

TEN

What did I think when I returned home
 At lunch the next day, after my opening shift to find
 The fourth
 Misdelivered
 Piece of mail? That it was all a joke, that I got it
 Now, that I knew
 The culprit!
 It was a postcard for Richard, from some friend
 In Italy—St. Sebastian
 Pierced by many arrows, which of course
 Reminded me
 Of that incredible scene
 At the end of *Throne of Blood*, where Toshiro Mifune
 As the Japanese Macbeth, continues
 Standing in his armor, majestically riddled
 By more arrows
 Than I've ever been able to count—except that St. Sebastian,
 In the postcard,
 Wasn't wearing a forbidding suit
 Of samurai armor—just this little wisp of what
 Richard would consider
 A sexy loincloth.
 The postcard must have been put in my box
 By Richard himself, because the woman upstairs from me—
 The one I would later think
 Mr. Jheri Curls
 Was coming to visit—she was pacing in the lobby,
 Still waiting
 For the mail.

Now Richard is this guy, he thinks—
 I don't see it myself,
 But he insists, and people agree, that he and I
 Look exactly
 Alike, except that I'm straight and he's gay—which must
 Affect your appearance in some way, I suppose.
 Richard's a bartender at El Gato Negro,
 That tiny
 Basement gay bar

Downtown. I met him years ago, when one of Paulie's
Short-lived
Restaurants was briefly
Upstairs. Now Richard thought it was the funniest thing—
Our resemblance, the straight bartender
In the main room, the faggot
Doppelganger
Down the back stairs—and he had this habit,
When he was younger
And more of a gamer—you know, before the virus
Was isolated—
He would pick these guys up—in the bath houses—
Or the bushes—
I don't know—tell them he worked in whichever
Of Paulie's bars
I was at, at the time, give them my name
And tell them he'd stand them
A free
Drink or two.
Naturally this led to all sorts of awkward
Misunderstandings, in which even I—eventually—found ways
To find humor. So I'd known him
For years, without really
Knowing much about him, outside of bartending
And cruising—maybe
That was his life. He regarded
My existence as a Zen koan, or something, an endlessly
Tantalizing
Glimpse into the workings of some cosmic
Sexual
Hall of mirrors, where one
Or the other
Or both of us were wandering—like that amazing
Funhouse gunfight
At the end of *The Lady from Shanghai*,
Where people keep shooting at their own reflections, which
When you think about it, might actually be
Rational behavior
In that situation—anyway, Richard had done his best,
Over the years, to keep the joke—
Which is to say, our acquaintance, alive
And active, like some curious

Organism
In a petri jar.

On Thursdays, my afternoons are free—
Once I open
The store, that's all I have to do—so I started off
By watching
The second part of the Samurai Trilogy,
Starring, of course, Toshiro Mifune—for... let's see...
Part II, that was...
The seventeenth time. You know, the life of Musashi
Miyamoto, the greatest of them all, the victor
In sixty-seven
Fatal duels, the sword-saint in whom
Violence
Became a form
Of devout meditation. At the end of Part II, when Musashi
Renounces
The love of women
And sets off down the path
Of chaste
Swordsmanship, accompanied only by his devoted
Boy servant,
It seemed I could hear the voice of Tomas,
Whoever he was, in the background
Of an expensive long distance connection, leering
And laughing at me.

Like a lot of bartenders who are pushing forty,
Richard now preferred
The afternoon shift, the low-pressure
Unwinding
Of happy hour, not to mention the opportunity
To start one's own
Serious drinking
Earlier in the day. El Gato Negro was as dark and tacky
As ever, with its cheap
Year-round
Installation of Halloween
Black cats. "Robbing my mailbox again, you slut!"
Said Richard when I handed him

The postcard,
And without waiting for my order he opened me a beer.

"So what's going on?"
I said, "What are you doing
To my mail?
That's M-A-I-L," I added, trying to forestall
The predictable tangle of puns.

"We're being very defensive today, aren't we?"
Said Richard. "Just thought
You'd enjoy
Keeping track of our Euro-trash trick." He picked up
The postcard, gazed at it with fond
Nostalgia.

"Not just that," I said, "All week."

"Mirror, mirror, on the stool," said Richard, "You are still
Beautiful, do you know that?
But you're becoming fat and mysterious, a revolting
Combination."

"How did you do it?" I said. "All those people—
In the D.A.'s office..."

"The D.A.'s office?" said Richard.

"Yeah," I said, "Monday morning? Remember?"

"Please do not ask me to recall
The minutiae
Of a Monday morning spent in the clutches
Of the Law. Luckily
I endured the ordeal in a state of semi-coherence."
And with that,
Richard went off to serve another customer.

"So this postcard was the only thing you've sent me?"
I asked, when he
Returned to my spot at the bar to pour
Eight seconds worth of rum
Into some college kid's Coke. Good old Richard,
I thought, still lubricating
The chickens.

"I'm sorry, dear mirror," he said. "I have
Neglected you. I admit it.
I see we've been getting blackheads
As a result."

Now the charm of Richard's banter
Decays, I've found,
Quite rapidly into alcoholic nastiness, so I downed
The beer quickly, while he waited
On two straight-looking guys in suits. I left a couple of bucks
On the bar—
Good old Richard, still stiffing
The house for tips—and I moved quietly...

"Oh no you don't!" he said.

There was something important
He needed to discuss, he told me, in a reproachful
Whisper,
Full of wounded intimacy, as he opened another
Beer for me. It turned out
To be a particular video
The two sporting gentlemen who'd just come in
Were simply itching to see:
Hot Scrum,
Featuring the most luscious Australian
Rugby team ever to tug
Each others'—

"Look," I said. "We don't carry
That kind of stuff. Paulie wants it to be
A family place."

"Oh, cut it
Out!" he said. "What about your little
Porno Club'?"

"Porno Club?" I said. "What's that?"

"Oh, you naughty little mirror!" he said. "One of your
Satisfied customers
Sat in that very stool yesterday and told me all
The juicy details."