

LATE SUMMER RIDE

claire zulkey

"Would you like to see my stone?" he asked courteously.

"What?" the girl responded, startled. She had been staring out the window, chewing on the insides of her cheeks.

"Do you want to see the rock I found?"

"Uh, okay," she said, with a tinge of uncertainty.

Keeping an eye on the road, Bill produced the shiny igneous stone, the length of his palm and as thick as the wad of money secured with three rubber bands behind the cab's sun visor.

"It's very nice," she said, rubbing her finger along the slick surface and feeling the sharp edge.

"But look at this." Bill removed a small penlight and shined it onto the rock. They were at a red light but he could have done it while he was driving, too.

FEATURE WORDS

The light shone on the rock, revealing a spectrum of shiny flecks that flickered in the beam.

"Where did you find it?"

"I was in Nevada in 1972, in the desert. I picked it up and I had it ever since. I took it to all these different fellas to see what kind it is, but ain't none of them knew what it was."

"Well, I think it's very cool," she said, handing it back.

They were silent as the cab maneuvered between the lanes and the dampness of the coming storm shaded the atmosphere.

"Look," said the girl suddenly, "I've changed my mind. Can we just go to the Howard Street El stop?"

Bill considered, while the girl worried he would be annoyed by this change of plans.

"I'll tell you, I lived in this city all my life, but I don't know one El stop from another."

The girl thought a moment. "That's okay. We'll figure it out." She reached into her purse and pulled out a red phone and punched a few buttons.

"Hi, Dad? Tell Mom I'm going to be home a little bit later. No, it's okay. Go ahead and eat. Just put some in the fridge for me. Bye."

BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

She put her phone away, sighed, and lit another cigarette.

Bill thought for a second.

"Ain't nothing but second nature for a woman to be late," he offered.

"What?" asked the girl, startled, but he plowed ahead.

"I don't mean no disrespect, but women are always late, and that's just how y'aret!"

The girl smiled. "Well, that's true, although I personally always try to be on time, as much as I can..." she trailed off as Bill went on.

"Back in 1967, I was standing on the corner, looking at my watch, waiting for my girl, and this cat walks by. I never see him before in my life, and he says to me, 'Is you waitin' fo' a woman?'"

Never see him before, so I say, 'Yeah, what the hell you want?'

He say, 'She a woman, and she late. But I tell you, if she ain't late, she ain't comin'!' And he put his hand right in his pocket and walked right on by!"

Bill "hee hee hee'd" at this for a long time, while the girl smiled politely and sincerely.

"That's very good advice."

"Put his hand in his pocket and walked right on by!"

The girl started laughing too.

"If she ain't late, she ain't comin'! Hee hee hee!"

The girl laughed, this time more amused with Bill than with his story.

"I'll tell you what, he was right, too," he told her.

Bill told the story three more times in some fashion or another, and as the rain started to pour down, the conversation switched to the capricious weather of the city. They talked about the Blizzard of '79, the year the girl had been born.

"I'll tell you what," Bill said. "When things get like that, it makes people put away all their petty bullshit and really come together."

The girl couldn't agree more. When they finally reached the El stop, she gave him a \$15 dollar tip.

"Good night," she said. "And, I hope that whoever she is, she's on time."

Bill didn't know what she was talking about.

But when he got home, Ruth scolded him for tracking water into the house and added "If you're late, I don't know what I can do about your dinner. See, you need to get-"

Suddenly Bill kissed Ruth.

"What got into you?" She asked indignantly, but with a smile.



Miles in the Sky (Taxi I)

J. Thomas Lowell - from the Jazz Sketches
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BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS