

BANKS OF THE HUDSON

The Deuce was a like a magnet back then - forbidding, alluring and dangerous. Of course, the black girl was there - hard as nails, but with an inner fragility that was often frightening.

We were all broke and looking for the big score that would catapult us out of town. I was reading Paul Bowles, so Tangiers was my goal. She could barely read the Daily News, so Morocco was fine by her. That's when I realized she probably loved me.

Then I discovered that I was hooked and had to clean up my act. But what to do with her? Tangiers was no place to go cold turkey and bringing her back to Wexford was a bit of a stretch.

I must have been out of my skull takin' the Man for 20 grand. I should have gone straight to Kennedy; but I was stupid. What else is new!

The roll of bills was bulging in my pocket as we glided down the Deuce. She had just scored and was feeling no pain either. It was raining when we reached the pier. She neatly hung her dress on a piece of metal and laid some papers on the ground. Sparks flew from her eyes as the truck lights ricocheted off the broken window panes. Apart from an occasional sigh, she was her usual professional, silent self.

When we were finished, she combed her hair, chose a lipstick and stepped back into her dress. We walked back up the Deuce and she turned into the bar without speaking. For an instant, I stood frozen by the cold fury of his glare. Then, like a rabbit freed from the lamplight, I was gone. The hair stood rigid on my head as I ducked past hookers, pimps and junkies. When I vaulted over the Times Square traffic, a lone cop scratched his arse and swore at me. On Fifth Avenue, I knocked aside two Japanese tourists and shoved a 100 in a cabby's hand. He put pedal to metal and I didn't look back until we hit the Van Wyck.

She'd melted away by the time I returned to New York. I hardly ever think of her now. That's the kind of person I've become. That's the kind of city this is.