



Illustration by S.D. Speerbrecher

by Peter Smagorinsky

I stood at the curb as the car, single headlight beaming bright, wheeled by, its muffler banging the road as the car bounced past. I crossed the street to my car. With the streetlight out and my wits dull with beer, I had trouble fitting the key to the lock. As I stood fumbling, I heard a woman's voice.

"Hey, are you going by the El?"

I looked up and saw her standing back on the sidewalk, but couldn't make her out well in the dim light.

"Uh, sure," I said, thinking, El, El, where the hell am I, anyhow? Which stop do you want?" I asked.

"Belmont," she said, beginning to move through the shadows towards me as I groped with the key.

I finally got the door open, stepped in, and seated myself, then looked over to see her dark figure filling the passenger side window. I leaned over slowly, and unlocked the door, sitting back as she pulled it open. Jammed with rust and grime, the hinges creaked noisily as she shut it behind her.

In my cramped front seat, she was sitting very close to me, and I got my first good look at her. She had a white complexion and short, blondish hair streaked with white. She settled herself comfortably in the seat, her shoulders stretching her blouse tightly across her chest, her skirt inching up over her knees. She glanced over and caught me looking, and smiled.

I hastily put the key in the ignition. "Now, where did you say you're going?" I asked.

She leaned over close to me and looked into my eyes. "You from around here?" she asked.

I hesitated, then said, "Well, no, not right around here. I live about twenty blocks north. I usually don't catch the El down here," I said, thinking hard, where are the tracks from here?

"Twenty blocks? Say, that's about how far I'm going," she said.

"Oh, well, actually, I'm not going home right now. I told a friend I'd drop over to see him," I said.

"Hmmm, that's too bad," she said, shifting around and facing me, her knee brushing mine, her arm sliding up over the back of the seat. "Kind of late to be visiting friends, isn't it?"

I turned the ignition and gave the engine a little gas, then turned on the radio. Dinah Washington sang softly in the background. "Well," I said, "he doesn't get off work till late. I've got to pick up some things he borrowed from me."

She began to tap her fingers on her leg. "That's OK. You can just take me to the El, then."

I pulled out into the street. "Now, where should I go?" I asked.

"Oh," she said "it's not too far." We came to a stop sign, and as I shifted I noticed her reaching into her big, black handbag.

I paused. "Which way?"



"Straight," she said. She pulled something out of the bag, and I looked over sharply. "Mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"No, no, not at all," I said. "Just open the window a little."

She rolled the window halfway down and lit her cigarette, the top stained red as she took it from her mouth, a thick trail of smoke swirling lazily out the window. She leaned back in the seat, the cigarette perched in her hand.

We came up to the next corner, and stopped at the sign. She drew on the cigarette, and exhaled slowly. "Take a right," she said, the last wisps of smoke hanging on her words. I turned, and when I came to the next corner, saw the lights of Belmont Avenue. I looked past her, and saw the tracks looming above the street. My eyes then fell on her, sitting soft and comfortable with me in the front seat of my car, my hand resting on the gear shift inches from her knee.

She looked over. "Know where you are now?" she asked.

I hastily looked up. She sat facing me, quiet and cool, her thin eyebrows slightly arched. I got caught in her gaze, and then said abruptly, "Yes, uh huh." She continued to look into my eyes, reclining against the seat and door, the smoke drifting past her and out the window. I felt my throat tighten, and I swallowed. I looked down the street towards the tracks. "That's your stop, right?" I said.

"Yeah," she said. "That's Belmont."

I remained at the corner. A car rolled by and I drummed my fingers on the gear shift. The road was now clear. She turned and stared out the window, her chest heaving in gentle undulation. I cleared my throat. "Got a smoke?" I asked.

She turned. "Sure," she said, opening her handbag and drawing out her pack of cigarettes. She tapped one out, handed it to me, and flicked on her lighter. The smoke drifted into my eyes, and I winced and fanned it away. I rolled down my window. We sat there smoking for a moment. Then, I shifted and rounded the corner.

The flashing neon of the Belmont bars lit up the street, the music thudding within drowning the late night street noise. I looked up the street and saw the tracks drawing closer. Then, I saw to my right the blaring yellow sign of Mr. Kiley's. I lifted my foot slightly on the gas. "You ever been to Kiley's," I asked. I reached up and adjusted the rear view mirror. "It's open till four."

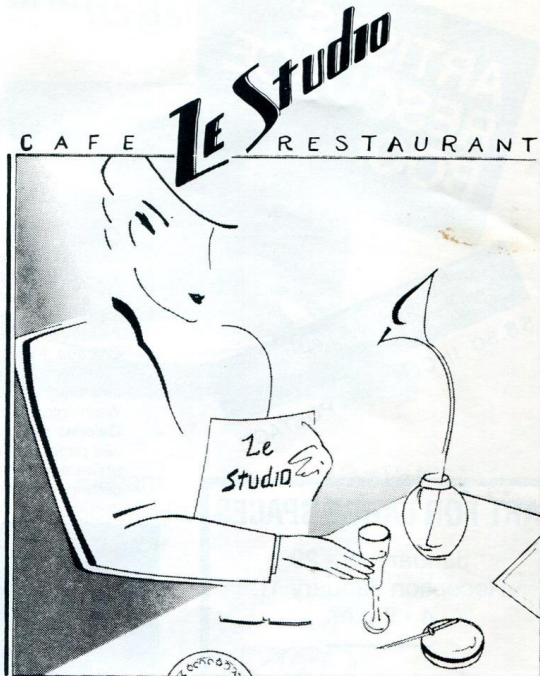
She sat quietly and drew on her cigarette. "Yeah," she said, the smoke floating from her nostrils in a thin curl. "I've been there." She stared straight ahead, the lights glinting off her silver eyelids, luminous above the thick black outline of her eyes. "Too many times."

We rode on in silence. I reached the tracks and pulled over, shifting the car in to neutral and pulling the brake. I turned to face her, but she smiled and pushed the door open. She got out, then leaned back in and said, "Thanks for the lift."

"Sure," I said as she remained in the window. "Say —"

"See you around," she said, before drawing away and fading back into the shadows.

I sat idling for a moment, staring at the empty seat beside me, the cigarette useless in my hand. I crushed it in the ashtray, and then released the brake. I shifted slowly into first gear and pulled back onto the road. As I drove away, looking back in the mirror, I could see her slouched against the El support, dragging on her cigarette.



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