

SIX

Who was tending the store while I
Gave evidence
That Monday morning? It was Paulie, my boss,
The owner
Of Omni Video. Now, I've known Paulie
Since I was a kid—I think his mom still has the snapshot
Of me beating
Him up when we were five years old. Normally
I open the store at ten,
Do the orders
And paperwork and check in returns until noon, when one
Of the part-timers—
They're both college students—
Comes in and works until six, which is when
I come back
And hold down the fort until close.

"Hey, didn't think I'd see you,"
Said restless Paulie, eager
To depart,
When I came in at eleven-thirty.
"Everything cool
Downtown?"

"Routine stuff," I said, as I opened
The drop box and took out
Six, seven, eight, nine videos. "Same old
Questions.
How's the computer?"

"It's cool, it's easy," said Paulie, jiggling the keys
Of his Acura. "I ran
All your reports. But that ribbon messed up,
It jammed
On the last one."

"I'll run it again," I said, as I disentangled
The ribbon cartridge.
"Pretty good job, for an occasional
Part-time worker."

"So far today,
You've had exactly one
Paying customer," said Paulie, the daring
But prudent
Entrepreneur. "Is that your typical Monday morning?"

"Mornings are slow," I said. "Except
For returns."

"Hey, it's cool," said quick-footed Paulie, moving
Toward the door.

"We'll do the porn tomorrow.
Did you see Tim?"

"No sign of him," I said. "I guess he's doing
Something with the Feds. I shot
Some pool
With him one night last week."

"Cool," said Paulie, pausing at the door. "Listen,"
He said, "I hear
There's been a lot of cops
In here.
A lot of reporters."

"I give them coffee," I said, as I poured
Myself a cup.

"This is the central exchange
For Vulmer jokes. We are a pillar
Of the law-enforcement
Community."

"Cool," said Paulie, "Yeah. That's cool. I like that."

When his car had purred off, I sat down
At the computer, but instead
Of re-running
The last report, I changed
The date to a day
In August, two and one-half years ago, and created
An account
For Gunther Mandrake. Then I moved the file
Into another program, pressed
A few keys, and then

I pressed
A few more.

When Larry, the part-timer, came in at noon,
I handed him a manila envelope
With a twenty-two page
Printout
Inside. "A squad car," I said,
"Will be coming for this. Make sure to have
Some fresh coffee. I'm taking
The Conversation, the new letterbox version, so make a note
In the computer. And oh yeah, you need to run
All the morning reports.
Paulie was in today—he messed up the ribbon."

That afternoon I was planning
To watch *The Conversation*—you know, with Gene
Hackman, it's Coppola's
Greatest, in my opinion, for the...
Let me check.
Wow.
This is embarrassing.
That was the seventy-fifth time. Anyway, afterwards
I intended—I had promised myself—
I was going to work
For a while
On my book. But in the lobby of my apartment, when I
Checked
My mailbox, I found—
Along with three video catalogs
And a postcard
With a photograph of some scrawny tree—
The oldest living
Creature on earth—from my long-distance girlfriend,
I found this letter addressed to one
G. Mandrake
C/O Ebenezer Temple of God
1731 Oxford St.