

SIXTEEN

Have I phoned Paulie to ask him to open
The store
Tomorrow morning? No, I have not. Instead, I called in
One of the part-timers. When I go
Downtown, I'll probably
Take the bus—it's so hard to park. Then I'll meet
This lawyer
Just outside the metal detector
At the Federal Building and we'll go inside
And then...

Well, you know what they want me to do, don't you?
They want me
To turn Paulie in, to save my own butt.

Does it matter that for one week, six months ago
I felt a strange
Deep connection with five
Of my neighbors? As if I had stumbled upon something
That one moment
Seemed evidence of a fantastic
Dark conspiracy and the next minute
Seemed a gift,
A revelation of correspondences
I would never have suspected, with people I brushed past
Everyday?

Not that it produced any magical
Era of good feeling
In this community. The mood around here
Is still pretty fucked up.
Samantha Jones and the Reverend Le Roy
Walker led a protest
March the other day, from Vulmer's apartment to police
Headquarters.
What they're saying about the police
And Vulmer
Seems farfetched to me—but who knows, there might
Be something to it. And the cops,

For their part, with all the mistrust
And the accusations—
They haven't been
Exactly friendly to us neighborhood businesses—though now
That I think of it,
In Omni Video's case, there might be another
Reason for their reluctance
To stop in
For a cup of coffee.

And all this tension is so damn
Complicated—you see I happen to think
That the Reverend Le Roy Walker
Is nothing
But a con man and a publicity hustler, but there—
Marching beside him, in a snazzy
Beige suit
With peach piping on the lapels—was my buddy, the pastor
Of Ebenezer
Temple of God. That was probably the nicest
Result
Of the postal mistakes—his grandson
From Virginia
Did come to visit, and I did see the two of them
Everyday all summer. They kept me
Informed as to the progress of the church's new roof,
And the kid
Gave me his expert opinion
On all the swimming pools at all the different
Military bases
Where he had lived. But I never did
Get up the nerve
To ask if any more
Letters
From Reverend Walker had come, addressed
To G. Mandrake.

The woman above me still fornicates noisily
And the other one, the one down
The hall, the one I
Went to bed with—well, she and I pretend
We've never met.

The funny thing is, her boyfriend—he of the too-secret
 Birthday surprise—he comes into the store
 All the time. A good guy, your basic
 Horror

Movie fan, I know him pretty well. And yes, I checked:
 His name is not Gussie. He doesn't
 Know any Gussies.

 Richard, to my tremendous relief,
 Dyed his hair
Bright orange—he said he refused to follow me
 All the way into greyness.
 I stop into El Gato Negro now and then—
 He makes me pay
For my Diet Cokes—at first I was checking to see
 If this Gussie character
 Had shown his face, which he never did—
 But lately, it's just to talk
 To Richard.

It's odd, after all these years of joking around,
 Pimping each other, insulting
 Each other's
Sex lives, we've become—sort of—friends. It must
 Be the orange hair—
 You know, not being able to pass
 For each other. One day
He came around the bar, sat in the stool beside me,
 Put his hand
 On my shoulder and told me he was positive—
 Which I had already guessed
From his jokes—but still, I felt dizzy. The hall of mirrors
 Had started to spin.

My old girlfriend? She's in India, doing a semester
 Of preliminary fieldwork—
 Don't worry, we'd called it off
Long before she left. She writes me—oh,
 Maybe once a month—and I...
 I respond. It's nice.
 But sometimes I think, what a waste—
 To have cultivated
A monogamous personality, worked hard to make myself

Into a long-term guy,
Only to end up
With a pen pal in India. I've seen a few
Other women, but—well, last night, for example, I told
This woman on the phone
That I didn't think I'd have time to see
Anyone seriously
Until I finished my book.
She thought I was making excuses.

The lesbian ninja in the attic—well, she beat me to it.
Last month she published
Her book on Bruce Lee. I was jealous, of course—
Until I read it. The thing is—
It's great. Her crazy tomboy perspective, it really makes you
Rethink your own.
And she says some great things
About the postures
Of violence—
You know, looking strong,
And looking
Like a victim. I went to her book signing, told her how much
I liked it, how it helped
Get my own book back on track. She still refuses
To rent
From my store though: I wonder what
She suspects.

The Hungarian woman? That was strange: one night in
August,
I went out to the bars
And went home with a woman
Who usually
Shares her bed with three cats. I woke up
In the dark, unable
To breathe. I'd forgotten how frightening
Asthma can be. My disgruntled new lover—
Already my former—
Dropped me off at the emergency room. They gave me
A breathing treatment—in the hallway,
They were so busy—
But the point is, when I came home at dawn

A fire truck
Was pulling up
To that bland modern building.
The fire truck left, a cop car replaced it, an ambulance
Arrived but took off in a minute—
And four hours later, when I was on my way
To open the store, there was this van
Parked outside,
"City Transports" it said, and these people—
I hate to say it but they looked
Like janitors—
They were wheeling a covered body
Out the front door. I asked one of my regular customers—
This guy in a wheelchair
Who lives in that building. He said it was the lady
Who couldn't breathe, couldn't talk.
Three days later he told me
A cousin from somewhere had flown in
To claim the body
And clean
The apartment. We wondered
Why she lived here. No one knew the story.
When they released that transcript—you know, Richard
Vulmer and his
Psychiatrist, two days before
His suicide—it was like it was happening
All over again—
You could see it in the store—people kept their eyes
To themselves, forgot how
To make small talk.
I thought I was hardened, but I could only read
The edited version. It spooked me.
For the first time
I became afraid of my apartment—the alcove
Where he... and how
He dressed them up, and how he said
They were trying to suck out
His soul with their... I'm sorry. I'm sure
You've read it yourselves.

And as for Gunther Mandrake and Gussie
Mandrigo—I have no idea who
Or what
The hell they are. Maybe I'll find out tomorrow
If they let me ask questions.