sent back to his hometown of Lercara Friddi, in Sicily, he sent the other photographers on a wild-goose chase and selected Aarons to be the exclusive chronicler of the journey. "His father came up and they kissed," Aarons recalls of the Sicilian homecoming. "Lucky said, 'Don't take a picture of that. People will think I'm a sissy.' . . . It was a real Italian festival, with cousins, *cugini,* whatnot. . . . The local boy who made good!"

When Aarons set off for Hollywood to photograph people such as Marilyn Monroe and Lauren Bacall, he found that the moviemakers—in particular, Howard Hawks, Ring Lardner Jr., and Bruce Manning—wanted to put him in pictures. "All these short directors love tall guys. That's why, the minute I came to Hollywood, everyone wanted to make an actor out of me," says Aarons, who failed screen test after screen test. "I can't be anything but me!" he says. "That's the problem. That's why I'm no good in the movies. I can't play somebody else. You follow?" (In his famous *Kings of Hollywood* portrait, of Clark Gable, Van Heflin, Gary Cooper, and Jimmy Stewart yakking it up at the Hollywood restaurant Romanoff's, the source of their obvious amusement was his pathetic acting skills.) Alfred Hitchcock was so taken with him, says Aarons, that he decided to make the Jimmy Stewart character in *Rear Window* a photographer.

On a more intimate level Aarons charmed Jean Howard, the beautiful Hollywood hostess married to talent agent Charlie Feldman. Prickly when talking about his personal life, Aarons carefully constructs what he'd like to say about her: "She was

GOOD SPORTS

Students from Stowe Preparatory School in Vermont get fit at Mount Mansfield, around 1960. *Left,* Laddie Sanford at the Gulfstream Polo Club, Delray, Florida, 1955.

my best friend and mentor in Hollywood, and was a very serious photographer. Serious enough to leave her husband and help me work around the world." He keeps the camera lenses she left to him, after her death in 2000, on a special table.

While Aarons personally was becoming a smash hit around the globe, his pictures were quietly changing fashion. So evocative were they that the objects in them became imbued with all that was desirable. Guest's swimming pool became the swimming pool everyone wanted, and many copied it. In 1968, after Aarons shot Peter Pulitzer in plain khakis, those khakis became the must-have pants. "The fashion magazines went ape after that," Aarons says. "There was no such thing as a khaki craze until this came out." But it was all unintentional, Aarons needs you to understand—he wasn't "dressing" anyone. "See, this is what the guys *wore,*" he says, impatiently flipping through his pictures in a cluttered kitchen nook, after a lunch of smoked salmon and bouillon made with hot water from the tap. "This is what the women wore, what the dukes wore. They're all wearing their own clothes. See the belt and whatnot? See how casual it was? In the country, you wore a blazer and white trousers! . . . See what the president wore, see that? How to dress properly!" And on and on. "I didn't do fashion. I did the people in their clothes that *became* the fashion."

There was hardly a movie star, a member of the *Social Register,* or a titled European whom Aarons had failed to get on film, and his Bedford attic was filling up. He and his good friend and neighbor, Buz Wyeth, an editor at Harper & Row, decided it was time for a book. A couple of names were tossed around for who might provide the text, but Cass Canfield, Harper & Row's publisher and majority shareholder, who'd witnessed Aarons's renowned stamina for holding court, insisted on Slim himself. "I don't call myself a photographer," Aarons explains. "I'm a storyteller." For a year and a half he and Wyeth pored over thousands of pictures. "I can remember being cramped and having back pain and eyestrain," says Wyeth, recalling the low-tech method of squinting at slides.

But 1974, the year that Nixon resigned, was not a good year for pictures of lawn bowling at the Newport Casino club. With a cover price of $35, the book sold only about 12,000 copies (and 8,000 more through the Book of the Month Club), then collected dust on the remainder shelf. "It wasn't a runaway by any means," says Wyeth. Indeed, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt at *The New York Times* called it "repelling" and said that Aarons "manages to make even T. S. Eliot look decadent." To those listening to *Exile on Main Street,* Slim's world was filled with Grandma and Grandpa's most appalling and uncool friends.

He continued taking pictures for *Town & Country* until about 1990, when Frank Zachary, who'd become its editor in chief, retired. "There was no point in staying after he left," Aarons says. Around the age of 70, he also retired and supported himself by selling his pictures to various magazines around the world as the opportunities popped up. All that would change one day in 1997 when Mark Getty, having just launched the Getty Images photo archive, came knocking on his door. After realizing the young "fella" in the Windbreaker wasn't the gardener, Aarons invited him up to his attic to look at his life's work, and a deal was made on a handshake. Though Aarons won't disclose how much he got for his pictures, he will say this: "He gave me what I call 'Fuck you' money. Remember—because this is important—you're never free until you have 'Fuck you' money."

By this time, the counterculture that so cringed at the contents of Aarons's book had played itself out. Even members of the Rolling Stones were discovering the allure of manicured estates and private islands. Suddenly it was safe to look back. Drowning in tabloid culture—unattractive people in unattractive places doing unattractive things—style-conscious people became nostalgic for what they saw as an era of authentic style. The ugly truths of Aarons's world—the "exclusivity" that meant no Jews or black people allowed—were forgotten in the rush to reimagine an antediluvian garden of easy-breezy privilege.

Those wanting to recapture all that attractiveness turned to Aarons. For magazines (such as this one) that ran pieces on bygone glamour, his pictures became a staple. "If you want to do a story about Old Hollywood, which picture do you open up with?" he asks. The answer he is waiting for—and he is correct—is *Kings of Hollywood.* "If you want to do a story about Palm Beach, which picture do you open up with?" Again, the right answer is his picture—of C. Z. Guest. "If you want to do a story about Capri . . . " And so it goes.

By the end of the 1990s, fashion designers were re-creating the Slim look. Photographer Steven Meisel's recent so-called Valley of the Dolls campaign for Versace, featuring models Amber Valletta and Georgina Grenville, bouffanted and Stepford-wife-esque, looks an awful lot like Aarons's picture of two women sitting poolside at Richard Neutra's famous Kaufmann house, in Palm Springs. Although Meisel denies any influence, others proudly admit that Aarons's images have become iconic touchstones for them. "Whenever I see a new, blonde model, I'm like, Oh, she's C.Z. in Palm Beach," says Michael Kors. "Or: Oh, gosh, you're thinking about new fur boots and suddenly you're, Oh, the pictures from Stowe, Vermont . . . Virtually every collection I have is going to have a little bit of Slim in it." Anna Sui based her last collection on his book entirely. "It was a perfect world that he put together," she says, "so I thought with the way things are right now . . . this would be a great uplift."

A handful have tried to do today what Slim did then. With her books *Bright Young Things* and *Bright Young Things: London,* Brooke de Ocampo, in an effort to chronicle the lifestyles of her gala-going friends, enlisted Jonathan Becker, who found in Aarons an unparalleled mentor and adviser. "Although Slim was always very appreciated in the world of magazines," says Becker, "his work was never really taken very seriously until recently, for the great, original form of photography that is his own. He is an original."

As much as Aarons appreciates the Slim renaissance—he even called Anna Sui to thank her for giving him a "second career"—the work is different today because society is different. "Today it's all about celebrities," says Zachary. He shrugs, depressed. "You want to see a picture of Jeremy Irons in his castle." All those "top people" Aarons likes to talk about are gone forever. "Society doesn't exist," Aarons says, "so you can't call it society." And so, when he decided to capitalize on his new popularity, instead of picking up the camera again, he turned back to his enormous archive.

To speak of his "new book" doesn't describe it, Aarons insists. "Next *books,* you mean." Since putting together selections for *Once upon a Time,* Aarons has been opening drawers and scrapbooks, untouched for decades, and has found he has enough material for several more volumes. "I got stuff on Hollywood you wouldn't believe," he says, winding up the IBM and letting it do its thing. "If you see the ones on Acapulco I have with the top people wearing the stuff, Guinness and all of that . . . I just found it! Stuff that I'd forgotten. The Rothschilds in Acapulco having lunch . . . Alain Delon, wonderful picture of him on a horse. Every time I open something I find something new! I called [my editor] and said, 'I hate to tell you, but look what I just found!' How many times do you find a picture of Irving Berlin singing 'I Like Ike' at Madison Square Garden—see my point?" Indeed, for as long as Aarons continues puttering around the farmhouse opening boxes, his future looks bright. □

WILDE PARTY
Lounging, left to right: Debra Messing, Gale Harold, Carson Kressley, Megan Mullally, Kyan Douglas. Standing, left to right: Eric McCormack, Sean Hayes, Thom Filicia, Randy Harrison, Karina Lombard, Leisha Hailey, Jennifer Beals. Photographed in Los Angeles by Mark Seliger on September 18, 2003.

Gay TV

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 325 talk show, it was followed by the words "and the problems they present," according to *The Prime-Time Closet,* a 2002 book by TV historian Stephen Tropiano. The h-word resurfaced, in 1973, when Marcus Welby, M.D., treated a man with the "illness," and when retirement-home residents were butchered by bloodthirsty lesbians on *Police Woman.*

But Gay TV's unofficial history—that's another story, one that pre-dates even *The Andy Griffith Show,* which gave us Don Knotts's fey Barney Fife and Jack Dodson's Howard Sprague, that lovable "confirmed bachelor." That epithet could also have been bestowed upon *The Beverly Hillbillies'* supercilious banker, Mr. Drysdale (not to mention his tightly wound, butch, suit-wearing assistant, Jane Hathaway, played by Nancy Kulp), and should have described every male castaway on *Gilligan's Island:* Gilligan (girly-boy, platonic adoration for actresses, musicals), the Skipper (a "bear," in current gay argot), the Professor (fastidious, indifferent to horny babes), and Thurston Howell III (ascots, swishing). During this era a real, live confirmed bachelor—Paul Lynde—was in plain, screaming sight as the center square of *The Hollywood Squares.*

See also: Felix Unger (*The Odd Couple*). See also: Jan Brady (*The Brady Bunch*). See also: Eddie Munster (*The Munsters*). Mostly, though, see Batman. Replete with cape, tights that showcased interesting bulges, and the Caped Crusader's doe-eyed little buddy, Robin, Batman was a festival of unconsummated man-love. Although willfully ironic, the show's homoeroticism grew so fraught, and the Dynamic Duo was spending so much time together in the Bat Cave, that the producers decided to send in a new character, Batgirl, who promptly became the loneliest woman in Gotham City.

Only in the late 70s did gay characters stop barking at fire hydrants and bludgeoning the elderly. Here we recall Archie Bunker's gay drinking buddy, Steve, and Billy Crystal's gay quarterback on *Soap,* albeit with mixed emotions. Jodie Dallas—the Billy Crystal character—spent most of his screen time dreaming and scheming about a sex-change operation. The 80s and early 90s brought little relief from stereotypes, but much hand-wringing from the family-values crowd, usually because of gay kisses—on *Thirtysomething* and *Melrose Place*—that ultimately never aired. Even after Ellen finally came out, in 1997, we never saw her actually being a lesbian, literally speaking.

Although *Will & Grace* certainly validated and commercialized gay chic, the legwork was done by the less risk-averse, cable networks—specifically HBO, MTV, and Showtime, which have routinely produced gay characters (*Sex and the City*'s fictive Stanford Blatch; *The Real World*'s nonfictive Pedro Zamora and Danny Roberts, among others; many, many characters indulging in explicit gay canoodling on *Undressed*, all of which appealed to that most coveted demographic—the 18-to-24s). Credit also goes to England's Channel 4, whose original *Queer as Folk* series, which premiered in 1996, spawned the American version. Still, few would have predicted that straight men across America would favor five take-no-prisoner stylists over *JAG.*

Former talent agent Michael Ovitz, it turns out, was wrong only in degree. There *is* a "gay mafia" in Hollywood; it doesn't exist to foil embittered, old heterosexuals, though. Anyone who disputes the existence of a gay mafia obviously wasn't invited to the annual guy-centric Valentine's Day party thrown by producers Kevin Williamson (*Dawson's Creek*) and Dan Jinks (*American Beauty*). In TV, especially, many or most of today's best producers happen to be gay: Williamson, Darren Star (*Sex and the City*), Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*), and David Crane (*Friends*). That all of these producers have fostered gay material is as understandable as it is vital. Collectively, and despite their liberal bona fides, TV's Big Three straight guys—John Wells, Aaron Sorkin, and David E. Kelley—currently offer only one gay series regular, *ER*'s Dr. Weaver, who "became" a les-

FOR DETAILS, SEE CREDITS PAGE