

(CHARLOTTE puts the letter down; she pauses, considering the request.)

CHARLOTTE:

Dear Mr. Wright,

Yes. Perhaps it is possible for you to make a play. Maybe you will visit Berlin after Christmas.

Sincerely,

Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

(DOUG, ecstatic, springs into action, giving the thumbs-up sign; they're in business now. He circles the stage, reaching into his mini recorder.)

DOUG: Testing. Testing one-two-three. Testing.

Tape One. It's January 20, 1993. I'm headed to the Grunderzeit Museum in Mahlsdorf for my first official interview with Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. With me, John Marks.

(He sits. On one side, presumably, is JOHN MARKS. On the other, CHARLOTTE.)

TRANSLATING TANTE LUISE

DOUG: John—if you could, please—would you ask Charlotte about her given name? Her legal name?

JOHN: (His Texas twang evident) Was war Ihr Geburtsname?

CHARLOTTE: Mein Geburtsname war Lothar. Lothar Berfelde.

JOHN: It was Lothar—

DOUG: Yeah, yeah. I got that. And next, could you ask her when she knew . . . the precise time . . . that her name ought to be Charlotte?

JOHN: (Even sharper on the ear this time) Und wann wussten Sie, dass Ihr Name Charlotte hätte sein sollen?

(CHARLOTTE decides to put an end to this auditory torture.)

CHARLOTTE: I can tell it in English, yes?

(JOHN and DOUG exchange a look. CHARLOTTE takes over the telling of the tale.)

CHARLOTTE: Meine Tante Luise was working on an estate in East Prussia, and she raised horses. On a large farm. And since she was fifteen years old she never wore ladies' clothes.

No.

Only boots. And jodhpurs. The clothes of a land inspector, and not a fine lady.

(She gives a long, knowing look to punctuate that thought. Then she continues.)

And so I was coming in August in 1943 to East Prussia and I found in her closet clothes. Girl's clothes. And . . .

*(She whispers with an almost erotic intensity.)*

. . . I . . . put . . . them . . . on.

*(CHARLOTTE steps before an imaginary mirror. She gazes into it as if she were looking at herself—truly examining herself—for the first time. And she's delighted by her image in the glass. She turns, raising her skirt as if it were an exotic fan.*

*Suddenly she's stricken with a look of terror. She sees another reflection, looming behind her.)*

And my aunt was coming into the room, and I was standing there, and she looked at us in the mirror, and then she said:

*(CHARLOTTE becomes TANTE LUISE, with a stirring alto voice.)*

TANTE LUISE: *Weisst du, mit uns beiden hat die Natur sich einen Scherz erlaubt. Du hättest ein Mädchen werden müssen und ich ein Mann!*

*(She repeats the phrase—eloquently—in English.)*

Did you know that nature has dared to play a joke on us? You should've been born a girl, and I should've been a man!

*(TANTE LUISE morphs back into CHARLOTTE.)*

CHARLOTTE: And there was—on the bookshelf—a book. And *meine* Tante took this book down and handed it to me. The binding, it was blue. And I opened it. And on its *Titelbild*—"Frontispiece"—"*Die Transvestiten, by Magnus Hirschfeld.*" Und ich spürte eine Gänsehaut . . . über meinen Rücken kriechen. I felt a shiver down my spine. And *meine* Tante Luise said, "Read."

*(CHARLOTTE begins to read.)*

*In each person, there is a delicate balance of male and female substances. Just as we can't find two matching leaves from the same tree, it is scientifically impossible to find two human beings whose male and female characteristics match in kind and number.*

*(She passes the book to DOUG.)*

CHARLOTTE: *(to DOUG)* Read.

*(Now he reads from the text.)*

DOUG: And so we must treat sexual intermediaries—those individuals who defy the ready classification of "man" or "woman"—as a common . . . utterly natural . . . phenomenon?

(He looks to CHARLOTTE for approval, she nods and says):

CHARLOTTE: Yes. And *meine* Tante said:

TANTE LUISE: This book is not just any book. This book, it will be your Bible.

CHARLOTTE: (to DOUG, lightheartedly) *Möchten Sie ein paar Spritzeküchen?*

(DOUG ducks aside, his invisible tape recorder primed, and makes a few private observations.)

### THE GIVEAWAY

DOUG: Charlotte's just slipped into the kitchen, to bring us some *Kaffee und Kuchen*. I brought a camera, but I'm too shy to ask her to pose . . . I'm afraid she'll think I've only come to gawk. So I wanted to record a quick . . . visual . . . an impression.

She's about five eight, maybe a hundred and seventy pounds. Sixty-five years old. Doesn't look like a drag queen at all. No makeup. I asked her about that, she says she "doesn't need it." She's got piercing eyes—really smart eyes—and a sly little crooked smile. She still wears her own hair, which is

**End**

white, goose-feather white, cut in—I guess you'd call it a pageboy. She's got on a black peasant dress, a string of pearls, and heavy black shoes. Orthopedic shoes. She doesn't have breasts—not really—but just enough padding to sort of enhance the impression. But her hands are big, and thick. The hands of a woodworker. A craftsman. Definitely a man's hands.

(DOUG raises his own hands as if they belonged to

CHARLOTTE. As he does so, he transforms back into her:

CHARLOTTE picks another Edison Amberol on the phonograph, and the room fills with the sound of nostalgia.)

### ARE YOU A BOY OR A GIRL?

CHARLOTTE: And the last days of the world war were the most dangerous time for me because I refused to carry a weapon or to wear a uniform. Instead, I had my hair long and blond and my mother's coat, and the shoes of a girl. And so I was—in Germany we say "*Fräulein*." Like the Jews, we were wild game.

Berlin was destroyed. I was walking about—the houses were all broken—and the street was full of rubble. Yes. And I would turn a street, and there was coming Russian airplanes with the splatter bombs—so close you could see the pilot with the helmet and the goggles. And this was very