

Incautious after an hour of slow drinking, Noze had watched while a lady with lustrous hair the color of fresh-stripped copper wire and wearing a low-cut dress in vermillion stood from the table she occupied alone, threw a glance his way, and walked toward him, casually cooling herself with a matching carved-wood fan. She had a hitch in her step that exaggerated the sway of her hips. The clingy dress ended just below the knees and parted in a slit that exposed her right leg to the hip as she moved. She brushed against him lightly and took the stool next to his, facing the bar as he faced away.

“I am thirsty,” she said, looking straight ahead in the mirror on the back bar.

“I’m good for it,” Noze said. “Anything you want.”

She also caught the attention of the bartender, a girl in a tight white blouse and black dress slacks who wore a fine gold chain between pierced eyebrow and ear, a small blue star tattoo on her right wrist, and a simple silver ring on one thumb. Noze reckoned that she could kick-start a 747 on an icy morning. When she tended him, her lips were frozen in a grim line. When she spoke to the lady in red, they parted in a smile that showed sharp bleached teeth.

“Well, hello there, peaches. What’ll it be?”

“Campari rocks lemon twist. He says he is good for it.”

Jimmy Noze was hooked on her style, from dress to drink. Who drank

Campari? He turned his stool to study her profile while the liqueur was poured, and paid from what was left of his cash on the bar. He noticed that the red of the drink nearly matched her lips, and wondered if it had been calculated. She smelled like flowers. He had no idea what they might be.

“So,” he said, feeling stupefied, “come here often?”

She reacted as though his seat was empty, pursed her lips in a way that put a little knot in his colon, and sipped the aperitif.

“That was kind of a joke,” he tried.

Nothing.