

A NIGHT ON THE TOWN

The air was thick with summer heat, the streets were quiet, the sidewalks nearly empty.

On the corner of Tenth Avenue and 46th Street, just ahead, I saw a girl, and I lingered for a moment, watching.

Silver stars on her jacket and studs on her belt caught the sun as she turned, beckoning to the few cars that passed. She shrugged, then called to a man on the stoop of one of the tenements across the street. I felt a tingling in my loins and tried to ignore it. I moved on.

An hour or so later, heading back that way, I saw her slumped in the doorway of an abandoned warehouse, savoring the shade and listlessly dragging on a Marlboro, the red and white pack jammed between her belt and abdomen. Standing beside her was another girl, tall and big-boned, and off to her left sat the scrawny, Afro-haired young man I had seen her calling to before. I lit a cigarette. They're just kids, I said to myself.

"Kinda early to be out working, isn't it?" I asked the girl. She looked at me with glassy eyes and jerked her head in the young man's direction. Her hair was like straw, and there were still traces of adolescent acne on her face. "Somebody works me too hard," she said.

"Him?" I asked.

"Yeah, me," the young man said. "I work her seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day."

I could feel his eyes on me from behind dark glasses. The two girls exchanged glances. I dropped my cigarette and ground the butt into the pavement. Just kids, I thought again.

"My name's Michael," I told him, squatting low so my eyes were even with his.

"What's yours?"

"Harry," he said, more readily than I would have thought. Waving his hand toward the girl with the stars on her jacket, he added, "and she's my old lady, Kathy." The other girl introduced herself as Betty. "Nice to meet you all," I said, then sat down.

Debut

On a Friday night almost three weeks later I was on my way to the corner, and everything was jumping: Drag queens gossiped on street corners, boys glided by on bicycles and skateboards, men gathered in groups, laughing and talking and sucking beer from splits, and well-dressed couples made their way to fancy restaurants and Broadway shows, apparently oblivious to it all. I walked across town on 46th Street, taking in their faces, looking for Harry and Kathy; none of these faces were theirs.

But another girl, pretty in a homey sort of way, was standing on the corner when I got there. She had freckles, a turned-up nose, and shoulder-length, auburn hair. The tops of well-formed breasts, cream-colored under the nearly full moon, protruded from her green and orange bikini top, and faded blue jeans gripped her thighs and hips. I watched her for a few moments, hoping she would see me. When she didn't, I took a couple of steps forward, then asked, "Do you happen to know a guy named Harry or a couple of girls named Kathy or Betty? I met them here a few weeks ago, and they said they'd be around."

She started. "Well," she drawled, her green eyes darting between me and the cars streaming up Tenth Avenue, her face brightening and darkening with the shifting headlights, "I don't know the people you're talkin' about, but you see that car on the other side of the street?" She pointed toward a beat-up sedan. "There's a guy sittin' there who's watchin' for

me, and he knows all the girls around here. Talk to him. His name's Frankie. Tell him Cookie sent you over."

A heavy-set man in a faded, plaid shirt, his hair long and graying, was hunched over on the stoop I'd seen Harry on some weeks before. His large, rough hands dangled between his legs. He gazed in my direction, but seemed not to see me. I took another deep breath, then asked him about Kathy and Harry.

He sighed. "They burn you?" he asked.

"Burn me? Uh, no, I'm a writer, and I wanted to talk with them -- "

"Because you wanna write about prostitution, right?" he said, grinning. "I haven't seen 'em around," Frankie said, "but they might be out later. Harry's woman's name, by the way," he confided, "is really Ginger. But don't tell her I told you, if you see her."

Growing less nervous, I asked him if I could sit there while I waited for Kathy/Ginger and Harry. I said I'd just as soon talk with him. "Why not?" he shrugged. "I got nothin' else to do while I'm waitin' for her. But please," he added, when I took out my tape recorder, "do me a favor? Don't use no name, no description of the car, no license plate number? I'm a happily married man, believe it or not. I got a wife and three kids, I got a good job, I just bought a house... my wife'd kill me if she knew I was out here tonight."

"I'm not usually out here doin' this, you know," he went on. "I'm just doin' a favor for a friend of mine who couldn't make it, watchin' his chick for him, that's all. I just happen to know about this because I grew up with it."

Frankie's friend, he told me, was in debt to loan sharks for a couple of grand, and they were threatening to get rough if he didn't start paying them off soon.

I asked Frankie to tell me a little about loan sharks, but he said he didn't really know much about them. "I never borrowed from them," he said. "I do it... legal; the hard way, sometimes, but that's the way it goes, right?" He nodded toward Cookie. "She's out here tryin' to raise a hundred dollars for her old man's first payment. And I just wish she'd hurry up -- 'cause I wanna get home and be with my family."

We watched the street together. Cars turned the corner every few seconds, pausing just long enough for the men inside them to check out the girls. Frankie seemed to grow increasingly impatient. "See how she's missin' 'em as they go by?" he cried. I nodded. Even I had already noticed something odd about her behavior; she was nowhere near as smooth as the girls I had seen on the Upper West Side.

A white van pulled over a few yards from Cookie. "C'mon, c'mon!" Frankie muttered, tapping his foot and kneading his hands. "He's waitin' for you!" The driver, a bearded man who appeared to be in his early thirties, backed up, and Cookie met him halfway. They talked. "She's takin' too long," Frankie observed after a minute or so. And as if on cue, Cookie slammed the door. No deal.

Cookie started to walk back to the corner, but changed her mind halfway. She cut across the street, toward us. Frankie rose slowly and met her at the curb. "I was gettin' worried, with him sittin' there all this time," Cookie said to him, tipping her head in my direction. "It's cool," Frankie told her. "Don't worry. He's a writer."

"Oh!" Cookie said. Turning to me, she added, "I'm sorry, I thought you might be a cop." I shook my head 'no' and smiled. "C'mon, Cookie," Frankie said, gripping her arm and directing her toward her corner. "It's gettin' late. I wanna be home by twelve."

He sat back down on the stoop. "What's with her?" I said when she was out of ear shot. "She new at it?"

"Uh-huh," Frankie said. "She just got into New York. This is her first time out."

"Her first time out?" I repeated.

"Uh-huh," Frankie said.

Her Unfortunate Break

A brown, dented Mustang pulled up next to one of the cars parked across the street. Its driver, a young mulatto, honked his horn, and Cookie sauntered over to him.

"Okay," Frankie said, "if he wants to make it with her, I'm gonna follow them. You wanna go for a ride?"

"Sure," I told him.

Cookie climbed into the Mustang and they took off. "Let's go!" Frankie hollered. He was behind the wheel and I was beside him in seconds, but we waited until the car was halfway down the block before we started after them. Frankie continued to fill me in on Cookie. "I'm sorry to say, I introduced this guy to the loan shark," he confessed, "and I don't wanna see him end up in the dumps." We pulled away from the curb. "He met this girl three weeks ago," he went on. "She's from Chattanooga, Tennessee..." He glanced around him, sensing something wrong. "...she claims her stepfather had relations with her at a very early age..." With the road? "...and she's been on the run since she was thirteen years old..." Or the car? "...so she says." The tires!

Thumpabump! Thumpabump! Thumpabump! "And I got a fuckin' flat tire! God dog!" Frankie slammed his palm against the steering wheel. The john's car was pulling away fast.

"I can't chase her on the flat. I wish she'd stop and let me get her at the corner!" The brown Mustang disappeared onto Ninth Avenue. "I don't believe I got a fuckin' flat tire. I gotta get her outa that car -- she don't know where to go or what to do!" We picked up speed -- ThumpaBUMP! ThumpaBUMP! -- and jerked around the corner after them. "I'm gonna ruin that fuckin' tire," Frankie whined. "Damn friends! Don't make any friends, Mike, I'm tellin' ya. It don't pay."

Idiotically, I observed, "This is one bad fuckin' night."

We pulled alongside the john's car, stopped at a light. "Open the window, would ya, Mike?" Frankie asked. He leaned across the front seat and hollered to the john, "I'm sorry to say this, but I know the girl." The john took his arm from around Cookie and rolled down his window. Frankie repeated himself, then explained, "I gotta get somethin' for her later, okay? Could you please bring her back later?"

"Sure, man," the john said. He smiled and waved us off.

"Thanks a lot, my friend," Frankie told him.

Cookie, puzzled or annoyed, appeared in the window, looking over the john's shoulder. "I have to see you later," Frankie said to her. "I got a flat tire. I'll meet you back there, okay?"

The light turned green. Cars honked at us from behind. As the Mustang pulled away, Frankie shouted, "I gotta give her some weed!"

*

"Look at the cops," Frankie said. "And I got a fuckin' flat tire. I'm gonna pull over, Mike."

We limped around the corner and into a parking space, then climbed out onto the street. The tire was shot, and changing it turned out to be no easy job. First, Frankie couldn't find the jack handle and had to use a long screwdriver instead. Then the screwdriver kept slipping out of the jack's socket, skinning Frankie's knuckles. When at last he did raise the rear end of the car enough to pull the bad tire off, he found that, because the car was parked on an incline, he couldn't raise the rear end high enough to squeeze the good tire on.

Soon, Frankie was breathing hard and sweating. He pushed and kicked at the unyielding tire, swearing under his breath. "Fuckin' tire!" Frankie groaned. He threw down the screwdriver he had been using as a lever.

"I hate to ask you," he said, "but could you do me a favor, Mike?" I nodded, eager to be of some use. "You know what she looks like, right? Tell her what happened. Tell her to wait for me. Tell her I'll be right there," he said. "I don't want her to be alone when she gets back." As I was about to leave, he added, "I only know her for a few hours, and would you believe it? I'm worried about her."

*

I sat on the stoop where Frankie and I had sat earlier in the evening, waiting for Cookie and watching the prostitutes on the corner. People passed in and out of the building, stepping around me, trailing dogs of assorted breeds and sizes. I noticed above my head a small metal sign, painted green with white lettering. It read:

NO LOITERING OR LITTERING

BY ORDER OF POLICE DEPARTMENT

I decided to stay there anyway.

Still riding the flat, Frankie returned about ten minutes later. He parked the car opposite the stoop and walked over to me. "She's not back yet, huh?" he said. I shook my head 'no.'

Frankie shrugged, then took his jack and the long screwdriver from the back seat of the car and again set about changing his tire. He removed the flat again, and this time he examined it. Embedded in it was a piece of glass about an inch and a half long, perhaps once part of the bottom of a Coke bottle. "Wow," Frankie said, "when I pick up glass, I pick up glass."

I watched him work. His movements were clumsy and mechanical, as if his mind were somewhere else. "He's takin' advantage of her," Frankie said after a while. He was soaked with sweat, and his breathing was labored. "She should never be out that long," he went on, wiping his greasy hands on his pants. "With one of these guys, there's girls out here that'll tell you after a couple of minutes, 'C'mon, you're takin' too long.'" He tightened down the lug nuts on the spare and shoved the flat and the jack onto his back seat, the job was done.

We returned to the stoop. "Where do you think he took her?" I asked.

"Probably down by the water some place."

"They'll do it in the car, then?"

"Yeah. Most of the men out here can't go for the money to get a girl in a decent surrounding."

Frankie gazed without expression at the two girls who had taken over Cookie's spot.

"I couldn't tell you what she's gonna do or not do," he said. "For all I know, she's talkin' to

the guy and she's thinkin' about runnin' away with him, right? Which I wouldn't blame her for doin'. Would you wanna be out here doin' it for some jerk?"

"How do you think she feels about it?" I asked.

Frankie shrugged. "I don't know. I guess she's in love with the jerk who's makin' her do it, right? Or somethin' to that effect." He paused, then turned and looked me in the face. "Which isn't me, in case that's what you're thinkin'," he said. "The money she makes she's gonna turn over to her old man, or whatever you wanna call him, which he's gonna turn over to the people he owes money to." He spat on the sidewalk. "She's out here sellin' her body for that shit."

"This guy you're calling a jerk -- he's a friend of yours?"

"Yeah. I know it sounds terrible, but, you know..."

A patrol car pulled over near a fire hydrant someone had opened across Tenth Avenue. One of the cops got out to shut it off. Frankie and I watched as the girls on the corner strolled down the block and, after the police left, strolled back. I began to feel very strange, but did not, then, have the luxury of figuring out just what it was I was feeling strange about.

"You say you're just gonna write a book? What, on city life?" Frankie asked me. I nodded, and told him about some of the other people I'd met. As we talked, we saw, almost directly across the street from us, a man in a white T-shirt, walking with a tall, stacked blond, throw a wine bottle into the street; shards of glass skittered across the pavement. "You see that?" Frankie said. "They do that to slow the cars down, right?" The man and his girl stopped by the side of a car parked near the corner. They talked. "Now, he's gonna put his woman to work," Frankie said.

We waited. "I wish she'd get back," Frankie said, "so I could quit my worryin'. I'll tell you what happened: If this guy don't come back with her, he probably took her some place. Even, he got friends that were layin' for her. Either she's gonna get the shit kicked outa her by him and his friends, or he's gonna take her some place and Lord knows what the hell he's gonna do. Drop her, take her into Brooklyn, keep her, maybe, over the weekend. And use her. 'Cause she's not -- " he fumbled for the word "streetwise, or whatever you wanna call it. She's dumb, for this. She don't know what she's doin'. It was her unfortunate break I got a flat tire."

Frankie scanned the area. "If she does come back," he said, "she's gonna get scolded. I can't take this shit." Frankie stood, then checked his watch. "Look," he said, "I'm gonna go to where she was supposed to take the guy, then I gotta make a call; I gotta check in. I'll be back in about ten minutes. If she does happen to come back, tell her not to move, just to sit here with you. I don't care if the world's comin' to an end -- let her wait here, okay?"

A Change of Scene

The john dropped Cookie at the corner just as Frankie returned from his call. They met a little ways up the block. I hung back a while to give them a chance to talk, then walked over to them.

Frankie was all smiles, but Cookie seemed edgy and distracted. I saw her pull a bill from her bikini top and hand it to Frankie, who stuffed it in his shirt pocket. The mood soon grew more cordial. As I drew near, I heard Frankie's voice asking questions, and Cookie's, louder and giggly, answering him with phrases like 'negatory' and 'ten-four.' "She's from the Midwest," Frankie explained to me when I joined them.

They continued to talk. I noticed Frankie calling Cookie 'Marna.' I asked her if her name was 'Marna/Cookie,' trying awkwardly to make a joke. She laughed indulgently. "I'm Marna Jane," she explained carefully, "but everybody calls me Cookie."

"She's really Cookie," Frankie said, his voice a little stiff.

Suddenly a wave of exhaustion swept over Cookie's face. "If I'm gonna bust this town," she said stonily, "I gotta get somethin' to drink." The three of us moseyed up the block to a grocery store, where Frankie bought Cookie and himself each a Coke, and treated me to a beer.

"We were afraid something had happened to you," I told Cookie as we left the store.

"Nooooo," she said, smiling seductively.

Frankie was worrying about the cops hassling us if we stood around, so we all got into the front seat of his car and headed up Tenth Avenue. Cookie turned on the radio, but Frankie shut it off right away. "Please," he said, "talk to me while we drive." Cookie sunk into the seat. "Where the heck did you go?" Frankie asked her.

"Same place," Cookie said.

"Down by the river? I gotta be blind."

"We were behind the buildings. I got brains. I ain't dumb. You know why?" Cookie jerked her thumb at a scooter cop parked by the curb. "They busted three chicks down there tonight, and now they're gonna look for another one. I just seen that cop five minutes ago."

Frankie's knuckles whitened as he gripped the wheel hard. "Damn!" he said. "You got that tape recorder turned on, Mike?" he asked. "They're bustin' the girls when they

shouldn't be. There's too much fuckin' crime goin' around for these hard-ons to be out here bustin' girls who aren't really hurtin' too many people. Let me tell ya -- you can put this down -- they had one cop here, I don't know his name, but he actually hit the girls with his night stick."

"Let one of 'em hit me," Cookie snarled, "he's gonna get a knife" -- she lined up her words like dominoes -- "right... between... the legs. I'll put him in the hospital deader 'n' a doornail." She turned to me, sitting beside her. "I'm mean," she explained, giggling, "when it comes to fightin'. But I'm sweet as a kitten, otherwise."

Seconds later her bravado dissolved, and she slumped deep into her seat. "Frankie," she whimpered, "I wanna get outa here."

Frankie sucked in his breath. "Look, how about if I take you some place farther down, if that'll put your mind at ease. We'll just stay out another hour, okay?" he asked.

"My behind," Cookie said.

"What?"

"I said, 'my behind.'"

"You don't wanna stay out that long, huh?"

"Shiiit. I'm gettin' fed up."

"You're puttin' me on the spot, Marna," Frankie said.

We drove on.

*

"This is your first night out?" I asked Cookie.

"First night in New York, yeah," she said. "But I used to do it in Texas -- Rockpaw, Texas. I never thought I'd see the day I'd become a prostitute, but I've been doing it since I was about nineteen." She said that she would be twenty-one in a month or so. I pressed her for information about her past, and with some prodding, she told me about herself.

"I left home when I was young, went out, worked, had my own apartment. I used to be very heavy into drugs, and I've got scars all over my arms, all over my body, just from fights -- knife fights.

"When I was growin' up, me and my parents didn't hit it off together, and I used to want to kill myself and want to get away from them. So, that's the only way I knew how to do it -- run away from home. And I started very young, at thirteen... Like, that's when I first started screwin' guys, to put it in plain English.

"This was in the state of West Virginia. But, like, in different states I'd run away. I'd go to Minnesota, Texas, Tennessee, California, Oklahoma... Baltimore, Maryland. You know, just different places. New York, for instance. Like, I've only been here, what, four weeks?" She looked to Frankie for confirmation. "Yeah," she went on. "I mean, it's really just... I don't know..."

"How do you feel about it?" I cut in.

"How do I feel about it? Well," she said, "I can't say I'm proud of myself, but it's one way of makin' a living, I guess; I can say that."

"It's the oldest profession in the world, so they claim, right?" Frankie observed.

We drove on.

*

"What did you charge the john who picked you up?" I asked Cookie.

She was slow to answer. "Well," she said, clearing her throat. "Well, like, it's... ten for a head, and it's twenty for... the other." She drew a deep breath, added quickly, "and, like, all he got was a head, so that was ten." She turned her body to Frankie: "He's askin' me all these questions and he's tapin' it on tape!" She turned back to me: "Don't you dare put that in the paper!"

Her reaction astonished me, and for a few moments I didn't know how to respond. "It's okay," I told her. "I won't use your real name. I'll just call you Cookie. I've met other girls," I told her, hoping this would reassure her, "who call themselves Cookie."

"Yeah," Cookie sighed. "I guess there's too many 'Cookies' in New York."

She changed the subject. She told me she had been writing a lot of poems (she said 'poms') and songs lately, and she wanted me to listen to some of them, since I was a writer. "Sure," I told her. But we were stopped at a light, and before she could tell me about her poems, or recite some of them, we saw a dark-skinned woman in her late twenties or early thirties about to cross the street with two small boys. We watched as the younger boy -- chubby, with curly black hair and big eyes -- balked. We saw the woman drag him by the hand; when he resisted, she bent over and slapped him across the side of the head three or four times, scolding him savagely in Spanish. He cried, which further infuriated the young woman. She began to slap him again. The older boy drew back and watched, too, a kind of terror in his eyes, but without surprise.

Cookie could hardly contain herself. "Oh, you whore you!" she screamed at last, trying to crawl across Frankie to the window on his side. The child stumbled to the curb.

The woman dragged him to his feet and, holding him by one arm, slapped him again and again with her free hand. "Frankie, lemme outa here!" Cookie cried. "Oh, you bitch!" she said.

"Relax!" Frankie told her.

"I hate to see a mother like that."

"So do I, but be cool. It's gonna help him, you getting out?"

"But look at that, Frankie," Cookie pleaded.

The light changed, and Frankie made the turn. "She don't deserve a kid," he said.

"She don't."

"Oh, Frankie," Cookie said, watching now over her shoulder, still trembling, "that's not right. I swear," she went on, "I would love to see somebody come up the street and just smack the holy shit outa her."

"She don't deserve a kid," Frankie said.

*

We continued touring, the streets we drove through throbbing with light and motion.

"I'm gonna die," Cookie groaned suddenly. "I've had it." She began to whimper. She turned to Frankie for support. "And if he doesn't like it, that's tough shit, right?" she asked.

"Well," Frankie said, "for now it is, but -- "

"Plus," Cookie said miserably, "plus, the baby is moving. The baby's just movin' too much, that's all," she said.

"The baby?" I asked. "You're pregnant?" My eyes moved to her belly pressing against her jeans.

"Yup. Naturally," she said. Her tone became matter-of-fact. She told me that she was two to four months pregnant; this would be her second child. "My first," she explained, "is nine and a half months old. His name" -- and at this she brightened -- "is Prometheus. He's in Des Moines, Iowa, with my sister-in-law." The father of both children, she said, was the same man, a Puerto Rican.

It was not until much later that I began to wonder whether a woman two to four months pregnant could actually feel her baby moving.

*

Frankie stopped the car near a factory that had shut down for the night. "I gotta talk to her, private, for a coupla minutes, okay Mike?" he asked me. They sat together on a concrete ledge a few feet away. I watched them. I didn't hear their actual conversation, but I surmised he was telling her she was going to have to stay out a little longer. I don't know for sure what else they talked about, but when they returned to the car, they were both chatting and seemed more relaxed.

Cookie wanted to know how big the piece of glass in Frankie's tire was. "Put it this way," Frankie told her, smiling, "I guess I'll be going to Bambergers tomorrow to get a new tire."

She rested her head on his shoulder and stroked his chest. "Aww, you poor babe," she cooed. "I'm not poor," Frankie declared. "This could be a lot worse."

Cookie continued to fondle Frankie, her hands moving from chest to thighs, lightly caressing his balls. I tried to pretend not to notice, as I felt my own prick swell. Frankie began to moan softly. He tried to slip his hand around Cookie's waist and down her pants, but she pushed him off. She replaced his hand on the wheel. "No," she told him.

"He's gonna get it," she said to me, winking.

"You promise?" Frankie asked her. "If I didn't know Bobby, I wish I could."

"What he don't know won't hurt him," Cookie said.

Encouraged, Frankie tried again; but he was again rebuffed, this time with verse.

Cookie recited:

Expectations are mine alone.

What can I say?

Vows are known.

*

Cookie asked me about my writing. I told her I was doing prose, but that I used to write poetry when I was in college. She asked about my poetry, but before I could say much, Frankie interrupted. "Excuse me, Mike, for a minute; I'm sorry," he said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Right, we just come off Eleventh Avenue, okay?" he said to Cookie.

"Ten-four," she replied.

"That's a big ten-four, forty, roger, and all that good stuff," Frankie said, kidding her.

"Okay," he went on, "now, I'll show you."

We pulled into an underground parking lot. "Very, very quiet," Frankie said.

"No security guards?" Cookie asked.

"No security guards, no nothin'," Frankie said. "You could go right behind that truck over there in the corner. And, matter of fact, you're gonna have two body guards tonight, looks like, instead a one."

"Well, that's cool," Cookie said. "I mean, if Mike doesn't mind hangin' out with you. And," she continued, turning to me, "and, if Mike doesn't mind me, the way I act."

"I don't mind anything," I assured her.

Frankie asked her if she knew how to get to the lot. "Negatory," she said, giggling; then, gauging Frankie's mood and forcing herself, in response, to become more sober, she added, "but it won't take me long to learn." Frankie rubbed her thigh. "You're beautiful," he told her.

As we drove to the corner Cookie was to be working from, Frankie carefully went over the route from there to the parking lot. He had to repeat the directions several times before Cookie understood, but at last she seemed to get it. However, when we reached the spot, there was a police scooter parked on the sidewalk. "You're not goin' out over here, sweetheart," Frankie said. "They just closed off the street."

We headed further uptown, but found cops there, too. They seemed to be everywhere. "Jesus, what am I gonna do?" Cookie wailed.

Frankie thought it over. "I'll take you over to the East Side," he said. "Twenty-somethin' street. It probably won't be so hot there. That's where the black dudes with the El Dorados and five or six girls in their stables hang out. The cops are probably gettin' paid."

Cookie wanted to try and pick up some smoke first. "My head... I... I... With these cops, I'm freakin' out, you know?" she said. "I'm gettin' very paranoid, I hate to say."

"Relax," Frankie told her. "We'll stay out just a little longer, and then I'll bring you over to Brooklyn, to Bobby."

Frankie thought Harry might have some stuff, so we drove around the neighborhood, looking for Harry and Ginger, but they weren't at any of their usual spots. "Ah, come on Ginger," Frankie said, beating his palm against the steering wheel. "Harry's not out, Ginger's not out -- "

"Well," Cookie said, "why don't you ask somebody if they seen 'em?"

"You think they're gonna tell me? Most of these people, when they see me, they think one thing: cop."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think I look like one."

"Well," I said, "you do look a little like Al Pacino in that movie."

"Ho, ho..." Frankie said, "well, thank you. I wish I was makin' his kinda money."

*

It was beginning to look as if we wouldn't find Harry or Ginger. "Ah, fuck this shit," Frankie said, "excuse the tape recording. My language isn't the best in the world."

We headed crosstown. Cookie was still uptight. Frankie tried to cheer her up by making fun of the drag queens hanging out on the street corners. "Did you ever see a woman with legs like that?" he asked. "God help the girl who has legs like that." He squeezed Cookie's leg. She smiled. "Oh, I think mine are very firm," she said.

Cookie started to relax into the ride. We again began talking. "Can you see doing this years from now?" I asked her.

"Hell, no," she said. "After this kid, I'm goin' back to topless dancing, and I'm not having any more kids. Two's the limit, for me." The next day, in fact, she was supposed to start a new job setting wigs, something she said she had done in California. "If she has any problems," Frankie said, "I'll teach her, 'cause I'm an ex-beautician."

I asked Cookie if she wanted those kids. "Naturally," she said. "I mean, abortions and adoptions, those are two things I don't go for." But she said she was not exactly against contraception. "Like, it depends on how much hot water I'm in, and, if I got a dude like I do now, how much hot water he's in."

I asked her about this "dude." "I'm not really that involved with him, you know? But I really like him a lot. So I'm helpin' him out."

"How long have you been together?"

"Frankie?"

"Three weeks," Frankie said.

"You mean you just met him when you came to New York?" I wanted to add, 'and you're selling your body for him?'

"Put it this way," Frankie tells me. "He's one of the few guys who had a kind word to say for a little while, treated her decent for a while. He just borrowed the money -- well, not too long ago. So you can say faith, or whatever; it could just be faith that she came along at the wrong moment. Maybe it woulda been a hell of a lot better if he didn't borrow the money and she came along, right? Maybe she wouldn't be out there now."

"To be honest with you," Cookie said, "I've never really met anybody like him. I mean, I've met worse, really worse, but he's kinda hard to figure out and kinda hard to understand. He doesn't explain things. He just says 'do this' or 'do that.' I don't know; maybe he just doesn't think. Or maybe he doesn't realize the things he's comin' out with."

I asked her if it bothered her that he didn't explain. She thought about it for a few seconds, then admitted that it did, kinda.

*

We headed downtown, toward the Gramercy Park area. I remembered a story about a fifteen-year-old runaway who had been strangled to death by a trick in a hotel near there a year or so before. I asked Cookie if she ever worried about getting hurt.

"Yeah," she drawled, after thinking about it for several seconds, "because, see, this last guy had what you call a deadly weapon in the car."

"That guy?" Frankie asked.

"Yeah," Cookie said. "We were just sittin' there, and I really got scared. He was pointing it at me and waving it around and I didn't know if I should scream or get out of the car, or what. It kinda freaked me out," she admitted. "That was another reason why I didn't get back so soon."

We headed toward the river, and Frankie started to look for some place for Cookie to work. "Here, it isn't too hot," he explained. "The cops very rarely bother the girls. Over here, they work right on the street, park in between cars and make it. Mostly, it's no screwin', just a little head. Or would you rather go to Third Avenue, where there's a lot

more girls and a lot less vehicle traffic, but where you have less of a chance of gettin', you know, into trouble?"

"When we get to Third Avenue, I'll decide," Cookie said.

"You better hurry up and decide," Frankie said, "'cause I wanna go home."

"I know it. I don't want Victoria to lose her -- "

"I ain't gettin' nothin' tonight, sweetheart. I know she's mad at me."

"Just tell her to scratch her left boobie and get glad. Or tell her to shove it up between her toes, tell her something -- " her voice edged toward panic " -- I don't care what you tell her, tell her you had to work late, that's all."

*

We crossed over to Third Avenue.

"I hope there's no spooks in this territory," Cookie said.

"You don't talk to them," Frankie told her. "They come over to you, you just don't bother. Don't even walk over to the car, okay?" He stroked her stomach and spoke with some tenderness. "And no more hassling this thing with money with these people, okay babe? You tell 'em the price, they wanna hassle with you, forget it." He continued to rub her belly. Cookie's eyes began to tear. "I'm glad you're doin' that," she said softly. "My stomach's cold."

*

We pulled over at 14th Street and Third Avenue. Frankie told Cookie to have the trick take her all the way out 14th Street to the Con Edison building. "It's gonna be dead around

there," he explained. "You go between two cars, or you park in front of a car and work from there." Again he went over the directions several times, until he was certain she understood. "I'll be followin' you through," he concluded. "Let's get home. Let's get outa this damn shit in a little while, okay?"

"Frankie?" Cookie said, her eyes taking in the dingy tenements, the massage parlors, the winos walking the street.

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"Why you had to pick this territory, I'll never know."

*

We let Cookie out a few blocks further downtown. As I opened the door to let her out, I asked Cookie how often she thought she'd have to come out. "To be honest with you," she sighed, "I don't have the slightest idea. But I hope this is the last. In Texas, I'm used to it, but in New York, I'm not." She gave Frankie one final, imploring glance, then walked toward the corner.

"She's pretty nervous, isn't she," I said to Frankie.

"I would be, too," he said.

"Why did you bring her down here?" I asked.

"It's on the way home," he replied.

Cookie had taken no more than a dozen tentative steps when she was intercepted by a drunken black man, who started to paw her. Frankie leaped out of the car as quickly as his bulk would permit, slamming the door behind him. He ran toward Cookie and the wino, hollering: "Marna! Marna!"

"Get lost!" he yelled at the drunk, pushing him away. "Go! Go! Quit your woe shit!"

Cookie was close to tears. Frankie put his arm around her shoulders. "Was he messin' with you already?" he asked.

"Yes!" Cookie sobbed.

Frankie held her by the shoulders. "Okay," he told her, "protection's workin'. He ain't gonna bother you no more." Still trembling, but angry, Cookie responded: "I know he ain't. Because if he does," she looked menacingly after the drunk, by then staggering up the block, "he's gonna get it right in the balls."

"Okay," Frankie said. "You gonna stay on this corner?"

"I dread the thought of it," Cookie told him, glancing around her again, "but all right."

"Look," Frankie said, giving Cookie's shoulders a final squeeze, "when somebody starts botherin' you like that, just come back to us."

"Okay," Cookie told him.

*

Frankie and I sat in the car and waited. A couple of cars stopped for Cookie, but she didn't get in. She seemed even more dazed and confused than she had seemed when I first saw her. "She's too much," Frankie said. "I'm not gonna come out with her no more. One favor's enough. That's the second guy she turned down, in the Lincoln."

A few minutes later, a maroon station wagon pulled over. The driver beeped for Cookie. She looked back at us. "Go ahead, stupid, go!" Frankie said in a stage whisper. "These guys ain't gonna stand around for her when there's girls up the block willin' to jump on the car," he explained to me.

Cookie made her way slowly to the car. "I don't believe she did it in Texas," Frankie told me. "My personal opinion is, she's new."

Cookie got into the station wagon. We could see them through the car's rear window, two shadows moving. My heart began to pound.

"I tell ya," Frankie went on, "the guy she's goin' with is supposed to give me a hundred to bring in tonight, but I'm not stayin' out here much longer; so whatever she makes, I'm gonna bring in, and fuck the rest."

"She just made ten bucks before?"

"Twenty. See, when she first got outa the car, she was picked up within a minute. The last time took like ten minutes -- she was out there maybe five minutes, before you came over to me. So it wasn't long. She could turn a trick every fifteen, twenty minutes, but she's not..." He sighed. "She's doin' this, I hope, not outa love, 'cause if she's in love with this guy, she's a jerk; a bigger jerk than I thought she was."

I asked Frankie how she met this guy Bobby. "I'm to blame for every goddamn thing," he confessed. He sighed again. "I was workin' on a job, and this guy Bobby's brother was workin' with me, and I met her at a pizza place, and she didn't have no place to go. I'm certainly not gonna bring her home to Momma's house or to my house, but I know Bobby was divorced from his wife, so I said, 'Hey, you wanna stay with my friend? Far as I know he's a decent dude and he'll treat you good.' So, she said yeah. That was the first night she came into New York. She had nothin' but really a buncha rags she was wearin'. He bought her some nice clothes, but naturally one pair a clothes ain't gonna last three weeks. They were lookin' kinda bad, so I bought her what she's wearin' right now."

"Did your friend put her up to this, or was it her idea?"

"He put her up to it," Frankie said. "I work with these guys for eight, ten, twelve hours a day, but what they do in their private life, I really don't know. Except," he added, grinning a little, "except, now I learned one thing."

The wagon still hadn't moved. "He's hesitating," Frankie observed. "She's probably tellin' him where to go. Let's hope he don't mind..."

A moment later, the john's car glided slowly into traffic. When it was nearly a block ahead, we pulled out after it. "Here we go again," Frankie said. "This time, we'll watch her."

Gadding About Town

The john took a right at the next corner. "Oh, shit!" Frankie cried out. "How many times I gotta tell her? I told her 14th Street, right? What's this to you?"

"Twelfth Street," I told him.

We followed them east almost to the river, then through a maze of side streets, always trailing by a block or two, running red lights so as not to get too far behind. "Why don't they pull over?" Frankie asked. "What's she waitin' for? It's dead; it's dead. What is she doin' to me?" he moaned. "Oh, man," he said, "is this guy takin' her for a ride?"

On a particularly desolate street, the john stopped. We stopped a couple of blocks behind him and waited. There were no cars between us. "This looks stupid, you know?" Frankie said to me.

"Maybe he's trying to see if you're following him," I suggested.

"He's doin' a good job of it," Frankie said.

The john soon took off again. We waited until a car passed us, then resumed the chase. The john headed further downtown, taking us through a jungle bathed in bright, pink light. Groups of men stripped to undershirts drank beer around the stoops of crumbling tenements. Handfuls of kids screwed open fire hydrants and sprayed passing cars, laughing demoniacally and gesturing lewdly with their hands; I had to close the window to avoid getting drenched. "He's gettin' himself really into some hot water now," Frankie said. "He don't know where he's goin'. He's goin' to a pretty bad part of New York."

The john turned uptown and meandered through a half-dozen side streets until he was nearly back to where he was when he first picked Cookie up. He stopped again. We stopped, too, and again we waited. It was so dark that all we could see clearly were the taillights of his car.

After about a minute, the john flicked on his left blinker and started to move up the street. He turned at the next corner. "He's takin' her back," Frankie said. "He's not gonna take her out no more. To hell with this shit. I'm gonna get her now. This is too much, in one night, for my head."

We came to the spot where the john had stopped. We were about to swing over to Third Avenue to pick Cookie up when I spotted her leaning against a plywood fence covered over with posters. "She's right there!" I cried, pointing.

Frankie stomped on the brakes. "He kicked her outa the car, huh?" he said. Then he saw her himself. She was wobbling, holding her neck; her face was twisted with pain. "He hit her?" Frankie said. He beeped his horn, leaning out the window, shouting, "Hey, Cookie, hurry up if he hit you!" He shouted still louder, "Cookie, get in the caaaaar!" When he saw her beginning to respond, he added, "We're gonna get him. C'mon, Cookie!"

Cookie staggered to the car, still holding the back of her neck. She was sobbing uncontrollably. I got out of the car and let her in, then sat down again beside her. "What happened?" Frankie asked her.

She said nothing. We waited.

"He seen us followin' him, right?" Frankie guessed.

"Right," Cookie said, choking.

"And he hit you."

Cookie nodded, rubbing her neck and muttering "Oh, fuck!" in a hoarse whisper.

"What happened, instead a cursin'?" Frankie asked. "He gave you a crack in the neck?"

Cookie nodded again, then emitted a sharp laugh. "He was a goddamn fuckin' Chinese!" she spat out. Her breath came in gasps. "I told him to turn down 14th Street... and he turns down 12th..." She rotated her head around. "I know one thing," she said; "I'm gonna have a bruise and a half tomorrow!"

"What did he tell you, that there's people followin' you and he didn't like the idea, or --?"

"He didn't like the idea of the price, either," she snapped. Her voice was growing stronger. "I told him before I got in, and he said it was okay. Then when I told him to turn down 14th Street, he got even madder."

"I'd like to see his station wagon now..." Frankie threatened.

"He says, 'No, we're goin' down to my apartment.' 'Oh no we ain't,' I tell him."

"What was all that riding around about?" I asked her.

"A game," she said. "I started to get out two or three times, at the red lights, but he seen me grab the door handle. Plus," she added hurriedly, "he was askin' me a bunch a questions, and I think he's a cop."

"He's not a cop, or he'd of busted you," Frankie observed. "He seen the car followin' him?"

Cookie nodded. "Yeah. I says, 'There ain't nobody followin' us. You're dreamin'!' And he goes like this -- " she swept the tip of her finger across her neck, under her chin, as if to slit her throat from ear to ear. She began to whimper; hopefully, she asked, "Did you get the license plate number?"

Frankie shook his head. I explained, "It was too dark. We were too far away."

We began to move.

"Was it like this in Texas, you raising money for some guy?" I asked Cookie.

"It was me, myself, and I," she replied. "And then I carried a switchblade. I used it more than once. And let me tell you, those guys never forgot it."

"There must be an easier way for you to make a living," I suggested.

"She's gonna try, tomorrow," Frankie said.

"I can hardly swallow," Cookie said. "Shit! I just wanna see his car, that's all I ask. Just let me see that car."

"Okay," Frankie said. "I'll swing over to Ninth."

I wondered what would happen if by some coincidence or miracle we did actually manage to find that maroon station wagon.

We drove in silence for a while.

"All I can say is, I'm sorry," Cookie said.

"What are you sorry about?" Frankie asked. "You didn't do nothin' wrong."

"Are you sure?"

"Huh?"

"Are you sure?" Cookie said.

"Sure," Frankie said. "What'd you do wrong? You tried for him."

"Huh?"

"You tried," Frankie repeated, rubbing her leg.

*

We were sitting at a red light when I saw the john's car about a hundred yards away; it looked as if he was picking up another girl. I began to visualize a showdown:

We are tearing across the intersection, trying to cut the john off. He spots us and pulls away before we reach him, and we give chase. We jolt through crowded, twisting streets, weaving from curb to curb, slamming into parked cars; he nearly loses us when he throws his wagon into a slide and spins completely around, but we manage to stay on him until, at last, he turns into a dead end. We have him. Frankie whips open his door, hikes up his pants, and slowly, menacingly, swaggers over to the station wagon. Hesitantly, I get out the other side. I see the john climb out the passenger side of his car, his hand behind his back, concealing something. Frankie is almost upon him. From where I am standing I can see the glint and sparkle of metal reflecting street lights, and I know Frankie suspects nothing. For a moment

*or two I am frozen, but I shake my voice loose, and, nearly certain my warning will come too late, I finally call out: "Frankie! Look out! He's got a -
- "*

I blinked the dream away, and pointed toward the station wagon. "That's him, isn't it?"
I said.

"Yup," Cookie said.

"Where?" Frankie asked.

"By that light," I told him.

"That's him?" he asked Cookie.

"Damn straight," she said.

The john had his left blinker on. "He's gonna make a U-turn. Ohhhhh! Isn't that so pret-ty?" Frankie said. "Oh, c'mon, make a U-turn, mister...."

The john's car did not turn around. His light changed before ours, and we watched as he disappeared around a corner a block farther down. "I tell you," Cookie said, "if that chick he picked up has any sense, man, she'll get that sonofabitch."

We remained at our light, waiting for it to change to green. Frankie asked me, as we waited, if I happened to read about a Chinese guy who'd picked up a black girl down at the Bowery. "He took her over to a place and about twenty guys gang-banged her," Frankie said. Cookie nodded. "I think that's why he wanted to go to his apartment," she said.

Our light finally changed. Frankie asked me if I was going to hang out in the area. I told him no, I was going home. He offered to take me to the subway. "I hate to drop you off around, you know, the streets," he explained. "You could probably handle yourself, but

it's no use bein' in a neighborhood that isn't necessary. 'Cause I'm gonna be splittin' into Brooklyn to bring her back to Bobby."

Frankie drove to the Bowery and Delancy Street stop, near the entrance to the Williamsburg Bridge. The three of us talked for a few minutes before we split up. I was beginning to feel as if I were waking from a dream, unsure as yet which side of consciousness I was on.

I asked Cookie about her plans. She said she was thinking about getting her own apartment; the women's wig business, she figured, paid pretty good. I told her she might find a cheap place, maybe with a roommate, on the bulletin boards in the stores near the universities (but as the words left my mouth, I imagined her rooming with Columbia students, turning an occasional trick on the side, and knew before I'd finished that it would never happen). Frankie told me that what she was really looking for was a guy that'd keep her, "that isn't gonna pimp her or any of that shit," until she got on her feet. But maybe she could get a roommate one of these days.

"Who knows, Frankie?" Cookie said. "After your divorce goes through, I might just say, 'Hey, c'mon, move in.'"

"Divorce? I thought you said you were a happily married man," I told Frankie.

He faltered for a moment. "Happily married?" he said, "there's no such thing. We lived happily for about five years, and then it started going bad 'cause she came from a rich family, and I lived in a project most of my life. She was a fashion designer; she was makin' good money -- but now I'm makin' decent money -- and she couldn't take the strain of havin' three kids and not havin' a big payroll.

"My in-laws just gave my wife the down payment for a house, and the judge said give it another six months. Her parents think the house will pacify both of us."

I heard myself saying, "Well, I hope it does."

"Whatever, right?" Frankie said. "My children are more important than her. I hate to see it, but that's how I feel."

He paused, and I looked for the right thing to say. "Let me split, okay Mike?" Frankie said. "Cause I wanna be home before twelve. Maybe we'll see you again. I might be down in that area next week."

"You think you're gonna do this again?" I asked.

"I got to," Frankie said. "I gotta start payin' these people off, or that man's gonna get hurt."

"Yup, that's it," Cookie agreed.

"But next time," Frankie added, "I'm gonna make sure she has a room to work out of, instead off the streets. That's what she'll be doin' next week: out of a room."

"Mike, I'll see ya, okay? Let me get goin'!" He offered me his hand. "Okay," I said. We shook hands warmly. "Maybe I'll see you," I said. "Thanks for the ride to the train."

I stared after them numbly, watching the taillights of Frankie's car merge with the traffic headed over the bridge. I remembered (or perhaps only now, writing this, do I remember) a woman I met just after I left Harry and the straw-haired girl he called Kathy. She was overweight and looked well into her late thirties or early forties. She had brittle, bleached-blond hair, and she wore too much pink eye shadow and a pink pants suit that

didn't seem to fit her right. She stood in front of the Circle-in-the-Square Theater on 50th Street and smiled as she asked, in a voice like sugar syrup, "Do you wanna go out?"

"It's kinda early, isn't it?" I replied. It was not yet noon.

"Nooooo!" she cooed. "There's a lotta early birds out. You oughta try it."

"Maybe," I said, returning her smile. "But not today."

I lost sight of Frankie's car. Then, disoriented, as if I'd walked out of a movie in which I'd played a minor role, I descended into the subway and began the long trip home.