

To Be or Not to Be



Darlette Davis

A "Her TV" Novel

Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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“TO BE OR NOT TO BE”

by Darlette Davis

DENISE

My little call box came alive and it was Marilyn’s (my boss’s) voice, she is the Chief Associate legal partner of Harding Associates.

“Denise darling, will you be a dear and run and get us some coffee.”

“When you said ‘us,’ did you mean for both you and me, Miss Roberts?” I replied.

“Yes, and no need to bring your pad when you get back.”

“Wow, ‘Miss Bosslady’ sounds in a chipper mood this morning,” observed Madge, Mr. Harding’s secretary, from her desk facing mine. “You must be in for some kind words or even a raise, though I’ve never heard of raises following only three months on the job.”

“At least I’ve never heard of being fired after a request to join your boss for coffee,” I rejoined with a smile.

Minutes later, after being asked to close her door, I was seated opposite my exotic-looking superior, clad in an electric blue dress, her dark hair, as ever, immaculately drawn into a tight flat bun, her lovely face beautifully made-up.

“Tell me honestly, Denise,” she said after taking her first sip, “you’ve remarked about your enjoyment at being with us, but honestly, is it really working out for you? I mean not just the kind of things you’re doing as a secretary, but your whole lifestyle change. You’re no longer privately ensconced as a practicing attorney. Instead you’re slipping into a skirt and blouse every morning to come here to sit in a crowded office and be at my beck and call. From professional to glorified ‘gal Friday,’ not to mention the big drop in your income.”

I reflected a moment, knowing there was no simple answer to Marilyn’s question, then said, “I have no regrets in doing what I’m doing, Miss Roberts. First, I have a paying job. That’s not something I could be sure of a few months ago. Secondly, although I’m still confused about it, I like working as a secretary which I consider professional, depending on my competence. I’m a little bored at times with my life in general, but not when I’m here at the office doing the best I can to help you.”

“Well thank you, my dear, that’s sweet of you, and I in turn appreciate having you work for me. Your typing is flawless, your shorthand is becoming very rapid and you seem to quickly fulfill any offhand request I make for anything in the general files as well as our own. So I can confirm that you’re already professional in the conduct of your duties.

“Beyond that, it gives me satisfaction that you’ve fit in so well here, and so unobtrusively. The girls in the outer office who work with you think of you as a little introverted but appreciate the help you give them whenever you have a spare moment. Best of all they seem to have a protective feeling about you meeting the challenges you face every day trying to become one of us.”

“Oh, thank you, Miss Roberts, I’ve nothing but good vibes working with any of them, and Madge I think has adopted me as her special charge, and I hope as a permanent friend.”

Marilyn frowned through her nod of approval.

“You mentioned being confused about yourself. Care to go into that, dear?”

What was my boss probing for, I wondered. This meeting, I began to feel wasn’t called just as a session in mutual admiration.

“Oh nothing serious, Miss Roberts. It’s just something I can’t put my finger on. I’m doing what I want to do and just love working for you. It’s maybe that I’m quite lonely away from work. ‘Adrift’ might be a better word. Right now, I frankly don’t know who I am, almost like I’m a non-person feeling my identity only in the recognition of others.”

As Marilyn made no attempt at agreement or rebuttal I went on.

“I don’t feel sick anymore from my medication, but I guess I still haven’t gotten over my divorce. I haven’t even had a date since then. To be truthful, I wouldn’t know what to date, let alone who to date,” I blurted out, facing a truth about my current self for the first time.

If Marilyn caught this final observation she decided to let it pass, instead observing, “You know, Denise, for some time you’ve been quite passable, but I’ve wondered, as others who have spoken to me have, why you’ve never experimented with clothes and make-up. And you know, that lack of interest seems to be reflected in your very careful, subdued manner about the office. You give the impression you’re not at all enjoying your new life, and your clothing and get-up seem to emphasize that.”

Warming to her theme, she continued.

“You’re too young, barely thirty, to be seen every day, without a touch of color on your face and wearing one of those two or three things you have, almost carbon copies, the long, dark skirt, the plain blouse, the severe jacket. And that straight, squared-off ‘Dutch boy’ haircut, my dear. It almost seems like you should be wearing high-button shoes, but those patent leather flats are a reasonable facsimile.

“Now, don’t get me wrong, darling,” she added, possibly noting a stricken expression on my face, “none of this detracts one whit from your exceptional performance and value here. Maybe I should be quiet and thankful you’re not suffering the distractions which a more attention getting appearance might induce. I can hear Desmond asking me why I’m voicing thoughts that might divert you from your unstinting attention to your job.”

Despite Marilyn’s disclaimer, I felt defensive.

“I’m just following Ruth’s advice, Miss Roberts. She has told me again and again that for the first year at least, until I confirm a final decision about myself, I should maintain as low a profile as possible.”

“In fact, her drama friend, Mildred, who I started taking behavior modification lessons from while I was still with my former employer, agrees with her one hundred percent.

“Their consensus seems to be that there’s time enough to decide the woman I want to be and look like when I’m sure I’m on the right track basically. In the meantime I should maintain a subdued voice, avoid any unnecessary motion, movement or expression, dress conservatively and keep myself away from any situations where I can get hurt. Not physically, but emotionally where I’ve been pretty scratched up by insensitive people, not so much lately, thank goodness, as the medication and experience become more of a protective factor.”

Marilyn’s lips were pursed, as if she was not overly impressed.

“That was fine for your first week or two here,” she observed, “but you knew we had already accepted you by then, and you like what you’re doing, so what’s the problem of meeting your emerging self halfway? You’ve made your commitment, at least for the next year, so why do you still appear to be fighting it? I think that may be at the bottom of your confusion, your loneliness and apparent arm’s length relationship with your new self.

“You have a trim figure, not exactly womanly but one certain models would not object to having. Plus you have the kind of regular features that would benefit from the use of make-up,” pursued Marilyn. “With your possibilities you just can’t be determined to be the plain-looking Jane you are right now, like some of the sad-eyed frumps I’ve known.”

I struggled to hide my hurt over Marilyn’s merciless caricature.

“I’d love to listen to any ideas you might have for helping me with these problems, Miss Roberts,” I primly responded as she paused, looking at me expectantly. “I agree with your feeling that my waiting passively for some heavenly inspiration at the end of a year or two probably isn’t going to help me be a little more content with who I am now.”

Marilyn smiled, probably pleased with my acquiescence to involving herself so bluntly in my personal affairs. “Tell you what, Denise,” she said, turning to address her desk work in her typical “end of conversation” mode, “Why don’t you make it over to my place, say about 6:00 this evening. There we can relax a little, have a drink and something light for supper while we try to figure how you can find some more positive enjoyment out of the success you’re having with us. We don’t want to lose you to the outside world either as your new or former self.”

MARILYN

(Chief Associate Partner of Harding and Associates)

Driving home, I suddenly realized I was enthusiastically looking forward to my evening with Denise. Not only did I feel I could work wonders with his confusion concerning my new identity, I realized I could at the same time both enjoy myself and solve a nagging problem of my own.

I fell to reflecting on the strange series of events that had led to my fortuitous employment of Denise.

Madge had been the key to the process, starting when we had taken our usual vacation trip together a few months ago.

I had been talking to her of my concern having to look for a new secretary to replace my invaluable Colleen, recently resigned to leave town with her transferred husband. Jokingly I had asked Marge if she knew of a clone of herself over whom I might hire. I added that I'd steal the original without a second thought if she wasn't an executive secretary reporting directly to our head honcho and firm president, Desmond Harding.

"I think I've got someone better for you," Madge had answered, "someone with top skills and who will also bring a law degree with her. Also I think you'll be intrigued with the interesting transition going on with my candidate."

"What transition and what lawyer wants to work as a legal secretary these days?" I had responded.

"Well hold onto your hat, my darling," Madge had replied with a playful nudge, "my candidate is a guy who's been learning to live as a female outside of work hours while polishing her secretarial skills, taking behavior lessons and champing at the bit for any work opportunity except with her present employer, which she feels would be a little much too handle.

"She'd start as a file clerk but I think you could make a lot out of her beyond what she'd bring to the table as a secretary, utilizing her experience in patent law."

"How did you hear about this poor creature, and is there any possibility he looks like anything but a freak?" I had inquired, somewhat mystified, repelled; yet, intrigued by the possibility of employing a male who aspired to be a woman.

Madge had then related to me at length the story of David as told to her by her friend Ruth.

It seems David had been hired a few years ago by her firm primarily to do a load of patent work in connection with a new breakthrough in the art of flock-coating. Since its discovery fifty years ago, this process had been limited to the manufacture of artificial suede, but was now thought by Ruth's Director of Research to be subject to amazing, patentable changes enabling a variety of softer finishes which could revolutionize the clothing and carpet industries. Unfortunately, the changes while occasionally demonstrable in the lab, continued to frustrate all attempts to reduce them to a mass production capability.

"Ergo," Madge had said, "Ruth tells me the company either has to let David go, or get him to temporarily fill in his time doing other things."

Madge had gone on to relate how two important events had transpired to focus David's attention on a drastic redirection of his life.

His intensive efforts to find other employment had hit a blind wall, recently revealed in the Wall Street Journal and other periodicals, that mid-career lawyers were a drug on the market as law firms were retrenching and hiring only newly-minted graduates.

Secondly, even though he'd had to take a drastic cut in pay, he'd surprisingly taken a genuine liking to performing secretarial type duties, which had turned out to be his "march-in-place" assignments at the company.

Ruth had been personally put in charge of training him so that his typing, filing and shorthand skills were honed to perfection. As a result, he was turning out to be the perfect fill-in for every girl on secretarial row.

The upshot was Ruth's selling David on the idea of becoming a legal secretary to continue to use his experience and maximize his earnings. When he'd finally swallowed that, she fed him some drinks one night and after getting him to climb into a blouse and skirt "for the fun of it," induced him to agree to experiment, in privacy with her, living as a woman so his opportunities for career employment might be expanded by a factor of a hundred or so.

She used the "Tootsie" scenario about adapting a sex to fit the career need and persuaded him with the help of her friend Mildred that with his face, all he'd need was some estrogen treatment and mannerism training to pass as a female.

The rest had been downhill, both for David and ourselves. Madge had interviewed him at length over dinner at Ruth's twice and while out together at a restaurant to see how Denise acted in public and was reacted to by others.

With a promise that I would meet with David, now to be called "Denise," for luncheon upon our arrival home, I told my dear friend I couldn't wait to see and at least chat with a real live transsexual, if not hire my new legal "gofer".

DENISE

I was admitted to my boss's apartment promptly at 6:00.

She looked stunning as usual, dressed in a yellow, silken floor-length hostess gown, her lustrous hair combed out to fall upon her shoulders.

"Come in, Denise, and keep on going down the hall and to your left. I thought we'd waste no time doing a little revision in your appearance as a basis for con-

tinuing our afternoon discussion. You might take off your blouse and skirt, and shoes and stockings for that matter. Wait for me while I get us something to drink to help you through what's coming next."

I entered what appeared to be Marilyn's bedroom where over a chair I saw the blue dress she'd worn during the day and what looked like a blonde wig.

Upon her return I had divested myself of my outer clothing and was greeted by her astonished remark, "For goodness sake, Denise, what are you doing wearing jockey shorts to go with that little bra? Now there's a combination that Vogue has never featured, I'm sure.

"Here," she walked over to open a bureau drawer to pull out a pair of pantyhose. "Go into the bathroom and put on these in place of those shorts. They'll give you all the support you need and you can then be a thorough little lady from the skin out."

"I assume you're going to dress me in a manner you feel will be more becoming than the garments I had on today," I said softly, not knowing whether to be resentful, oblivious or happy with Marilyn's well-meaning rudeness effecting my change of attire.

"Exactly dear, so what we'll be doing right now I hope you'll comply with, saving your reaction till later. Then it's your decision whether to adopt my ideas, or that's the end of it, and you can crawl back into your protective wallflower cocoon. Agreed, dear girl?"

"Of course, Miss Roberts, I had an idea something like this would be occurring tonight and I'm willing to give you my full cooperation."

Within a few moments I found myself slipping reasonably well into Marilyn's blue dress, being fitted



with the blonde wig, and finally forcing myself inside a pair of open-toed pumps which were at least three sizes too small for me.

“There now, that’s step number one,” pronounced Marilyn as she brushed away at the wig, finally observing that she had the curls arranged as she wanted them. “Already I see the real Denise emerging, honey. Now I want you to sit down over there while we do a little work on your face.”

With that, she had me in a chair to one side of the stool at her dressing table while she alternately worked with powder, lipstick, blusher and assorted pencils and sponges, talking to herself how this color was right and that one wasn’t, while telling me that “we’d” have to do something “drastic” about my eyebrows, among other “improvements”.

Concluding her soliloquy, she decided, “All that can await another time while we limit ourselves to the general picture tonight.

“Now just a minute while I get the blue earrings and some things to brighten your wrists and neck. There now.”

Marilyn stood up, “swing your chair around so you can take a good look at what a cute secretary ought to look like.”

After thirty seconds during which I was engaged in an awed scrutiny, Marilyn leaned down to place her face next to mine, her hands busily fastening the clip-ons, bracelets and necklace. Finished with this handiwork, she turned to buss my cheek, saying, “that little idiot smile on your face tells me all I need to know, ‘babykins’. You like it, don’t you? Here, stand up and take a good look at your full length image in the mirror over there.”

Indeed I liked what I saw a lot while becoming embarrassingly aware that I was hardening beneath my pantyhose as I stood to haltingly walk toward the longer mirror.

The skirt hem and heels were keeping me from making my normal stride, my physical reaction was forcing a projection in my dress and my heart was beating uncomfortably, but I couldn't stop my smile.

All I could do was reach out for Marilyn's hand, taking her with me to gawk at the distracting stranger returning my wondering glance from behind the looking glass.

"Well, what do you say, 'Miss Tongue-tied?'" queried Marilyn. "I didn't get you all gussied up to make you lose your voice, sweetie. You can admit to Mommy you love the way you look. I won't tell a soul. Now tell me, what's your reaction?"

"I feel awful, no, I mean excited, oh, I don't know, something I've never felt before. Talk about mixed emotions!"

Why was my thinking so tangled up, so irrational, I wondered.

Continuing, I said, "I guess I should just thank you, Miss Roberts, and sort my tangled feelings out when I get back to earth. I should say this though, if you want me this way at the office, I'm just going to die. I'll feel everyone's staring at me and I don't know how I'm going to concentrate on my work."

"That's easy," said Marilyn breezily, squeezing my hand, "we don't have mirrors sitting on our word processors or file cabinets, so how you look is everyone else's problem, not yours. You're just going to need to be distracted only when you do yourself in the morning and refresh your make-up in the ladies' lounge

during the day. After a while, like with everything else, you're going to get used to it. Now let's get away from admiring yourself while we finish our drinks and see what I've got going for supper."

While I helped Marilyn get things ready and on the table, it was as if we'd done nothing but pass the time of day over our drinks, and even eating supper, she'd divided discussion among subjects one might talk about with a fellow passenger on a plane. No mention of business or the unexpected trauma I had been put through following my arrival.

Afterwards, I cleared while Marilyn loaded the dishwasher, and after pouring us what she announced was a tummy-settling creme de menthe, she invited me to be seated with her in the living room.

"Now back to our assignment for tonight, 'babykins'. Incidentally, not to worry, I'll never use that expression in the office, but it does fit your big blue eyes with that make-up I loaded you up with. And by the way, I think we'll have you go bright blonde, that wig becomes you so.

"Now let's start on the other phase of our operation for tonight. First, though, please comment on this assumption: You love the way you look when dressed as you are right now and you would like to appear that way every day. Am I hot, warm or cold?" she asked with a knowing smile and a toss of her dark tresses.

Again I felt the inane, causeless grin spreading my features.

"I never knew I could look this way and worse, I never knew I could get so pumped up looking at myself this way. I just hope I can get used to it, but, no

offense, I'm afraid I have to say you're very hot, Miss Roberts. I just wish I could afford going around looking this ridiculous."

"All right, Denise, and since I noticed you earlier quietly indicating to me with your remaining symbol of manhood that you enjoy what I've done to you, I have the solution to your becoming the new you full-time. It will also help me out with a problem."

Marilyn then went on to describe how she currently was without housekeeping assistance, her weekly maid service having gone out of business.

"If you like, Denise, you can be my new part-time maid, say spending your Saturdays working here.

"There's a lady I used to have that did a terrific job; but, who had to quit when her husband didn't want her doing such demeaning work. I can have her in here this coming Saturday to give you a complete training course after which you can decide whether cleaning, dusting, laundering as well as occasional serving maid duties are for you.

"In return, I'll be your beauty advisor and shopping aide, helping you learn to dress exquisitely, show you all the make-up tricks plus pay you the same generous fee my maid service was charging me.

"That way, you can build your new wardrobe a little bit each week, so in six months you can quit if you like and have a wardrobe any fashionable young lady would envy.

"Oh, oh," she added as she waited my reaction, "that appreciative look on that brand-new baby-doll face of yours tells me I just hired myself a brand-new maid."

RUTH

(A Secretary at L.P. Franklin, Inc.)

It started out as a very bad day indeed. Parker Craig, Director of Research (and my boss) for L.P. Franklin, Inc. had called me into his office first thing and without so much as a good morning, he had launched into a summary of the previous evening's emergency executive meeting.

“Two major events were announced, significantly affecting the Company, Ruth, and particularly certain individuals including you and me.

“First, the bad news, we're doing even worse financially than anyone thought, meaning further personnel cutbacks. Secondly, one ray of light comes as good news, but I could kick myself for not keeping David around, at least to have told him how I planned to make his future secure so he'd stay with us.

“In short, Abe seems to think he's about ready to have us file some intricate flock-coating patents. He's now getting ten out of ten perfect lab results and sees the light beyond the tunnel on adapting his process to mass production. He wants David back on the double. So, where is he?”

I had seen it coming eventually, so my answer was matter of fact.

“Your guess is as good as mine, Parker. He was looking, as you might have surmised, and he just dropped out of sight one day. I've heard nothing from him since.”

“But he was living with you right after his divorce, wasn't he, and he told me more than once that you were totally responsible for his fine secretarial performance in doing his temporary fill-in duties. I had no