

Lunch With Harriet

by R. Daniel Lester

Debbie Peters was talking to herself. Okay, babe, she said. You can do this. You. Can. Do. This

Debbie Peters was waiting for the casting director to call her name and lead her into a room she'd only seen in glimpses as the door opened and closed. She'd arrived early, watching as three other Harriets entered and exited. They were all glossy photocopies of each other—skinny, vacant, pretty—and not at all right for the part as far as Debbie was concerned.

The movie: Lunch With Harriet.

The role: Harriet.

Debbie Peters was Harriet.

She knew this. Now she just had to convince them.

Them: the director, the producers and whoever else they decided could stay in the room to watch her bare her soul. Debbie had once been to an audition where the director's kid was playing war games in the back corner because the baby sitter cancelled at the last minute. In the scene, her waitress character was getting fired by the loser manager, and the constant "Take that you evil beasts!" didn't much help her get into the part. They smiled. They nodded their heads. They took her headshot and résumé. They said thanks as they showed her to the door.

In and out in 45 seconds, exactly like her last boyfriend.

Debbie left that audition knowing very well she wouldn't get the part. And she was right.

But today felt different.

No punk kid would get in her way.

She knew her lines forwards and backwards.

Debbie Peters was an actor. Debbie Peters was Harriet.

It's your world, they're along for the ride, she said to herself as the door opened, and the friendly-looking casting director, a spot of ketchup on her upper lip, asked her to enter.

Question: should she say something about the ketchup?

Debbie hated when people didn't tell her stuff like that, like she could tell when there was a piece of restaurant broccoli stuck between her teeth, and the guy was really cute, and she went to the bathroom, looked in the mirror and badly wanted to crawl out the window to escape. But Debbie didn't have *Escape Out The Window Hips™*—something she was actually rather proud of—so she slunk back to the table, avoiding eye contact, and kicked the shin of her best friend, who didn't tell her about the restaurant broccoli in her teeth, and who'd taken the opportunity of her absence to seriously game on the cutie pie.

But before Debbie could say anything to the casting director about the ketchup, she was in the room, being introduced to a jury already sizing her up, already judging her. Them. The director, the writer (who also had some ketchup on his lip), two producers and some guy fiddling with a digital camera sat in a semi-circle, a lone chair their focal point. Debbie smiled her best Harriet smile and sat down in the chair, making eye contact with all of them, except for the camera guy, who was clearly the sprig of parsley on this talent plate.

“Hello to Debbie Peters,” said the director. “How feeling are you today?”

“Excuse me?” Debbie asked.

The director glanced down at the table, ruffled a piece of paper, mouthed a few words. Must be a foreigner, Debbie thought. French, maybe. Whatever. The guy could have a second head growing out of his neck and she wouldn't flinch.

Be nice. Smile. Nod.

Sell it, baby, sell it.

“Oh, I am apologetic. How are *you* feeling today?”

“Great, thank you. And yourself?”

“Hungry,” he said, grinning an almost-too-wide grin at his fellow filmmakers. “We are very hungry.”

Oh, great.

They'd be scarfing away on burgers and fries while she forced raw emotion out of every pore for their enjoyment. For their appraisal.

She really hated auditioning sometimes, but her acting coaches warned her there'd be ones like these (hell, days, months, years like these), so she vowed to nail the part despite them. Still, didn't they believe in napkins in Europe or what? And Debbie was fully aware that the closest she'd been to France was Paris, Texas, but at some point it simply came down to manners.

"How much do you weigh, Debbie Peters?" asked the director, eyes like a butcher studying a piece of meat.

"I don't really..." she replied, a little angry he'd been so direct. This guy needed to learn something about how to talk to a lady.

"Because you are perfect."

Okay, that was better. Debbie blushed, tried to stay calm. Holy crap. She hadn't uttered a word of dialogue yet, but the director was already totally into her, practically offering her the role.

Debbie knew those other Harriets weren't right.

They wanted someone with some meat on her bones.

Debbie beamed. "Oh, really? Thank you so much."

"It will be our pleasure," said producer #1, licking his lips with a green tongue that over shot its mark to flick the underside of his nose. Damn. His wife and/or girlfriend must be extremely happy. Hell, Debbie would never leave the house if she had that waiting for her in the bedroom. But then she remembered (a green tongue?) the lock on the audition room door clicking behind her.

She didn't realize right away, but it'd happened.

The casting director had locked the door.

The casting director whose face was now different—not friendly at all—a row of sharp teeth in her mouth that Debbie hadn't seen before and the camera guy was through fiddling with the lens and the lens looked like it had ketchup on it too and what the hell was ketchup doing on the lens? and she felt something warm and wet on her ankle and it was producer #1's green tongue and he was still sitting down behind the table and it traveled slickly and caressed

her calf with a sensuousness she wouldn't have thought something so ugly could possess and the director (who really did seem to be growing another head) was beside her, foul breath on her neck as he whispered, "Hungry, so very hungry, Debbie Peters," into her ear and luckily she passed out right before the director yelled, "Cut!"

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The filmmaking team enjoyed a fine meal that afternoon.

Debbie Peters was indeed Harriet.

She convinced them.

Not like those other three who were so without curves and tasty flesh.

They even watched the tape later on that evening in their hotel room as they looked over tomorrow's audition schedule. Men tomorrow. Big men. The character's name was Ronald. He was a "con-struk-shun-wer-ker."

The director tried to form the words, but it wasn't going to happen.

A pesky language, that English.

People talked too much anyway, thought the director. More talking meant less time for eating. And speaking of eating, he (it) wiped a glob of drool from his (its) cracked lips with a clawed hand, gurgling to the other filmmakers—in their native language—what translated loosely into that pesky English as, "Is anyone interested in going outside for a midnight snack? Because as tasty as these humans are, a couple of hours later, you're hungry again."

