

FOUR

Where did I get
A crazy idea like that? You see, for a moment there—
In my panic, my desire
To run away,
I actually thought—it actually seemed possible—
That, well, since I was not
Merely myself—
Since I partook in the being,
The identity, the... How do I say this?
I don't know.
I never thought it out clearly.

Sometimes I tell myself it was all
Just a bunch
Of mistakes, a random
Sequence of... well, of carelessness. That week
On our route,
There was probably
A substitute mail carrier. I can almost see
The incomplete
Uniform. He or she would have been overwhelmed, falling
Behind schedule,
Becoming
Sloppy, inattentive
To details—rushing, eventually stuffing
Envelopes into slots just to empty
The sack, finish the shift,
And get
The hell home.

But then I think that incompetence,
No less than blindness,
Can be a source of
Insight, and mistakes
Can uncover
The true structure of things.

Anyway, it began, I now realize, on a Monday morning,
About six months ago, in the waiting room
Of the D.A.'s office,

During the investigation, the aftermath, whatever
You want to call it, that period
Of agitated gloom, of sudden, unwanted
Notoriety, when the shock
That each of us
Could barely articulate to ourselves became
International news.

There were a half-dozen of us, I suppose, all
Half-familiar
Faces from my neighborhood, sitting
Quietly on the benches. The only one I knew by name—
Richard, a downtown
Bartender—
Seemed too hungover to talk. We had all
Been scheduled for eight o'clock
Interviews, and at nine-thirty we all still sat,
Watching the cops
File their weekend reports. Now I knew
How these things
Worked—how the life of a witness
Consists almost exclusively
Of waiting, so I'd brought along three
Newspapers, which I shared with the grateful,
Courtly
Older black man in a dazzling bright blue suit
Who sat beside me.

Now I should explain that I live
Across the street and half-block down from the apartment
Where Richard Vulmer
Committed his crimes, that my building
Has the same floor plan as his—except reversed, because
It's on the other
Side of the street, that my studio is number
315
Just like his, the mirror image, the transposed
Enantiomorph
Of that sad gruesome place. More than once
TV crews
And photographers took shots of my door, when they couldn't
Get near his,

So that the age-speckled brass numerals
In stock footage and file photos
That now
Represent, to an anxious world, the last boundary
Between sanity and the unimaginable
Destructiveness
Of something kindred to love, more likely than not
Are the numbers
Attached
To the door I lock and unlock every day.

Everyone in the neighborhood had been questioned
By the police
At least once, and by the media, as often
As we chose. I, perhaps unethically,
Had pulled
From my computer and revealed
To a baffled public
The record of Vulmer's maddeningly normal
Taste in movies:
Much was made, by certain national
Op-ed columnists
And late-night talk show hosts of Vulmer's
Last rental from me
Before he was caught: *Twins*, with Danny DeVito and Arnold
Schwarzenegger—you know, the banality
Of evil, and so on.

And now, three weeks later, we were all
Being questioned again, after Vulmer's suspicious
Suicide in jail, and Samantha Jones'
Delayed
Allegations. I figured I must have said something worthwhile
To the humorless detective who came
Wearily to my store
The day after Samantha's unsettling news conference,
With the Reverend Le Roy Walker standing
Beside her, the one where she
Held up
That wedding gown.
The next day the cop returned, calling me in

For a special
Monday morning chat with a D.A.

I had long since finished reading the news, and had started
My second
Crossword puzzle when they finally remembered
They had us all waiting and I moved
My legs
So an old woman with thinning white hair
And a thick
Wheezing
Eastern European accent could pull
Her oxygen tank
Past me and go in
To the little office to give her evidence.
The third puzzle had defeated me and I was perusing
The recipes
For a high-fiber Easter when at last
They called my name.

The assistant
D.A. behind the desk and the cop who filled
The other fiberglass
Visitor's chair
Both looked tired and grouchy so I didn't mention
Tim or joke around
About their Indoor Winter
Softball League. I sat down, and when the D.A.
Lifted his head
From his stack of reports and asked me,
Deadpan, what I knew about
Gunther Mandrake,
I looked at his grim face and struggled to suppress
A surging
Impulse to giggle.