

Harry, A Slow Learning Curve

by Dennis Hiatt

Harry sat behind the wheel of his Coup de Ville and fiddled with the radio, trying to pull in a blues station while he waited for Amber to start bitching at him. The scummy wino that haunted his restaurant's doorway, hung in the shadows, watching him and Amber. Once, two month's ago, Amber had slipped one of her huge breasts out of a low-cut summer dress and pressed it against the window of Harry's convertible. The wino had almost gone into convulsions. Harry was positive that the wino would have moved on to better hunting grounds if Amber hadn't tortured him with her monster sex.

The wino was a problem. La Donna was another problem. Harry cast a jaundiced eye toward his restaurant's windows. La Donna had spent twenty minutes in some kind of trance, mopping one spot on the black and white tiled floor. Harry knew the bizarre Lesbo, with her freak-of-the-week hair, would quit mopping as soon as he drove off, and tomorrow there'd be one spotless spot in the middle of his restaurant.

"Why don't you just fire her, Harry? It makes me itch just working with that cunt sniffer." Amber leaned forward and turned off the radio.

Harry slipped the big convertible into gear and nudged it out onto Twenty-First Avenue. He sighed. He'd been wishing for months that he'd bought a retro clothing store. He would have called it HARRY'S HOARY HOSERRY. He would have met a better class of women.

"You know she'll never get sweaty with you. She's just a dyke." Amber adjusted the collar on the pony coat Harry had bought her. "I know." Harry slowed for a red light, but it winked green before the big car came to it.

“Why DON'T you fire her just for me?”

“Because,” Harry said slowly, “She gives me an urge that I haven't felt since '68.”

Amber pivoted her head. “What does that dyke do for you that I don't?”

“La Donna makes me want to call in an air strike,” Harry smiled. That should get Amber off his back. Harry waited a second before glancing at his girl friend. Sure enough, Amber had unbuttoned the top buttons of her blouse to show off her awesome cleavage. There were times Harry hated himself for being a tit man. Amber had become one of those times. La Donna had warned him not to hire Amber, but Harry, fool that he was around god's own breast factory, had gone and hired her. Harry knew La Donna might quit, but he would never fire her. La Donna's advice on women (however cryptic) was unbeatable. Besides, La Donna was awesome at cutting unruly customers. When she was on a roll, the assholes went down like Tommies charging a machine-gun in the mud and blood of the First World War. Harry liked having La Donna do his dirty work. Having La Donna shut down rude customers was like using the neighbor's Doberman Pincher to bite assholes that needed bit, and then, if the cops arrested the dog (or La Donna), Harry was off the hook. (I don't care if you put the bitch to sleep. I don't own her.) La Donna had warned Harry not to hire Amber. Harry, naturally, had been smitten by Amber's pectoral splendor. “What do you think?” Harry had fidgeted with Amber's job application.

La Donna stared serenely across the room at Amber who was sitting at a table near the window. “She has the personality of an AM radio station, Harry.”

“She's nice, though.” A little fat under the jaw, but great blue eyes, blonde hair and tits like the prow of an icebreaker.

“Monopoly money's nice, Harry.” La Donna flipped a loose strand of red hair from her weird hair-do out of her eyes and cocked her little head back.

“She IS nice.” Harry crossed his arms. La Donna crossed her small, slim arms. “Uh-huh, and the earth IS flat.”

"You're nice." Harry hated himself for the pleading note he heard in his voice.

"Am not!" La Donna's nostrils flared.

Amber stretched, showing her full form most delightfully, and Harry said, "Well I'm the boss and I'm hiring her."

"Fiend!" La Donna shrilled and stomped her small feet back into the kitchen.

Fiend (or neef) was gerbil talk La Donna retreated into whenever the situation was ambivalent or ambiguous. Harry was so tired of neef this, fiend that, he was thinking of getting La Donna a wharf rat to improve her vocabulary.

"Harry?" Amber fiddled with the radio, hunting for her favorite AM station, "Just when are you going to move out of your mother's?"

Harry shrugged. He wanted to smoke, but Amber had fits when he fired up a clove cigarette in the car. Amber cuddled up to him.

"Does your mother still have that cute bumper sticker that says. 'Ask me about my grandchildren?'" Harry nodded forlornly. He was an only child and a bachelor. It didn't matter to his mother that he ran the coolest cafe in town. Hell, the governor could—and did—come in and have a cup of coffee and read the sports page, and no one bugged him. What mattered to his mother was that Harry hadn't bred a platoon of grandchildren so that she could troop their pictures out to her blue-haired friends. Amber and his mother seemed to be in a conspiracy.

Amber rested her hand lightly on Harry's thigh. "You could move in with me Baby."

"No." Harry really needed a cigarette.

"Then you've GOT to just fire that crazy cunt sniffer." Amber's hand squeezed Harry's thigh and nestled in his groin.

"No, I've got a better idea," he said. Amber smiled. Harry smiled back and lit up a cigarette. "Amber, you're fired."

The next morning, Harry was at his cafe before any of his employees showed up. He moved a table over the clean spot on the floor, brewed a pot of coffee and checked the work schedule. Amber was off today, so he wouldn't need to call anyone in to replace her. When

Harry had bought the café, it had been staffed by drug addicts that ripped him off. His first hiring phase had been young, gay men, because he wanted a classy place. They hadn't worked out. They'd unnerved Harry with their squealings in the back room and calling each other bitch out front. He'd replaced them (as they quit) with college kids. The collegiate phase was fine in the summer, but when school started, the kids all wanted weird hours. Harry had then settled into a cute phase, and La Donna had been one of the first Cutes hired. Amber, Harry now suspected, was the last of the Cutes. When Borden, the baker, clocked in, Harry took his coffee to the backroom office to hang out. Harry didn't like Borden, but the tall, gangling, chain-smoking baker (a leftover dropout from the collegiate phase) was a great baker, and as long as Borden had a free hand in the bakery, he worked cheap and kept to himself. Harry didn't like Borden because he had sneaky eyes and was always smiling at you like he'd caught you doing something, and that something was dirty...really dirty. Coffee in hand, Harry fired up a clove cigarette and looked for the job applications. He couldn't find them, so he moseyed out front and checked the Coke machine. The overflow had been backing up for a week, and Harry was starting to worry about the plumbing and the floor. If the floor was pressboard, sooner or later, it would come apart and the Coke machine would fall through the floor.

Stewart and Emily, two nice but bland Cutes, were opening. "Hey Stewart, have you seen the job applications?"

"No Sir," Stewart replied, pulling his long hair into a ponytail and fixing it with a rubber band.

Borden laughed. "La Donna took them home with her, boss."

"That bitch!" Harry snarled.

"Am NOT!" A La Donna-like voice yelled from a table hidden by the food display case.

Harry sighed, went back to the office for his coffee and cigarettes, and joined La Donna at her table. "What are you doing here?" he said.

"Amber called me last night," La Donna smiled her mystery smile

and tore up a job application.

Harry sighed deeply. "Why?"

La Donna read another application and tore it up. "She wanted to know if I'd testify about your sexual harassment of her."

Harry watched La Donna tear up another application. "And what did you say?"

"Fiend," La Donna grinned and laid an application to one side.

Harry wiggled his cigarette. "Will you?"

Tearing up an application, La Donna shrugged. "It might be be-neef me."

Harry reached for the job applications, and La Donna held them away from him. Harry gave up and took a drag off his clove cigarette. "La Donna, us men have got to stick together."

"Fiend!" squealed La Donna, her weird shark fin of red hair bobbing to the K. D. Lang tape Stewart had put on the stereo. Harry smiled, real friendly, and blew his cigarette smoke away from La Donna's hair. "What if I LET you hire the next employee?"

La Donna grinned from over the job applications. "Fair E-neef."

Harry, feeling somewhat dispirited about his restaurant moving into a lesbian phase, went back to the office and called in his produce order. He was low on veggies, but he knew he'd soon have plenty of fruits behind his counter.

Around noon, La Donna bopped into the office with a smashing girl in a black, silk blouse and sprayed-on, black jeans. The girl had magnetic gray eyes, hard, high cheekbones and bad-girl full lips. She was slim and rather flat chested, but reminded Harry of La Donna's girl friend, Simone. Unlike Simone, however, whose lips and eyes hinted of fire in snow, death-sex, this girl had a melancholy face. "Harry, I want you to meet Koo," La Donna cooed as if she'd found a diamond in the toilet.

"Hi," the Koo girl said, soft and polite.

La Donna pulled the Koo's blouse down over the girl's left shoulder, and for a second Harry thought sick La Donna was going to show off the girl's small breasts. "Check it out!" La Donna creamed happily. The girl lowered her eyes as Harry examined a tattoo that covered

her shoulder and chest down to her still hidden nipple. The tattoo was of a spider web with a black widow and several small women caught in it. Harry frosted a smile. The tattoo looked like the kind of thing guys did to each other in prison with exact-o knives and ballpoint pens. "Uh-huh."

"She'll do just FIEND, won't she, Harry?"

Harry nodded, half heartedly hoping that weird La Donna was scaring the kid off. "Nice to meet you, Koo. If you'll excuse La Donna and me for a second, I'll get right back to you."

"Yes Sir," the girl said and, looking very sad, went back out front.

Harry sighed. "Uh ...is she like you, La Donna?"

"Neef? " La Donna replied.

"Uh ...you know...special."

"Gay special, Harry?"

"Well...yes." Harry fiddled with his coffee cup, but he met La Donna's eyes.

"No," La Donna said primly. "At least I don't think so.

"Uh ...why do you think she'll work out?"

"Because, I asked Koo if she enjoyed seducing sad-eyed, middle-aged men, and she said that it was no more sport than shooting wounded dogs."

"I see," Harry said very sadly. "Let me know when she can start training and I'll rework the schedule."

La Donna brushed her shark-fin hair out of her eyes, leaned down and kissed Harry's forehead. "Trust me, Harry, there are more tears for answered prays than unanswered ones."

Sadly, Harry nodded and said, "Fiend."

