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Peninsula of Lies

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Chapter 1

Death of a So-Called Transsexual

The Communiqué

The year before she died, Dawn Langley Simmons, a person I'd never met but knew from her infamous reputation, sent me a letter. I learned later she'd asked someone to draft the letter for her, despite being a published writer, because she suffered from Parkinson's disease and could no longer type. Dawn Simmons said she'd gotten my address from a friend, and she had a question.

I was living in Charleston, South Carolina, Dawn's adopted hometown, an old city where she'd settled after sampling its atmosphere of forgotten manners and antique buildings. Dawn explained that she was a lover of antiques, and some years earlier she'd bought a piece of eighteenth-century furniture previously in the hands of my family. 'I once owned the Ball commode chair, which was Chippendale in style,' she said.

> It was stolen with everything else after my marriage, which *Newsweek* said 'shook the cradle of the Confederacy.' It disappeared in a fake auction, turned up in an estate, and was featured in *Antiques* magazine. I would still like to know where the commode chair is. I would be quite happy to find it in a museum, as I did my harp, Palmetto mirror, and grandfather clock.

A Chippendale commode once used by family members

was a bond I didn't share with many people, but what, exactly, is a commode chair? There are two types of commodes in furniture. One is a paneled chest that was popular in Victorian drawing rooms. The other is a chair with a big hole in the seat and a bowl underneath, used at night to empty the bladder. Dawn was asking about the Ball family toilet.

Although I had no idea where the thing might be, the chair created a link between this stranger and me, through the warmth of the seat, you might say. I answered the letter with a friendly note but didn't promise to locate the commode. When I had more time, I'd get back in touch.

Too many months passed, however, and Dawn Simmons died. When I heard the news, I reproached myself for letting the chance pass to meet one of the most unusual people ever to put down roots in the South, a region with a flair for the bizarre. Even among the South's strong crop of weird personalities, Dawn's life had been exceptional, the kind of thing with which people marked the passage of time, like a hurricane or a war – as in, 'Charleston was such a dignified place until Dawn came to town.'

Dawn Simmons, the sexual enigma, had led a lopsided life. She was celebrated in her first incarnation, that of an author of biographies, who happened to be male. Later, she made it known she/he was a transgender person whose identity fell somewhere between the sexual poles, a revelation that led to her ostracism. She faced her punishment with a smile, like an actress catching trash thrown by the audience. In the end, however, she found a kind of vindication and surprised even her detractors.

With all this, I wondered whether there was another reason she'd written. Had she really just wanted to talk toilets or did she mean her letter to convey some message in code? I recognized too late that perhaps what she'd wanted was a listener, someone who might pay careful and not mocking attention to her fascinating and unlikely story.

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SHE'D BEEN BORN in England sometime before World War II as a boy named Gordon Hall, and raised in modest circumstances. During the 1960s, Gordon Hall, who'd grown up to become a slight, handsome man and who'd acquired a small fortune, moved to the moldy, provincial American city of Charleston, South Carolina. A picturesque enclave very in love with its Southern heritage, and slow to change, Charleston was still getting used to air-conditioning and airplane travel. In those years, the city was so out of date it felt like an island adrift in time. Some people still kept chickens in the yard, while a few rich whites lived in decaying mansions surrounded by antique silver and old black servants. Gordon Hall arrived into this motionless setting with a lot of money, and he began spending it like a river in an effort to soak open the city's closed, stuffy society, to which newcomers were, on the basis of their newness, refused admission.

It helped that Gordon Hall was a modestly successful writer who'd published a couple of chatty biographies (including a royal one on Princess Margaret, sister of Queen Elizabeth), plus a memoir. In Charleston, where few people actually read books, this entitled the Englishman to the kind of respect that goes to a magician who can pull things from his ear. It helped also that at every opportunity, Gordon Hall dropped the name of Margaret Rutherford, a dotty English movie star who he said was his adoptive mother, and whose reputation suited the local society, where dowagers had special influence. (Rutherford became known to Americans as Miss Jane Marple, the lady detective in big-screen adaptations of Agatha Christie novels, like *Murder, She Said* and *Murder Most Foul.)*

All that was a long time ago. But it was still impossible in Charleston, after forty-odd years, to speak coolly of these things, because of what the British writer did next.

In 1968, Gordon Hall surprised everyone when he began

living as a woman, and took the name *Dawn* Hall. To change to the other sex was not a very Southern thing to do, and it was particularly out of line in Charleston, the queen city of the old Confederacy, where men and women were considered two species who met only in church. Doubling the shock, Dawn Hall claimed she *already was a woman*. She said she had actually been born a girl but, due to a genital anomaly, had been misidentified as a boy. Therefore, the surgery she'd decided to obtain had merely *corrected* her sex, not changed it.

This was a lot for people to digest, and the local reaction fell somewhere between bewilderment and fear. Many Charleston people could not even pronounce the T-words like *transsexual*, and *transvestite:* yet here was a trans-person many knew and had shaken hands with. The figure of the trannie had not yet emerged from the secret barrooms of downtown New York, and certainly she'd never showed up at the fake Civil War battles that pass for weekend entertainment in South Carolina. Among people who knew a little about medicine, the term *sex reassignment* had been spoken only in whispers, referring to the strange new practice of one or two sleek hospitals – and fortunately, those were in the North.

Soon after the news of the sex change (or sex correction, as she insisted), Dawn Hall introduced a further nuance into her character, for she was beginning to live like an actress whose audience was a small city. As a fresh, rich white woman, Dawn decided to marry a young black man named John-Paul Simmons. By different accounts, John-Paul was a mechanic, fisherman, or gardener. (A popular rumor, which Dawn vehemently denied, was that John-Paul was her butler.)

Around town, the lady's marriage to 'a Negro' aroused even stronger feelings than her evolution from Gordon to Dawn, if that was possible. This time, magazines ran stories, and television crews appeared at Dawn's door. Those few white people who'd remained her friends during her journey from one sex to the next now ceased to have anything to do with her; and Dawn

Hall, the new Mrs. Dawn Simmons, passed from one side of the invisible wall that separated the two races to the other. She entered black society, joining an African American church, becoming a regular at civil rights meetings, and in other ways making herself into an honorary person of color.

But the third act and the climax were yet to come. Two years after her marriage, Dawn Simmons began to appear around Charleston in maternity dresses. And in October 1971, her baby, Natasha, was born. Pictures showed that Natasha was a striking mixed-race child, the perfect creation of a white mother and a black father – that is, if the couple had been capable of conceiving. Dawn Simmons claimed that yes, she had conceived – that Natasha was her biological child, proof of her natural state as a woman – and it was her prior incarnation, Gordon Hall, that was the invention, the costume, and the sexual prop.

Now she was gone, and no one knew the truth.

A Living Mystery

When Dawn Simmons died, in September 2000, a friend invited me to the funeral; but because I'd never met her, I was reluctant to go. The friend persisted, however, and I justified my appearance with Dawn's letter to me.

We drove to the J. Henry Stuhr Memorial Chapel, where the better sort in Charleston had been embalmed for generations, and threaded our way between the limousines to the canopied door. I'd asked my friend to lend me a tie, and he'd brought a stained blue one with repeating fleurs-de-lis.

A few mourners mingled and murmured in a room with mahogany furniture and Regency curtains. I talked to the two or three people I knew until suddenly, Joe Trott appeared in the room.

Joe Trott had an amiable, lined face and walked with a cane.

He was dressed in a linen jacket and string tie, and his long gray hair was pinched back in a ponytail.

'Dawn, Dawn,' Trott said. 'She was sweet to the bone. Such a dear heart, with no idea about handling money, or handling her life. I knew Dawn before all the hoopla. I remember him from when he first came to Charleston, when he was just a cute little cockney boy.' Trott looked away wistfully, and then he wandered off.

For many years, Joe Trott had owned a house a block from the one belonging to Dawn Simmons, on Society Street, a row of venerable townhouses and converted slave quarters remade into quaint cottages. A retired florist and antiques dealer, Trott had stood by Dawn through her sexual transformation and rise to motherhood, when many of her friends cut her loose.

People used to say things about Dawn, and as we waited for the service, some of the old gossip popped into my head.

He was just a pansy who liked women's clothes. He never was a woman.

A nervous young minister, wearing a white cassock with colored embroidery, approached the mourners, and we all stepped into the chapel. The room was long, white, and entirely without ornament, with a simple altar at one end. As we took our seats, I noticed an aspect of the scene that seemed to sum up Dawn's story. On one side of the chapel sat the black people, whereas we, the whites, sat across the aisle. This kind of thing was familiar in Charleston, oil separating from water, and we might have all gone along without thinking; but there was something more to the split.

The black mourners were of all ages and both sexes, and were evidently Dawn Simmons's in-laws. On the white side, however, most mourners were men over the age of sixty. A couple of them wore ascots, and one or two wore hairpieces. Their romantic dress and touches of vanity implied these were gay men of a certain age, probably closeted in keeping with their generation. They were Dawn's friends from before her

sexual rebirth, when she was still Gordon, an English-born dandy who wore pressed cotton jackets.

That Dawn had a coming-out party for his two Chihuahuas, who were dressed in white gloves and pearls and carried down the stairs on velvet pillows. He was more than eccentric.

With a strained expression, the embroidered cassock cleared his throat.

'We are gathered in the presence of God to offer final farewell to Dawn Simmons,' he said. 'I only met her a few times, but on each occasion she made a strong impression. She was a gentle person who cared for other people, who loved her animals, and especially loved her daughter, Natasha.'

There were only about twenty-five people in the room even though, in her best years, Dawn had been on a first-name basis with the entire city. If you'd said, 'Dawn's back in town,' everyone in Charleston would've known you meant *the* Dawn, and it was a name that provoked a reaction. Some people would smile, and others would roll their eyes, depending (it seemed to me) on how comfortable they were with sex. Given Dawn's notoriety, I'd expected a crowd, not the thin turnout in the chapel. I later learned that Dawn's daughter, Natasha, had placed a misleading announcement in the newspaper, stating the funeral would occur at another location, so that she and her family could escape curiosity seekers. I imagined a restless mob at that false address.

In the front row, and in the position of chief mourner, sat the living mystery of the Dawn story, Natasha Simmons. It's not too much to say that Natasha had been both the culmination of Dawn's life and her greatest ordeal.

She was a tall, thin, beautiful woman whose poise and height, joined with her dark eyes and beige skin, made her the most naturally elegant person in the room. She wore a fitted black dress, and her composure was magnified by grief.

That nigra he, or she, married was a voodoo man, and they used to sacrifice their animals. At night you could hear the damned dogs howling.

The mood in the chapel was somewhat unsettled. There was no casket, because Dawn's body had been cremated, and her ashes divided into three parts. One portion was to go to England, to be buried in the town of her birth; another went to a friend in New Hampshire, who intended to create a shrine with his allowance; and the third part went to Natasha. I saw at the front of the chapel a small metal box, which I assumed held a portion of Dawn's remains.

Someone had set up a pair of card tables in front of the altar and covered them with mementos. Dawn had been an author, and therefore on the first table were several books she'd written, both as Gordon Hall and as Dawn Simmons. Next to these were framed photographs from different stages in Dawn's life. The pictures began with her days as an androgynous young man in a bow tie (the author photo on a book), moved on to her years as a woman (transfigured into a conservative lady in a dress, with beehive hair), and climaxed with Dawn on her wedding day, a bride in a white gown walking with her black (and much younger) groom, the smiling, vigorous John-Paul Simmons. A last picture was a portrait of Dawn as wife and mother, holding her young daughter. In this faded color image, she seemed different, in a way vindicated, her pale white face nestled into the brown cheek of her girl. It also looked a bit like she was holding a trophy.

Common sense said that Dawn Simmons hadn't given birth, but here in the chapel stood her daughter, silent in grief. If she wasn't the child of her mother, then who was she? I'd heard that in recent years, Natasha and Dawn had lived a few blocks apart and seen each other every day. It was what any aging mother would want with her child, an inseparable attachment.

I wondered what Natasha, standing in the front pew, thought of the talk her mother had stirred. Did she know the rumors? How did she feel about the gossip? Obviously, she knew that Dawn had once lived as a man – how did she make

sense of that part of her mother's life? I imagined Natasha regarded Dawn as a woman and a mother, because anything else would have been hard to understand.

John-Paul Simmons was not in the chapel; indeed, his family didn't know where he was. A few years after the wedding, he'd been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and he'd drifted in and out of psychiatric care for decades. It was said he was living in New York State.

The minister gave a ten-minute eulogy on the theme of kindness, which ended with a prayer.

'Dear God, watch over your servant Dawn Simmons as she completes her eventful time on earth. Keep her safe from those who would torment her, and protect those she leaves behind – her beloved daughter Natasha, and her grandchildren.'

That faggot stole that baby and passed it off as his own.

The service ended and we drifted back into the reception room, where my friend introduced me to Natasha. She was the youngest among the mourners, her trim figure fitting just so in her dress. She weakly shook my hand, looking up but not focusing on my face.

'Thank you for coming,' she said.

Natasha blinked but didn't really see me. And I knew she was with her mother, whom she'd loved.

I had been thinking that Dawn's claim to motherhood was specious, but Natasha's obviously genuine grief put doubt in my mind.

For several days after the funeral, I felt uneasy. People had once watched Dawn from a distance, like drivers rubbernecking an accident, and I felt like one of the voyeurs.

She'd been properly blessed, but she lingered in memory.

The chapel scene was a puzzle: the beautiful Natasha, the black and white factions, the incompatible photographs. Dawn's life seemed like a jagged pile of events, with unbelievable pieces – unless, of course, you accepted her version of things, in which case all of it made sense.

When I thought about Dawn's sex reassignment, my instinct said she was a transsexual, a man who'd become a woman only with surgery. And a sex-change patient cannot have children. Thus, her daughter's origin was a mystery.

But why did she insist on having been born a girl? Dawn's explanation of her sexuality had brought her a raft of trouble, yet she stuck to her story till the end.

Maybe she'd wanted the adventure. Even if one rejected her account, Dawn's life had been a fascinating production, like music that keeps changing keys. First, she'd masqueraded as a man for decades, then lived as a woman for equal time, which gave her a panoramic view of things. And besides inhabiting two genders, she'd had the unusual pleasure of experiencing sex on both sides of the bed.

That's just to start. Dawn's claim to sexual ambiguity also placed her in the path of science. The first studies of the topic took place in the mid-nineteenth century, and since then researchers have listed many sexual dispositions other than male and female – from anomalies triggered by hormones to types of genital variation. Her decision to undergo sex reassignment made her a pioneer in twentieth-century medicine, which had been revolutionized by transplant surgery and a willingness to alter the body.

Crossing into social history, in the years before civil rights won the upper hand, Dawn flouted the ban against interracial marriage. She broke a taboo of the Deep South that reached back to slavery times – the one that called for white women to stay away from black men – and she faced down the

punishment. In the midst of this, Dawn produced an heir whose life summed up and extended her story. Natasha Simmons was proof of her mother's womanhood – and a guarantee that the enigma of Dawn's identity would outlive her.

All this was like a pageant. From a distance, however, it seemed Natasha would be made to pay the psychological bill run up by her own birth. I wanted to unravel Dawn's story not only because she'd broken all the rules but also because there appeared to have been a human cost. Dawn's daughter was at stake, and perhaps other people I hadn't met. And what about Dawn's husband? Was John-Paul Simmons, a schizophrenic, born into madness? Or had his mental illness been deepened by the events of his marriage?

I STARTED LOOKING into cases of sexual ambiguity and found several examples of women who'd lived in sexual disguise. A jazz pianist called Billy Tipton had grown up in Oklahoma in the 1920s as a girl named Dorothy but started living as a man at age nineteen. When Billy Tipton died, in 1989, her secret was finally uncovered. She had married several women and had adopted children; among those lulled by the deception were Billy's last wife, Kitty, and their sons. (Her biographer said Billy used to bind her breasts with elastic, telling people she had rib damage from an auto accident. In her sex life, Billy Tipton seems to have kept the lights off, and used a strapped-on dildo.)

No, it was ridiculous – Dawn Simmons hadn't been a 'passing woman,' or female transvestite. She'd lived as Gordon Hall for half her life, so why would she suddenly switch as an adult and invite problems?

Could Dawn have been a person whose anatomy fell between the sexes? The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan used to begin certain of his lectures with a question: *Pourquoi n'y a t-il pas un troisième sexe?* (Why isn't there a third sex?) People have long said that there are 'masculine women' and 'feminine men.' Could Dawn have been a blend, an example of a third way?