

SEVEN

Is Oxford the name of the street
 I live on?
 No, it is not. It's the name, instead, of the street behind me,
 One block over. The number was right, though—
 Which meant the Ebenezer
 Temple of God should be exactly
 One block away.
 I decided that my date
 With Francis and Gene and their tape
 Recorders and invasions
 Of privacy
 Was something I could postpone, so I ran
 The rest
 Of the mail upstairs, came back down and took a walk
 To the other
 Side of the block. Well, at least, I thought,
 I might meet the real
 G. Mandrake, get a chance to apologize
 For spreading
 Outlandish stories about him. 1731 turned out to be
 The building
 I had thought it might be—an old Masonic lodge, a tomblike
 Block, deserted
 For years but recently purchased,
 I seemed to recall,
 By some black congregation. To my surprise, the door
 Was opened
 By the same courtly black man, in the same
 Radiant
 Royal blue suit I'd sat next to
 That morning.

"Well, this is an honor and a blessing," he said.
 "My friend with the news."

"Actually," I said, "it's kind of funny—
 Here—this is yours, I think—
 I found it
 In my mailbox."

"G. Mandrake," he said slowly, looking at the envelope,
 "Why that's the name
 Those gentlemen
Down there at the District Attorney—
 They were asking
 All kinds of questions
About this Mr. Mandrake there this morning. Well,
 Like I told them, I surely
 Do not know
 No Mandrakes, but this here
 Is the Ebenezer
Church of God." And with that he unfolded
 A long-bladed
 Hunting knife and slit
The letter open. "Now look at that, young man,"
He said, "A letter from the Reverend Walker—look at this here
 Check! Three thousand
Dollars for our new roof." Then he looked at me
Accusingly: "You know you white folks, you just gotta stop
 Puttin' up
 These old buildings with these flat
 Raggedy ass
 Leaky old roofs!"

 "Well, I...
I'll see what I can do," I said, and folding back
 The blade of his knife, he grinned
 And slapped my hand.

 I ended up
Talking to him for quite a while, there beneath
 The Masonic portico. Neither of us
 Could figure
 Why a letter, addressed to him,
Had G. Mandrake's name on the envelope,
 Or why
 Since it had the correct
Address, it ended up in my mailbox, one block away.
 When he found out I ran the little video store
 On the corner,
 He wanted to know was it the kind of place

To take a young man, about eight
Years old?

"Oh, yeah," I said.
"I've got a great Children's section,
All the Disney's—"

"Now you ain't got none of that
Pornography?"
He said warily, "None of them perverts
Hanging around?"

"Nothing stronger
Than R-Rated," I said.

He didn't
Watch those videos much himself, he explained, but
His grandson
From Virginia
Was coming next month for a good
Long visit, and when he came I could expect to see
The two of them
Just about everyday.

"That'd be great," I said, and we shook hands
And he called me
A messenger of the Lord and I mumbled
Something about trying to be
A good neighbor.

Then I went home and watched Gene Hackman
Drive himself mad
With guilt and all-too-reasonable
Paranoia,
And I didn't think about G.
Or Gunther Mandrake or anything at all about unseen
Connections
In my neighborhood until the next day,
When I came home
From my opening shift and found
The second letter.