

THIRTEEN

Did I feel like a drink
When the part—timer
Arrived to relieve me at noon? Boy, did I ever! Now,
As I say, I was trying
To back off
From that way of life—you see, it's really
Been good for me, in more ways than one, not to work
In a bar. But that afternoon—
Well, all I was planning—all I could imagine—
Was a nap—
And sometimes, well, a drink—
It can thin out
Your thoughts, and my brain was packed,
Elbow to elbow, with a loud,
Ugly,
Inarticulate
Crowd of dim intuitions and half-formed
Fears. The bartender
At Hugo's was new—I didn't know him—just as well,
Really, since I did
Have to go
Back to work in six hours. And whatever
Paulie says, he doesn't want
A drunk manager. I had two Bloody Marys, there in the almost
Deserted bar,
And I stared at the pool table until it calmed
Itself down, into a green
Tabula rasa.

My mind was empty, blank, ready for that nap
As I sauntered home, and in the lobby
Of my building I opened
My mailbox
With no expectations, one way or the other. Inside
Were three
Greeting cards, two in envelopes
Of soft pastel,
And one
In bright neon. They were addressed

Not to myself, of course, but to a certain
Elaine Mandrigo,
Who lived, apparently, on the fourth
Floor—
Not directly above me—but across the hall, toward the back
Of the building.

Gone was the shyness, the agitation
Born
Of bewilderment,
That had attended my deliveries
Earlier in the week. As I mounted the stairs, I could feel,
Settling upon me
Like a robe, the gravity, the inherent
Hieratic solemnity of my role
As secondary
Postman.

"Are you Elaine Mandrigo?" I said, when she
Answered my knock,
And as she nodded her head
She started
To laugh.

"You're so serious," she giggled. "I've never seen
Anyone so serious."

She looked very Mexican, like an Aztec
Carving, in fact, but her accent
Was American—I mean Anglo, I mean—
Like mine.

"I have some
Things for you," I said, and, like an altar boy
Presenting
The gifts to the priest, I handed her
The envelopes.

"Oh my god," she said. "My birthday cards. My mother—
My sister. My—
My other sister." Slowly, with tenderness,
She shuffled
Through the unopened envelopes.

"I found them
In my mailbox," I said.

"In your mailbox?" she said. "They must have..."

"Yes," I said.

"It's very sweet of you," she said, "To bring them
Up to me. You don't
Know—"

She caught herself and turned
Her head away.

"You must be close to your family," I said.

Looking at
The carpet
She nodded, sniffing.

"Pardon me," I said, "But there's a question
I would very much like
To ask you."

She giggled
And gave me a bold, moist
Look. "Sure. Why not? Go ahead, Mr. Serious."

"Were you in the D.A.'s office on Monday morning?"

Her wet
Eyes widened. "You're the crossword
Guy!" she said. "I didn't think
You noticed me."

"It's complicated," I said. "Somehow I feel
Connected
In a deep, mysterious way—"

"Do you have
A crush
On me?" she said, turning
The ball of her bare foot in the carpet.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just
That all this week—"

"Come on," she said. "It's
My birthday. I was just having
A glass of wine. Why don't you come in and help me
Celebrate?"