

NAOMI SIMS

**HOW TO BE
A TOP MODEL**

FOREWORD BY BETTY RASNIC
DRAWINGS BY MONA MARKS

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OTHER BOOKS BY NAOMI SIMS:

All About Health and Beauty for the Black Woman

sweaters, nothing was too much, even if I had to starve! When I was fourteen, my mother let me subscribe to *Vogue*, *Bazaar*, *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, and *Mademoiselle*. They became my bibles. Especially *Glamour*. I faithfully copied as many of the fashions as I could. I dressed like the models and I carried myself as I thought these models did, although I had never seen one live.

When I was sixteen, I entered the talent contest sponsored by a Ladies Group to which my mother belonged. The show was to be held in the school auditorium and the prize was \$250 to be spent as college tuition. I knew that most of the acts would be standard routines like singing, dancing, and baton-twirling. I decided that my act would be modeling and that I would also design my own outfit.

I told this to no one except my mother. I needed her help in sewing the outfit. I refused to rehearse with the others for two reasons. I was scared that I would be laughed off the stage then and there and, paradoxically, I knew that when the real time came, with the lights, music and the audience, I would be spectacular. I did not want to jinx the spontaneity of this by doing a cold run-through.

Well, I won. The applause was incredible. No one had seen anything like it. I had never seen anything like it—I had never seen a live fashion show, so I just made up my own style. Of course my design helped. Full white satin bell-bottom pants with white satin quilted sleeveless, collarless jacket. My shoes were a very rich turquoise (cheap off-white bedroom slippers that I had hand-dyed). I also made a little speech about my ambitions (“to become a famous fashion model”) and my voice echoed nicely through the hall. As narrator for the Pittsburgh All-City Choir, I had already had plenty of experience as a public speaker.

Now, a bare twelve months later, I am in New York and seem to be half-way to realizing my ambition. I have an introduction to three photographers, at least one of whom, Gösta Peterson, I recognized from his credits in the *New York Times*.

Taking the bull by the horns I called the first name, John Vidol.

“Hello, my name is Naomi Sims. I am a new model without an agency. I met Peter Henrick and he suggested I might be able to test with you.”

“How tall are you?”

“I am five-ten and I have been doing fashion illustration, modeling for Macy’s and artists like Florence Mayer.”

“Well, I’ll take a look at you; come by tomorrow at one.” He gave me his address and that was that.

I was determined to make a stunning impression, so I wore my most striking outfit. It was a two-piece suit with a collarless beige linen

jacket and a rust A-line skirt, rust leather pumps, and a custom-made tall black straw hat that swept back off my head like an Egyptian crown. I highlighted my make-up with gold and bronze.

I found John Vidol in his cavernous loft-studio on West Twentyninth Street. It was not quite as elegant as my imagination had pictured a studio to be, but John was a very young photographer just starting out, and at least it was clean and bright.

He took one look at me and stepped back. “My God! You come just to test but you look as if you stepped off the cover of *Bazaar*. When can you start?”

That was the first of two magic sentences that were to launch my career.

My reply: “I am ready when you are.”

We made an appointment to start the next day at 5 P.M. when his regular work load would be over. I was very excited and elated. Then I panicked. I did not worry about my ability, I was supremely confident that I could model for the camera. I panicked about what I would wear, how I would do my make-up, what kind of hairstyle to have.

I had taught myself a lot about make-up and hair care and my wardrobe was more extensive than that of most young women of my age, but I was determined that my first shots would be truly spectacular! I was and still am a very critical self-appraiser and perfection itself was still short of the impression I wanted my appearance to make. To my rescue came a very dear friend.

When I had gone to Macy’s to be interviewed for the job of illustrator’s model, one of the young artists on their staff (he is now a top illustrator working for *Vogue* and *Bazaar*) just stared and stared and stared at me without a word. I was used to that treatment so I did not mind at all. Later, when we worked together, he told me his name, Jon Rodriguez, that he thought I was incredibly beautiful, and why didn’t I try wearing a really black, black eye shadow? I did, it worked, and from then on I listened when he gave me advice and tips about beauty and modeling.

He was as thrilled as I was about the appointment with Vidol. “But you need new clothes,” he said, “at least four complete outfits! And new cosmetics, accessories, the works!”

“Jon, how can I get all that by tomorrow afternoon? I don’t exactly have a fortune!”

“Come with me, come with me. I have a little card that will help.”

Because he was a member of the staff at Macy’s, Jon had a special discount credit card. We went mildly wild with it. We picked out an evening dress, a day dress, a silver bikini, and a pants suit. Also hats,

shoes, gloves, bags, and jewelry. Two days later we carefully replaced all the price tags and I let Jon return the merchandise. "The wrong size." "The wrong color." "She just didn't like it." Sorry, Macy's.

John Vidol is now one of the top fashion photographers in New York and his list of credits is very impressive. In 1967 he was virtually unknown and on my first visit to the studio I had seen no one else there. I was hesitant about going alone, especially in the evening. I asked Jon Rodriguez to come with me as a chaperon, and besides, he could help with my make-up and hair, which he did very well.

"You are a real pro, with your own assistant, I see," John Vidol greeted us at the door.

We began right on time at five. At three the next morning, reluctantly, we called it quits. In front of the camera I was reborn.

That very first shooting, the first in my entire life, was an intense, magical, mystical experience. Every top model experiences this at least once, when everything melds beautifully between her and the photographer. It was incredible that this happened to me with the first photographer I met.

We took our energy out of the thin air. We were inspired by the very fact of our meeting. We were both intensely thrilled. Jon Rodriguez helped me from one outfit to another. There was no time, no space.

At times the three of us would be absolutely silent for twenty or thirty minutes on end. The only sound in the studio the click-click of the camera. I was totally relaxed, I moved slowly and easily. I bathed in the attention and it seemed to me as if the tiny lens was sending me some very precious plasma of life itself.

Then, suddenly, John would change film, put on music—the Rolling Stones, Marvin Gaye, the Jefferson Airplane, and I would move like a whirlwind while we chattered with excitement.

"Jump, jump, like Hiro," Vidol would shout, giving me clues in a fashion shorthand that he guessed I would understand. No one had taught me to pose, but I had studied fashion magazines so hard and for so long that I knew when he said "Silano" or "Avedon, raise your head" or "Bert Stern, turn and look back" he wanted the looks that had become those famous photographers' trademarks.

We did everything we could with the semipurloined clothes. We mixed and matched them ad infinitum. I braided my hair with wires, I gilded my ears. I was inebriated by discovering a use for all the hours I had spent alone and with Jon Rodriguez "inventing" my make-up, at times, literally painting my face. I was in all respects like a freshwater fish that had spent its life in the sea and finally found itself in a mountain lake, its natural habitat.

Vidol barely slept and the very next day developed the hundreds of feet of film. We were both very elated with the results. There were not just excellent test shots, they were terrific fashion photographs. John kept a set of the best in his portfolio for years, and three years later, when I had become very well known I found a picture from that very first shooting on the cover of the Long Island newspaper *Newsday* illustrating a story about me!

I do not really know what I expected to happen next. I remember buying a good leather portfolio for those test shots and showing them off proudly to the illustrators I was still working with.

"I can see I am going to lose you soon," said Barbara Pearlman when she saw the pictures. "These are so very good, you know. One day you'll be very famous."

I will not deny that those words were music to my ears, but I still had a way to go. All I had was a shiny new book and one set of test shots.

I am a meticulous woman and as soon as I started working with the illustrators I bought a page-a-day agenda and into it I put notes about everything, every appointment, every penny earned, every name and address that I came across. Every model should have something like this. At the end of the year I would comb through the book and transfer the names and addresses to my Rolodex and make a record of my earnings for Uncle Sam. I found the notes I had made the day I met Peter Henrick and I called the second photographer on his list (I never got to number three!).

"Gösta Peterson's studio, good morning."

"May I please speak to Mr. Peterson?"

"Who may I say is calling?"

"My name is Naomi Sims, I am a new model and . . ."

I was interrupted. "Hold on, please."

I thought I was going to be disconnected. I waited and my luck held. Mr. Peterson himself came on the line. "Yes, you are a new model? I suppose you want to test. Are you with any agency?" He had a kindly, heavily accented voice and I felt more confident.

"No, but I have tested with John Vidol and the results were very good."

"How tall are you?"

"Five-ten."

"Come and see me on Thursday at two and bring your pictures. Good-by."

On Thursday morning it took me five hours to get dressed. My self-confidence never failed me, but as I got closer and closer to the world of fashion photography the stakes were getting higher. I realized just

how badly I wanted to win. Now I was about to be looked over by a top photographer whose work appeared every week in one of the most prestigious fashion sections in the country. To put it mildly, I was nervous.

When I looked in the mirror my palpitations ceased. I wore a white low-V-neck sleeveless linen dress with a white sash, white fishnet stockings (this was 1967, remember) and white patent leather Charles Jourdan shoes. I had on lots of black eye shadow and the picture was completed with small beaded turquoise earrings. I really did look great.

Gösta Peterson's streamlined studio was the antithesis of John Vidal's bohemian domain. It was uptown, on the East Side and seemed to me like a perfect replica of the fashion photographer's studio that existed for so long in my imagination.

There was an enormous white room with tall windows, the light streaming in. Myriad assistants rushed to and fro adjusting lights and holding up meters. Aretha Franklin belted from concealed speakers. Smartly dressed secretaries scurried from and back into hidden rooms. There was a great flurry of intense activity. Mr. Peterson was in the midst of actually shooting when I arrived. I recognized one of the models from the current cover of *Bazaar*. The furniture consisted of large, stark-white cubes, pyramids, and spheres which were being arranged and rearranged as props for the models.

I waited in total fascination, trying to appear nonchalant. At last the maestro was finished and he strolled toward me. He is a slender, tall Swede with sandy hair and piercing blue eyes. I knew not what to expect but I was quite used to receiving comments on how attractive (or at least how unusual) I looked, and I expected such a word or two from him.

For a moment he said absolutely nothing. Then: "May I see your book?"

He turned the pages very, very slowly. He examined each of Vidal's photographs with great care. Seconds, minutes passed. He said nothing. Eventually he closed the book and looked up at me.

I was prepared for him to say "No" and I was prepared for him to say "Yes" and I was prepared for him to say "Maybe."

I did not think there was any other possibility.

When he finally said what he did I was completely mystified. I had not the foggiest idea what he meant. I sensed, however, that it was very significant. In fact, it was the second magic sentence that would launch my career and change my life. His words were: "Do you have time to see my wife?"

I pretended to understand and opened my agenda to check the

day's schedule. Of course the afternoon was blank and I probably had the book upside down but I still wanted to appear reasonably busy.

"Yes, yes I do have time to see your wife."

"Then I will call her now and my secretary will give you her address."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Peterson," I said quite sincerely, though not knowing at all for what it was I was thanking him.

As I left the studio I looked at the piece of paper given to me by the secretary:

Pat Peterson
Eighteenth Floor
New York Times
229 West 43rd Street

I hailed a taxi and gave him the address. Why was I being sent to the *New York Times*? What did Mrs. Peterson do there?

I finally came to the conclusion that Mr. Peterson did think I had some potential as a model but that he himself was too grand or too busy to test me and that his wife would give me the names of some new photographers that might be willing to give me a try. This alone was enough to buoy my spirits and I was in a very good mood as I marched through the high bronze portals of the Times Building. On the eighteenth floor I encountered a vast scene of contained pandemonium that I later came to know as typical of big-city dailies. The whole floor was open, with no real walls or divisions. Desks and partitions were scattered in an apparently random pattern. Staccato bursts of mechanical chatter from teletype machines competed with the tap-tap-tap of a hundred typewriter keys and a hubbub of raised voices. Several pairs of eyes had swiveled toward me when I entered, and one young man sprang forward and asked if he could help me.

"I am looking for Pat Peterson. Where can I find her?"

"You'll find her over there in the fashion department. Here, I'll show you, follow me."

I obeyed, threading my way past numerous obstacles, human as well as inanimate, and eventually found myself in a relatively quiet corner. I was in the presence of two women, one, a tall, striking woman in her thirties, the other a pretty young Black woman. The latter was Andrea Skinner, then assistant to Mrs. Peterson and now a top fashion editor at the *New York Times* and the tall woman was, of course, Pat Peterson herself, to this day the guiding light of the newspaper's fashion section. I was struck by her schoolgirl figure and her beautiful chestnut hair which she wore in a long single braid reaching

to the small of her back. She was dressed with elegant simplicity in an A-line skirt and cotton blouse. She was expecting me.

"She has very nice legs," she said to Andrea and continued to look at me intently, critically, but without seeming impolite.

"Are you with an agency?" she asked me.

"No."

"That doesn't matter. Can you work for us next Tuesday? We will need you all day, from nine to five. The fee is \$150."

This time I did not even pretend to look at my agenda. "Of course, I would be delighted."

"Give me your telephone number. We'll call you tomorrow for a fitting and on Tuesday be at my husband's studio at 8:30 A.M."

I left walking on air. I was going to model for the *New York Times!* And she had not even looked at my book!

When I went for the fitting I found out more about the job. It was for the big semiannual supplement *Fashions of the Times* that was to appear one Sunday in August. This particular section called for very dramatic clothes and would be shot on location all around New York City. And besides myself, there was only one other model!

As the day dawned, I was beset with a strange combination of nervousness and confidence. Most of all, I was exhilarated. I knew that I would do a terrific job. Ever since testing with John Vidol I had been starving to get back in front of a camera and I knew that this was a very important opportunity, perhaps the key to my career.

We rendezvoused at Gösta's studio. He had two assistants, as did his wife. With myself and the other model we made an intrepid crew of eight. I was very curious to meet my co-model. I wondered if she would be as much of a novice as I. She turned out to be a gorgeous blonde, French, called Marie-France. She was a top earner at the Ford agency. At first her attitude toward me was cold and aloof, and I attributed that to the fact that she might not like to work with a totally unknown new model who did not even have an agency. In fact I was quite wrong. As the day wore on we became friendly, and I realized that she was simply shy because her grasp of English was very limited. Subsequent experience working with many models from Germany, Scandinavia, and France (all blond, of course) bore out the fact that they often attract totally undeserved reputations for stand-offishness caused by the language barrier.

This second shooting was as exciting as the first but in quite a different way. I was given the golden opportunity to experience what it was like to be part of an incredibly professional team. Later on I was involved with many bookings that were well organized but none more so than this one. Gösta and Pat and their assistants worked like

clockwork. Everything was meticulously planned. I was treated no differently from Marie-France and no exceptions were made for the fact that this was my first real session and only the second time I had been before a professional's lens.

Because of this I had a very great sense of accomplishment every time Gösta said: "Yes, that's it. A great shot. Now let's do the next outfit."

There were, of course, circumstances beyond our control that punctuated the day with moments of high tension (would the infernally slow ferry get us to Staten Island while the light was still good?) and low comedy (changing out in the open, screened by the assistants from the pop-eyed tourists at the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. All location work has its unpredictable incidents and it is very important for the new model to be able to roll, unfazed, with the punches.

Our outfits were the very latest fashions from a bevy of famous designers. In particular, I enjoyed wearing a glorious black cape by Adolfo which was matched with a low-crown wide-brimmed hat like that of a Vatican emissary.

We worked steadily and quickly and ended right on time. I was very, very happy and very, very exhausted. I had considered standing still for hours on end for the illustrators to be arduous enough, but this was really tough work.

The next day was an anticlimax. It would be weeks before the pictures appeared and I warned myself that those of me would probably be quite small and insignificant compared to the impact of the magazine as a whole.

I woke up feeling that I had become a professional print model, but still I had no other work besides that with my artists. For the next few weeks I continued to test in the evenings with a number of photographers, including friends of John Vidol and some recommended by the illustrators. The fruits of these early testings have often appeared in print over the years and one shot in particular, by Peter Oliver, was on the cover of *Modern Photography*.

I was happy with these testings even though I was not being paid. The most important thing a new model can get from testing is the camera experience. The photographers obviously liked some of the pictures because they put many of them into their books. One day I received a call from a top advertising agency, Norman, Craig & Kummel. One of their art directors had been checking out the work of a good new photographer and spotted my picture in his book. He wanted to know if I was with an agency.

"No, but I recently worked with Gösta Peterson for *Fashions of the Times*."

"Well, we have an idea for using you in a big print campaign for one of our clients. Can you come in and see us right away?"

Indeed I could. And I got the job. The product was Cold Power detergent. The ad agency's idea, a novel one in those days, was to advertise it with a very high-fashion look rather than link it to housewife drudgery. This had not been done before with such a household product (it is an approach used very successfully in recent years by Woolite) and the agency planned several full-color full-page ads that would run in all the major women's magazines, including *Vogue*. Each ad would show a different high-fashion model wearing a designer gown that was made of a fabric for which Cold Power was suitable. By using me I am sure they also intended to capitalize on the public's recognition of the implied pun because the slogan "Black Power" was then entering everyone's conversation. The photographer was the famous Bill Silano, and at that booking I met the multit talented Ara Gallant who then and on many subsequent occasions created extraordinary hairstyles for me. Now he is a well-reputed fashion photographer in his own right.

Because I had no agency, I handled all the details of billing and model's releases myself. I was positive, of course, that as soon as the *Times* appeared I would have a place with a major agency and I further assumed that this would be Ford, the dominant one. This assumption was not entirely groundless, because I knew that they took on girls with far less experience than I already had who were groomed and sent out testing for weeks in order to get just the type of selection, recognition, and real bookings that had come to me on my own. I knew that if I went to Ford with a book full of the very best of my test shots *plus* tearsheets of two very major jobs they would really have no choice but to take me on. How wrong I was!

How wrong I also was, although in a different way, about my debut in print.

Gösta, I knew, had done some color shots, but most were black-and-white, and my skepticism told me that the best I should hope for would be a half-page black-and-white. That, I felt, would be a sensational kickoff for my career.

The supplement appeared on the third Sunday in August. I did not know beforehand when it would be out, only what month. That weekend I was the guest of a fashion illustrator and her husband who had a summer cottage in the Hamptons on Long Island. We had been to a party the night before and I was sleeping late.

At ten o'clock there began a persistent knocking on my bedroom door. To my muffled cries of "What is it? Let me sleep!" there was no response. Eventually I roused myself and sleepily opened the door.

Thrust three inches before my eyes was the *Fashions of the Times*. On the cover was an enormous black triangle. It was a figure in a very wide, billowing black cape wearing a wide-brimmed hat. It was an extraordinary picture. At first I couldn't tell what it was. It took a good ten seconds for it to sink in . . . that's me! No aspiring model could have asked for more. A cover in color. One of the most prestigious fashion publications in the country. It was like manna from heaven, a broad staircase to success.

That Sunday I was treated like a new celebrity (as indeed I was) by the taste-conscious liberal professionals who make their summer havens on Long Island's far southern shore. The day before, a would-be model—today, a star!

I was in a tremendous hurry to get back to New York City and see Eileen Ford. I half expected she would try and track me down before I might sign with a rival agency. Only the formalities remained; we would discuss the best pictures to use on my composite, what my rate would be, things like that which I looked forward to finalizing.

I reorganized my book, putting the *Times* cover at the very beginning and keeping only the very best test shots. Although the Cold Power ad had not yet started to run, I had obtained an advance tearsheet from the agency. It looked very impressive.

I called the Ford agency. "Hello, my name is Naomi Sims. I am a new model. I'm on the cover of this Sunday's *Fashions of the Times* and I would like an appointment to see Eileen Ford."

"How tall are you?" was the rather curt reply.

"Five-ten."

"What do you weigh?"

"A hundred and twenty pounds. You can see me on the cover of. . ."

I was cut off with: "Come in tomorrow at ten."

I was very slightly upset that the arms of the agency, even on the telephone, had not opened wider for me, but I knew that when my credits were spread before them and when I was seen in person the champagne would be opened and the ticker-tape thrown.

I dressed to kill and was at the agency at ten.

"Miss Harnett will see you. Please be seated."

"But my appointment is with Eileen Ford."

"Miss Ford is very, very busy. Miss Harnett sees all new models."

Formalities I can understand. I did not blame them for sticking to the rules. I waited a long time. One thing that I earnestly detest is waiting.

Eventually a door opened and a very attractive blonde beckoned me into her office. This was Sunny Harnett, then Eileen's right-hand