

# Koo, The Queen of Nowhere

*by* Dennis Hiatt

Koo really needed this job. She couldn't sell anymore of her blood. Her food stamps were gone, and Jack's job at Burgerville wouldn't even cover the rent. Koo's stomach was so empty it hurt. Right off the bat, Koo had hated the tiny, too-cool, redheaded chick who called her in for a job interview. La Donna was a pampered little poodle of a chick, all bouncy red hair (that had to take hours to get in place) and fake smiles. Koo had known chicks like her in Pendleton -- cheerleaders that got hundreds of presents on Christmas and cried all morning because that wasn't enough. When the smart-ass La Donna chick asked her if she ever gave old men the come-on just for giggles, Koo'd flipped her weirdness back at her by saying that getting old guys to take an interest in her was about as much fun as shooting wounded dogs. For a minute, Koo had started to like the too-cool chick. But Koo had wanted to die when La Donna had taken her in the back room to meet the owner and then, like Koo was so much meat, pulled Koo's blouse down over her shoulder to show the owner-pig her Spider and Women tattoo. Why did the bitch do that? Koo had only showed the too-cool chick her tattoo so the chick would know that whatever she did with her toy-poodle hair didn't matter. She wasn't hard-core. Koo drank her free coffee loaded with cream and sugar and waited for the too-cool cunt to come out and say, "Don't call us, we'll call you." A sick-looking dude with womanish hips was baking pies and watching her like a hawk with weird dead-dog eyes. Koo stared back over the rim of her coffee cup. The baker's hairline was receding, and his long fingers were white with flour. Koo hated

him.

At nineteen, Koo was a hard-core; skateboard bitch, and not much fazed her. But when the poodle chick, La Donna, had pulled down the shoulder of her blouse like Koo was a present being unwrapped for the boss and squealed, "She'll do just FIEND," Koo had been so shook up that she couldn't have said shit if she'd had a mouth full. Were they into something sick, like Satan worship? Somehow, she couldn't believe that a restaurant named Harry's Ritz Cafe was staffed by Satanists. Harry didn't look really evil. At least not hard-core evil. He looked more like a football player in his forties gone to fat. His seventies, used-car-salesman haircut made him look kind of hopeless and lost. Koo could not see the boss on a deserted beach, drinking dog's blood at midnight.

The two bland mice-kids behind the counter looked kind of like zombies, but the Burgerville Jack worked at was full of zombies and suburban fuck-puppies trying to score a high school jock. The boy-mouse stared at Koo. Koo smiled back and ran the tip of her tongue over her upper lip. The little mouse found something to do in a hurry. Koo would have laughed, but her empty stomach flip-flopped. "Well, Koo," La Donna said, her off-center, rooster comb of red hair bobbing to the music, "When can you start?"

Koo's stomach growled so loud, La Donna could hear it. Koo rested a hand on her tummy and said, "Now."

The poodle chick's eyes flickered over Koo's tummy, and then she asked, "How long have you been in town?"

Koo shrugged. If the weirdo's were looking for a run-a-way for a human sacrifice, they had the wrong woman. "About a month. Me and my ol' man."

"Okay," the too-cool chick said, "Get something to eat, and I'll figure out where to start your training."

Koo's face softened red. "I don't have any money...on me."

"Harry makes everybody eat a free meal before they start. He hates employees nibbling on the job."

Koo nodded, real cool, but she couldn't stop herself from asking, "How much can I eat?"

"As much as you want until you get your first pay check," La Donna said. "And if you need, like, cash for deodorant and hair spray and soap, and things to tide you over, let me know, and I'll get Harry to give you a draw out of the till."

Koo couldn't stop the smile that was burning her lips. "Yeah, like that would be totally great, but why?"

La Donna laughed, but not mean. "See the kids at the counter?"

Koo nodded. "They're what Harry hires if you let him, and I'm real tired of working with...neef, fiend," La Donna frowned, making a face like a silly-funny, sad cat, and threw her hands up.

"Lights on, no one home?" Koo said, meaning La Donna as much as the mice-kids.

"Neef," La Donna purred, not making a bit of sense, but taking the hurt out of Koo's smile.

Koo said, "Are you still serving breakfast?"

La Donna nodded, her too-cool hair bobbing to the country twang of a K.D. Lang tape. "Does a dyke suck hot tuna?"

The muscles in Koo's face went hard. The La Donna chick must be a dyke. That was why Koo had never seen a haircut like hers in Pendleton Oregon, or on M-TV. "I got a husband."

La Donna nodded rather absently. "Before you go off shift I'll talk to the Borden." She hooked a thumb toward the baker who now had a cigarette dangling from his lips, "And he'll fix you up with a care package...seconds and such."

After she'd eaten, Koo was put to bussing dishes and wiping tables. La Donna had explained that Koo would do cleaning things today and just kind of get the feel of the place. That was fine by her. There was something weird about the restaurant, and Koo was more than happy to be able check the place out.

Harry's Ritz Cafe reminded Koo of Harry. The place had a lot of plants and hanging ferns that seemed like they were left over from the seventies, and the office stank from his bogus clove cigarettes. The prints on the walls were the stupidest. Koo had no idea who would paint such lame trash and thought that only a real sucker

would buy them. The food was good though, and the evil-looking baker was a real pro, even if he always had a cigarette in his mouth or stashed near him in an ashtray.

At two p.m., the shift changed, and two more mice-kids came on. If Koo hadn't paid close attention, she wouldn't have been able to tell that they were different kids. Harry stayed in the office most of the time. When he came out he'd fuss around the Coke machine, then grab a cup of coffee and disappear back into the clove-stinking office. The only thing he said to Koo was, "Do you know anything about plumbing?" Koo had shaken her head, and Harry had sighed and wandered back to his office.

Between eleven and two, the restaurant was packed. The people that came in were a mixed bag: office workers, people from the trendy shops nearby, a few construction workers (who eyed Koo like she was on the menu), and a handful of artsy-fartsy types. One old business type guy, who sat at a corner table and read the sports page over coffee, had looked so familiar; Koo had asked him, real friendly like, if he was from Pendleton. He smiled and shook his head. Koo had gotten the feeling that he was laughing at her, so she'd asked La Donna who the old fart thought he was. La Donna glanced at the table and said, "Since the last election, the governor." "Is he?" Koo said, almost freaking out.

"Sure, but don't worry. Harry votes Democrat," La Donna said, like she waited on the governor every day. Koo had looked around; even the mice kids weren't paying any attention to the governor. Koo felt like a real hick, and tears welled up in her eyes, but she went back and washed dishes before anyone could notice.

Scraping food off a plate, she started crying softly to herself. She'd been the Queen Of Cool in Pendleton. She'd hated how square the town was, and how everyone had looked down their noses at her, at her hip, board-bitch hair-do.

La Donna bopped back with a full tray of dishes and said, "Hey, Koosy cat, where's your smile?"

Bogus sympathy was more than Koo could handle. She snapped. "What do you care?"

La Donna blinked and set the tray down. "Well, if you don't work out, Harry won't let me hire anyone else, and I'll be stuck working with ..." La Donna made her silly-sad-cat retarded face again. Koo grinned through her tears just as Harry walked up. He looked at La Donna like she just might be a snake. "What's the matter?" "PMS," La Donna snapped and handed Harry an apron. Harry put on the apron, saying. "What did you girls do before you invented PMS?" "Sexual harassment...fiend," La Donna snorted and led Koo back to the office as Harry started washing dishes. As the office door closed, Koo heard Harry mutter, "Fiend this, Neef that....fuck this...." La Donna found some aspirin shook out three and casually plucked a sparkling water from a case in the corner. "Here, aspirins always make me feel better." Koo held the pills and, trying to sound off-hand, asked, "What is this Neef, Fiend stuff, anyway?" La Donna laughed sadly and helped herself to a sparkling water. "Oh, those are the only two words my sweet baby, Germutlich, can ever say." La Donna smiled that over-bright, fake smile of hers and added, "But when Germutlich snores, she purrs JUST like a little kitten." Koo lowered her eyes. Her youngest sister, Reba, had terrible birth defects. The aspirins in Koo's moist hand were getting flaky. Koo ate the sad, bitter pills just so she wouldn't have to try and make small talk about La Donna's deformed, retarded kid. When Koo had talked Jack into fleeing Pendleton, she'd done so not like she'd told him, to go where the action was (though THAT was part of why), but because she could not stand being the weird chick with funny hair and a mutant sister. Koo had promised Jack that if he'd go away with her, she'd get a tit job -- no bigger than 36-C cup, though. Feeling better, Koo took over washing dishes for Harry. Around four o'clock, Koo was totally caught up. She took her break with Borden who, like a fool, had burnt his hand on the oven. She bummed a cigarette off him. A Menthol slim. Koo was sure that Borden was

real trash and was just trying to be cool with his sneers and wimpy fag cigarettes. Still, he'd packed her some great food to take home, so Koo would treat him like he was cool. "Pretty crazy place to work huh?"

Borden snickered haughtily. "We are lacking canons of decidability on that issue."

Koo shrugged, stared straight ahead and smoked the cigarette. That was fagot talk if she ever heard it. Damn, she hated perverts, even ones that could make pastries that melted like sweet, crisp autumn leaves in her mouth. La Donna joined them and slid Koo an envelope. Koo smiled and said, "Thanks."

"It's cool. Harry'll take it out of your pay ten bucks a paycheck, or out of your last check -- if you quit."

"Real fair," Koo nodded and pocketed the envelope without opening it. "And thanks for the goodies," she said to Borden as he rose to leave. Borden nodded and put on his coat.

La Donna said, "See you later, baker-gaiter."

Borden smirked, "Fiend," and walked out the door.

Koo shook her head. Borden was an asshole for smart-assing her in some fagot way that she couldn't understand. But mimicking La Donna's retarded child was way out of line, even for a fagot. La Donna just kind of stared toward the door. She looked sad and very tired. Koo could see La Donna having to go home to some little, dark apartment and a dirty, warped and twisted baby that mewed Neef and Fiend. Koo's heart went out to the small woman. Koo ground out the cigarette and said in a soft voice, "My mom's a real juice-head. The last kid she had was real deformed." La Donna raised her eyebrows but said nothing. Koo smiled with tight lips. "Its head's, like, twice too big, and the ol' lady lets it roll around on the floor for hours, and that head banging, flip-flop all night can really drive you up a wall."

La Donna nodded, big-eyed, and whispered, "Neef."

Koo kind of laughed. "Yeah, except the poor kid can't even say neef, like yours can."

La Donna did a double take. "Like my kid?"

"Yeah," Koo was suspicious of La Donna's surprise, "Like your kid, Girl-milk."

"Honey-baby." La Donna touched Koo's hand with her fingertips.

"Germtlich is my gerbil."

"Oh," said Koo and casually pulled the shoulder of her blouse down so that the black widow in her Spider and Women tattoo was staring at the Too-Cool Bitch. Koo laid her hand back on the table inches from where La Donna's tiny fingers rested.

"I like your tattoo, Koo," La Donna smiled silly-sweet, "And it's nice to have a real person, besides Borden, around here."

Holding back tears, Koo nodded and noticed that she'd taken La Donna's hand and was holding it tight. Behind the counter, Harry was fussing with the Coke machine. He looked old and worried. As Koo began to cry, La Donna whispered sweet, "I think you'll like it here just fiend."

Koo nodded and smiled fiercely through her tears.

"Fuck'n-A-neef."

