

FIVE

What was so funny
About Gunther Mandrake? Well, nothing, really—
To judge
From the faces of the cop and the D.A—
I'd only heard the name
Once before,
And at the time I assumed—it seemed
So obvious...

"Tell us about Gunther Mandrake's childhood,"
The D.A. was saying. "Now was that
East
Or West Berlin?"

You see, sometime the previous week, a TV guy
Had come into the store,
An assistant producer, I think, for a network, you know—
One of the real
Reporters—and while he's looking at
The Action/Adventure
Section, he mentions that the cops are looking
For this guy,
Gunther Mandrake.
Now the tone of the TV guy's voice
Seemed to say that he was in
On a secret,
And if I
Was in on it too, we could talk, you know—
Joke around,
Like insiders. Now in fact I happened to have
A damned good idea
Of just what Gunther Mandrake was,
So in a dead serious tone
That I thought
Was hilarious, I started riffing
On the name:

"Old Gunther," I said. "At first I thought
He was phony. I mean how many

Black guys
Do you know with German accents? Never knew his father—
Some G.I., I guess, in Berlin—
His mother was a junkie
And a whore, of course. Lucky for him
He had that auntie in Hamburg, raised him up
Proper. He's got
Some good stories though. If you find him,
Get him to tell you
Who cut off
His ring finger."

The TV guy laughed: I could tell
He got the joke,
But now, obviously, the cops
Didn't get it—The TV guy must have been trading
Information—
As if my joke was a lead!

"Someone must have
Misunderstood me," I said to the D.A. "Gunther Mandrake
Is a German actor,
A *schwartz*, he plays a great part, a trumpet player,
Well, really a pimp,
In *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, in the fifth
Episode, about seven hours
Into the movie..."

And as I raved on about Fassbinder's
Lumpenproletarian
Masterpiece, their eyes drooped
With boredom, and I knew I was safe: these guys
Would never make it through
The opening credits of *Alexanderplatz*,
Let alone
The fifth episode.

"But we've been told," said the D.A., "That you
Rent movies
To Gunther Mandrake on a regular basis."
Had I said that? I probably had—you know—
To make the story

Plausible. Now this was the moment when I came very close
To telling the truth. Or a certain
Part
Of the truth.

You see, the night before the TV guy
Came in, I'd been out
Shooting pool,
Having a few with Tim, my friend the D.A. This
Was before
Samantha's news conference, but the rumors
Had already started—dark hints
Circulating
Through my neighborhood that Vulmer
Had an accomplice
On the vice squad. Tim had nothing to do
With the case—
He'd been transferred to some financial crimes unit—
But once, when we lost the table
On some guy's lucky
8-ball break,
We went to the bar and he told me
About the truth serum. You see, the prosecutors
Were wading through so many
Fantastic stories
That they had decided to concoct their own,
Just to test people—to discredit
Unreliable witnesses.
Now Tim hadn't told me the name, but when I heard
"Gunther Mandrake"—
What else could I think?

But the thing was, I'd already told
One lie
About a non-existent
Black German actor, and my joking
Improvisation
Would be taken as another, and I wasn't
Supposed to know
About the truth serum in the first place, so Tim
Would get in trouble
If I mentioned his name, so you see,

Telling the truth was out of the question, which meant
I had no choice
But to enroll
Gunther Mandrake in the Porno Club.

"Well, I don't really rent
To him,"
I said. "You see, we run this discreet—
Very discreet—
Adult video service. The customers never use
Their real names. I set up
Each account
Under the name of an obscure
Character actor
From some old Hollywood movie, or maybe the star
Of an obscure foreign film:
Morris Carnofsky, Roland
Topor, Reginald
Gardner, Takashi Shiimura, Gustav
Von Wagenheim. Names like that. Now that you mention it.
I think there is
An account set up under the name
Gunther Mandrake."

But naturally the D.A. wanted to know
Who the real guy
Was—I said I knew nothing about him. Besides,
It wasn't his fault—
I told them I was the film buff, I was the one who picked
The names. But they wouldn't
Back off—they wanted to know what he looked like.

"Oh," I said, "Sandy hair. Glasses. Going
A little bald—
Wears a tie, looks like an office worker, five foot
Ten or so, one hundred
Sixty pounds—
Maybe a little taller..."

"Or a little shorter?" said the cop.

"Yeah," I said, "Maybe a little. Shorter, that is."

"Does he wear a raincoat?" asked the D.A.

"When it rains," I said.

"Your generic porno customer," said the cop.

"Pretty much," I said.

"Credit cards? Checks?" asked the DA.

"No," I said. "That part of the business
Is all cash. Look,"

I told him, "It's all clean. Hardcore, but clean. Consenting
Adults, no violence, no children—
And we pay taxes
On every penny we take in."

"An anonymous pornmeister," said the ruminative D.A.,
Leaning back in his chair,
"Using the name of some black German actor."

"That's it," I said. "And the names
Mean nothing.
I flip through my film books."

"Still. It's too much of a coincidence
For us to ignore.
Keep an eye on this guy. Next time he rents from you,
Get a better description.
You going to the store now?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I—"

"Good," he said. "I'll send a squad around this afternoon
To pick up the record
Of this guy's rentals. You *can*
Do that
For us, can't you?"

"Of course," I said. "Sure. That's easy."